



Forbidden Desires

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Description: Our agreement was strictly professional...until it wasn't.

As an escort to the ultra-rich, I knew my place in the world. I'd mastered the art of blending in and keeping my true self—and my desires—hidden. When billionaire Eric Maxim hired me to be his date to an exclusive art show, I expected another impersonal arrangement. But Eric, with his piercing blue eyes and arrogant charm, was anything but ordinary.

Eric didn't want complications. All he needed was a polished date for various events—not someone like me—a much younger woman who challenged him, exasperated him, and worst of all, made him feel.

Just as we were on the brink of something real, shadows from my past threatened to tear us apart. Would Eric and I find a way to overcome our fears and fight for the connection we never saw coming, or would doubt and betrayal destroy our chance at happiness?

Forbidden Desires is a steamy, age gap, billionaire romance about love, redemption, and finding the courage to truly be seen.

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CHAPTER 1

Jasmine

Florie's in Palm Beach was comfortably packed, with just enough patrons sitting in the light, airy dining room to create a low undercurrent of conversation, laughter, and contentment, without being a total cacophony of noise. It was one of two reasons I loved to come here. The second reason, of course, was the delicately indulgent seared scallops I always ate while gracing the table situated at the window that overlooked the Florida coastline.

Usually, being here would be a comfort for me. Today, there was far too much on my mind to even be enticed by the half-eaten plate of scallops in front of me.

"Jasmine, darling. I didn't invite you out to lunch just to watch you stare at your plate as though it were going to grow an arm and strangle you."

I lifted my gaze to the woman sitting across from me—my mentor and my one true confidant left in this world. The oneperson who took a destitute young girl without a family under her wing and had offered her a better future than the one she'd currently been living. She'd given me choices when I'd had none, and I was grateful to her for that. But sometimes, admittedly, what I did for a living was a lonely existence, despite being surrounded by people.

Dominique La Rue was a seasoned woman. Her glossy, thick black hair that held a single, silvery stripe of grey was the opposite of my pale blonde waves. She was well into her sixties—a fact only those closest to her knew—but could easily pass for a

woman a decade younger than herself, with wise crows' feet and snarky smile lines that made her smirks mischievous and enticing. She had taught me everything I now knew about what it was to be an escort—a damn good one at that.

Irony that that's what caused my state of distraction today.

I laughed at her comment and shifted in my seat. It was fair enough that all I had done this meal was give despondent, single word answers and pick at my food. "I'm sorry, Dom."

A perfectly pencilled and filled in brow rose up. "Oh, a whole sentence out of you. Most I've gotten since planting my rear in this seat," she said in a dry tone. "Go on. Spit it out. You've clearly got something on your mind."

She always managed to read me like she'd just cracked open the pages of my life story, which she knew all too well. "It's about this last client. Well, about all of them, I suppose. And this line of work."

She hummed, nodding. "Go on."

I sat back in my chair and exhaled a deep breath. "I've been thinking about the future."

Dominique laughed, this time heartily. "Barely into your twenties and already thinking forward? I wonder who put such a mature mind set into your head."

"Who indeed," I said with a smile. "But it's true. I realized a few things the other night with a client and it got me thinking about how fun the flings are, how the pretending and the playing is so much like a game. I like the game," I said honestly. I was only twenty-four and I enjoyed the companionship, the social events I was privy to, and yes, even the luxuries that came with my job. "But many games come to an

end eventually, and in this line of work it's so easy for people to get bored and move on to something, and someone, different."

Dominique took a sip of her wine. "Your client said something to you, didn't he?"

I nodded, folding my hands in my lap. "I've seen him a few times. Nothing too serious. He's doting, likes taking me on business trips and showing me off to his friends. Then we part ways until the next time he needs me."

She tipped her head curiously. "And something went wrong?"

My lips pursed. "He's gotten engaged, and I had no idea he was seeing anyone else." Which went against my personal rules. Yes, I was an escort, but I didn't date men who were involved in other serious relationships and Dom knew and respected that. "From what he told me, it's more a marriage of convenience between two wealthy families, but you know that's a deal breaker for me."

"Yes, I do. So, this man has gotten engaged and now you're thinking about the future." She frowned in concern. "Don't tell me you got attached to your client, my dear."

Not even close. One of the first lessons Dom had taught me was to keep my emotions out of the equation. That in this line of business the relationships were fleeting and the men were fickle, all of which had so far held true. There hadn't been a client that had even tempted me to give him anything other than my time and body.

"No," I replied, a half grin curving my lips. "The last thing on my mind is getting attached to anyone who pays me to call him 'Captain Long John' in bed. Let alone someone who doesn't have the length to back up the name."

Amusement sparkled in her eyes. "I'm just making sure you're playing it smart, dear."

Do continue.”

I thought for a moment how to phrase what was on my mind. “Well, he’s not the only client who has settled down or has moved on, which is part of this business, I know. But sometimes I think it would be nice to find someone who could offer a bit more...stability.”

“So, you want someone who will provide you with a comfortable future. Give you the means to live as you please, make your choices according to what you want, not what you need, while providing him with the companionship he desires.” She flashed me a gregarious grin. “Why, Jasmine, are you looking for a future like mine?”

Dominique was teasing, but who wouldn’t want a future like hers? She wasn’t even escorting anymore and still had means to maintain a nice apartment and travel as she pleased. She still had connections from her former working days that got her into art houses, film festivals, and fashion shows. Dominique did not want for anything, whether it was luxury or necessity.

Mostly, she didn’t have to worry about security being pulled viciously out from under her feet, which was something I feared and worried about the most. And even though I’d come a long way from the scared, destitute eighteen-year-old I’d been when Dom had taken me under her wing, there was no way I ever wanted to live in such dire circumstances again.

So, yes, of course I wanted that kind of stability.

Dominique swirled the last of her wine around in her glass, her expression thoughtful. “I think what you need is an older man who is more in the position to offer you those things,” she suggested. “Someone who can appreciate both your mental and physical attributes and provide you with the security and independence that I know is so important to you.”

“Exactly,” I said with a smile.

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Her own grin widened. “Luckily for you, I have a close friend who is in need of a woman with longevity and exclusivity on her mind. He’s well established and in his mid-forties. He is also very monogamous when it comes to his arrangements, and generous.”

My interest and curiosity instantly piqued. Dominique always knew the ins and outs of the kind of class of men who had the need or desire to spend obscene amounts of money on pretty women for dates, to show off, or simply, to fuck. Whether he was older or not was of little consequence; an escort could have all manner of men. The biggest lesson learned was that the outer shell of a man rarely revealed the totality of who he was. It only gave context clues.

“Well,” I said impatiently, wanting to know more. “Don’t keep all of the important information to yourself.”

“His name is Eric Maxim. Obscenely wealthy and quite the catch, really. Son of a retired Army general and a French heiress to a sizeable fortune. He owns one of the largest producers and exporters of fine arts products—the sort of fare that would have had Van Gogh, Rembrandt, and the like positively frothing at the mouth to get their hands on the sheer quality of artwork. These days, he is deep in the philanthropy game. His money goes toward funding the arts and keeping the humanities accessible. He’s also well versed in several languages and can be quite charming.”

A man who had money and an interest in the arts?

“And he’s single?” I asked, surprised.

Dominique chuckled. “Eric Maxim is a focused man with specific and particular tastes. He has a hard time finding the right companion who can match his resolve, expertise, and wit for a night around the people he is either entertaining, or funding. I believe you’d fit what he’s looking for. He needs someone for an upcoming art show. Someone who is a little more than your average arm candy exhibition—a woman who knows their way around art, maybe even someone who knows it intimately through experience.”

At that, I hesitated. “I haven’t made any art in years, Dom.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “That truly doesn’t matter, Jasmine. The fact that you can, and you have, is the thing of importance. You and I have discussed the art world enough for me to know how well versed you are in the field.”

Then, she smirked. “Besides, it is unlikely that he will ask you to paint for him. Knowledge, however, he will find intriguing. And what intrigues Eric tends to put him in a good mood. I hear he’s quite the lover when someone actually interests him enough for him to put in the effort. I believe you’ll be able to accomplish both, and if you do, you’ll have his attention and a door opened toward the security that you’re wanting.”

It all sounded too good to be true. I took a drink of my water, letting my fingers linger on the cool glass while I considered all that she’d said. “So, he’s a reasonable, undemanding man?”

“Actually, he is. Shocking, I know,” she said, humor lacing her voice. “I think an arrangement with someone like Eric would be mutually beneficial, and it would leave you other options to explore in terms of what you truly want for your future, and maybe someday that will include art again. Whether it’s creating it, or owning an art gallery, or opening up your own studio.”

I glanced away from Dom's direct stare, and what I'd always believed in my youth was nothing more than a pipe dream. For as long as I could remember, as early as holding a crayon in my hand, I'd loved art. Drawing, painting, the extensive history of artists and all the different mediums used to create beautiful masterpieces. I still surrounded myself with books and immersed myself in the works of masters from various periods, soaking in their techniques and philosophies, but it had been a very long time since I'd dabbled in creating my own art.

But I couldn't deny that something within me stirred at Dom's encouragement. A quiet longing to reconnect with the canvas, to feel the texture of paint beneath my fingers once more. The idea of creating felt distant, almost like a forgotten language I once spoke fluently, but had since been lost with the tragic death of my parents. But as we spoke, I could feel a small spark of desire inside of me to revive those dreams again.

Dominique reached across the table and placed her hand over mine, redirecting my gaze back to her kind eyes.

"You're twenty-four, Jasmine. You've been doing this for six years and you've made a nice life for yourself when things could have gone horribly wrong for you," she said quietly, reminding me of how and when she'd saved me from a much worse fate. "And you're such an old soul. You've experienced pain that most people wouldn't expect from someone so young, but you are not one to wither when it comes to hardships and challenges. I think your parents would be proud of the life you've made for yourself, of how strong and resilient you've been in the face of adversity."

I chuckled incredulously. "I'm not sure my dead parents would be proud of me being an escort, regardless of the circumstances of me becoming one in the first place."

Her gaze softened. "Jasmine, it doesn't matter the method. Your survivability and resilience are something to be proud of. And now, maybe with Eric and him being so

involved in the arts, it will give you the push you need to get back into your real passion. And even if it doesn't, maybe it will push you closer to that life you're dreaming of, the one where you don't have to be so scared anymore."

I swallowed back the painful lump in my throat. Was that even possible? To not live with that bit of anxiety always niggling in the back of my mind and driving my actions? After losing my parents in such a horrific way, and not having any other family to fall back on, I'd gained a lifetime of fear in a few months just to keep surviving. Until Dom had given me purpose and direction.

I didn't want to just survive anymore. I wanted to truly live.

I sat quietly as our waiter came by and cleared our table and Dominique took care of the bill. What she was proposing sounded like it could be a perfect case scenario on paper for me to do just that, if it worked. The thing that would make or break the deal wouldn't be whether Dominique's information about this client held up—it always did. It would depend on whether or not the seemingly perfect arrangement was sustainable when we actually met.

"I assume you already set up a meeting between the two of us?" I asked, glancing across the table at my mentor, and friend. "If you're bringing this up so confidently and he seems the type of man who doesn't like wasting his working time on disasters."

She laughed, the sound light and filled with confidence. "Of course, my dear. What sort of match maker do you take me for?"

CHAPTER 2

Jasmine

Lunch with Dominique ended with a meeting time and place with this Eric Maxim—at an art gallery smack dab in the middle of Coral Gables. It was by all accounts one of the most luxurious cities in Florida. Socialites from all over vacationed there, retirees spent their billions, and new money young bloods blew lottery winnings, inheritances, and lucky break earnings at the casinos, clubs, fashion parlors, and art exhibits held within the city limits.

Most of my clients lived in the area. I knew its streets and businesses well, even though I lived outside the limits of the city next to it. Far less opulent, but my tiny, modest apartment meant most of my money was squirreled away into my savings, as opposed to sunken into overpriced rent. I did grant myself a small allowance for hair, clothes, nails and make-up to keep up my appearance, along with the occasional non-work-related treat. But overall, escorting was a good living that enabled me to live quite well.

Still, I was grateful for Dominique's opportunity to make a good situation better.

Wearing a pretty dress in a pale pink hue along with my favorite pair of beige Louboutin heels, and scenting of expensive perfume, I had an Uber drive me into Coral Gables around noon and drop me off at my destination. The gallery itself was an architecturally unique building with slants and curves set to the roof and walls that gave it a peculiar shape, yet somehow made it all the more beautiful of a place.

I was in awe as I approached the building. Though I knew of its location there, the Spinel Fine Arts Exhibit and Gallery was somewhere I had only had the pleasure of viewing from the outside, but never traversing within. Many of my clients frequented the clubs and restaurants and social hotspots of Coral Gables, but Eric Maxim would be the first to pull me into these illustrious halls I'd always secretly wanted to see and explore.

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All Dominique had told me of this meeting was that I should dress nicely, but not overtly sexy, and to give my name to the woman who would be at the ticket counter since my admission had already been paid for by Eric. To the woman's credit, she didn't seem too scrutinizing when I introduced myself. She was a vision of respectability as she looked through her notes, then nodded when she found my name seemingly on a list of pre-approved folk and told me to go on through.

The first low hurdle overcome, I was free to roam as I pleased while I waited for Eric Maxim to approach me based on the recent photo Dominique had sent to him, along with my other pertinent information. I didn't have any such luxury and had no idea what he looked like.

This situation was an uncommon set up. Normally, if a client needed to meet me to see if we were compatible before moving forward with any arrangement, he would usually FaceTime me. 'Compatible' was often whether they found my face and voice attractive, and therefore, whether or not they could see themselves fucking me.

Often, the simplest of intentions were the easiest to navigate.

This Eric Maxim was somewhat of an enigma, however. As I wandered the mostly empty art exhibition hall, eyes drawn from one painting to another, to grand sculptures and puzzling abstract pieces, I wondered if maybe Eric Maxim was an eccentric type for having me out here by myself, simply waiting for his arrival. Maybe he fancied himself a Phantom of the Opera type, watching his unwitting Christine Daaé from the shadows.

The idea made me smile in amusement as I continued on. Though this was

technically work and a job, I found myself easily forgetting it as so, and willingly enjoyed the atmosphere of this place which was quiet and unimposing.

Not knowing how long it would take for Eric to make his appearance, I immersed myself in the experience. It had been so long since I'd indulged in any art. The scent of dried paint—oils differing from acrylics, differing from watercolors—was as welcoming as the notion of reuniting with an old friend.

I had not expected to feel so nostalgic. To have the tingle in my palms as though my body knew that it wanted to be once more in the presence of paint brushes, ink pots, and grainy art papers beneath my fingertips. Or the way colors splashed in monochrome or vibrant mixes of pigments, how hard and soft mediums came together to create beautiful, dynamic sculptures.

My browsing brought me to a particular painting and forced me to stop in front of it and move closer with curiosity. It was a naked woman, bathed in a series of decaying flowers. They flowed over her naked form, the desaturated, muted colors of the flowers contrasting beautifully with the rich depth of her brown skin and ringlet curls fanned out around her head. It was almost like the life in those flowers had transferred their vitality into her.

“Exquisite, isn't it?”

I was startled by the sudden male voice that spoke beside me, but I found myself too enraptured by the painting to look away. “It is. Whoever did the coloring is an expert at blending and contrast. Even the imperfections could be called perfect.”

“Imperfections?” he questioned, his voice as smooth as fine bourbon.

Still enthralled by the exquisite piece of art, I pointed to a particular area and explained what I meant. “The artist uses chrysanthemums, spider lilies, and popover

poppies for the flowers. Each has a specific color palette corresponding with it, yet once you start getting to the bottom half of the painting, the color palettes shift just so from the exact hues of the flowers in the upper half, which suggests that the artist probably mixes their own paint colors—the original batch likely ran out, so they replenished with a new batch of mixed paint. The artist got insanely close to the original hue that they used, which is impressive with custom paint colors unless a painter is precisely measuring their paint ratios. The fact that they probably mix their own paint explains why the skin tone is so rich; it's hard to get that straight from the tube. But it's also why an imperfection like a mismatched color is actually quite charming. It's a detail most people would miss otherwise.”

“And yet you caught it immediately, Miss Greene.”

My back straightened with the unexpected use of my name. A shocked shiver ran up my spine, and I turned toward the source.

A man towered over me, even as his eyes remained fixated on the painting in front of us. Towered was not putting it lightly. He was one of the tallest people I had ever seen, with a golden tan to perfectly smooth, well cared for skin that beautifully contrasted with the tailored black suit that he wore. Tailored, I knew for a fact, because nowhere on his sculpted body was the three piece ill-fitted. All of it came together in a picture-perfect rendition of a man and a life well lived if the salt and pepper hair—erring more on the side of pepper than salt—was any indication.

It was when he glanced down at me, though, that I swallowed hard as my heart took flight in my chest. His thick, soft looking hair was styled back from his face, leaving nothing to take away from the clarity of the palest blue eyes I had ever seen.

Fuck...he was breathtakingly gorgeous.

Was this Eric Maxim? Had to be, didn't it? No one else, aside from the receptionist

who'd allowed my admittance, could possibly have guessed my name out of the blue.

Damn. Of all the things Dominique had said about Eric, she did not prepare me for how beautiful a man he would be. Even if you've spent years—or your whole life—escorting, it rarely diminished the effect of someone who looked like they were carved from the finest marble with loving sculptor's hands.

"Mr. Maxim, I presume?" I managed to say after a moment.

I was, of course, a professional, and if I couldn't even carry on a conversation with a client first meeting, then I had no business trying to carry on a whole evening event with them, either. I didn't want to make a fool of myself, especially not in front of a man Dominique already told me was very particular.

He inclined his head. "Eric," was his polite correction. "Just Eric. There's no need to be so formal. We were speaking about the painting. I'm not sure I'd call them imperfections when you have such a high opinion on the outcome."

I raised a brow and easily slipped right back into our previous discussion. "Imperfections aren't necessarily things that need to have low opinions. Or fixing. Imperfection is a general state of art. There is art that is perfect, and art that is not. I would say that imperfect art is superior, but I think that would piss off a lot of artists telling them that to their faces."

He stared down at me for a long, unnerving moment. "You seem to know a lot about the finer details of artwork."

The way he spoke was direct. Controlled. Almost like there was a comment that he was holding back. Was his statement genuine, or was he mocking me? It was hard to tell.

I returned my attention to the painting. “I know enough to hold a conversation,” I hedged with a smile. “Enough to know about mixing paint and how the flowers used in this painting symbolize death.”

“Irony, given the subject herself is so lively,” he murmured, his deep voice doing ridiculously arousing things to my body. “That you caught the symbolism is impressive.”

I ignored the latter part of his statement, which almost felt...derogatory. “I imagine she’s taken the flowers’ vitality for herself. She’s so tranquil laying among them even as they’re dying. Like she knows she’s going to be alright.”

“A floral succubus?” he mused.

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“Or maybe a witch with an interesting green thumb,” I countered, risking a little humor. “Maybe there’s a reason she cultivates death flowers.”

Eric chuckled beside me, the sound shocking me. I chanced another look up toward the man and couldn’t stop the warmth that tickled the tips of my ears at the fact that he was still looking down at me. Was he interested or did he think I was foolish? I hated how I couldn’t quite get a read on him.

“Dominique told me that you were a bit of an artiste,” he continued, his gaze taking in my facial features, but his own expression giving nothing away. “Admittedly, I didn’t expect much out of the assertion. Many like to call themselves such without any real backing for such a claim.”

I managed, just barely, not to bristle at his comment. “And you can tell that I am one just because I have thoughts about a painting?” I asked saucily, rather than stating what I really wanted to ask. Was it surprising because he didn’t assume a sex worker would know shit about art?

The corner of his mouth twitched...with a smile? Or was that annoyance?

“I can tell by the way you speak about art,” he amended. “There’s a certain tone that people have when they’re speaking on something they’re knowledgeable about, or something they’re passionate about, rather than something they’ve forced themselves to learn for the sake of conversation. You carry the former tone with you. Most of the women in your profession put on a pretense, expecting me to believe it.”

Quiet fell between us after that last insulting remark, and I wondered if this was the

reason why he had such poor luck in finding someone suitable as a partner. He started off by saying something that sounded almost like a compliment...only to finish it with a dig.

Not sure what to think of this man, I continued to look at the painting, following the curves of the woman depicted in it, watching how the flowers flowed like water around them. Had Dominique really thought that this man and I were a good match? Spending one night with him for a work event was one thing, but a long-term arrangement with someone who seemed to have a low opinion of others felt like it was pushing a little too hard into the realm of impossibility.

Surely Dominique had made some sort of mistake?

I remained quiet, and moments passed before Eric spoke again.

“I have a showing here I’m sponsoring in a week,” he said in a more formal, business-like tone. “There will be artists from all over Florida, many of marginalized backgrounds and all with immense talent. I respect all whose work will be shown here, and I would like company while their work is being admired and critiqued. I would like that company to be able to engage with the artists, but also myself.” Then, he exhaled a deep sigh. “I don’t need someone who is obviously here being paid for their lip service. That isn’t the point. I want someone who can interact and blend in seamlessly. Do you think you’d be comfortable with that?”

His question made me raise a brow. Was he embarrassed by having an escort mingling with the artists in this venue? If so, he was certainly bold in choosing to hire one while also having specific tastes and requirements.

I immediately wondered if I’d read this entire exchange wrong. Maybe he wasn’t being as open as I thought he was. I had to be right, I was sure of it, that his directness was masking something else. That at the core of things, he didn’t think

much of escorts—and thus why he was surprised one might know about art—while still being a man who sought one. It was a contradictory situation I couldn't make sense of.

Or maybe he simply couldn't keep an actual girlfriend because he was a condescending jerk, and that's why he was in this situation.

I said nothing of that observation, and instead, nodded.

“If you want a discreet date, it's definitely something I can do,” I said, equally businesslike. “Especially around something that I know a good deal about.”

That little tug at the corner of his mouth happened again, giving me no clue as to the emotion behind it. “I thought you only knew enough to know when an artist has mixed their own paint?”

I clicked my tongue. “Maybe a little bit more. I have done my own work, in the past.”

Interest flickered in his eyes. “Yet you guarded the answer to that question close to yourself with deflection.”

I gave a small shrug. “We all have things that are personal to ourselves, don't we?”

When he didn't immediately answer, I worried that I might have been too blunt in the way that I spoke to him. At the very least, I didn't want this meeting to end in a waste of time I wouldn't see a benefit out of. But when I looked up, he had a faint smile that curved his full lips.

“I think we'll get along well, Miss Greene.”

I resisted rolling my eyes. This man was going to be a major pain in my ass, I just

knew it. “Just call me Jasmine,” I said in a cheeky tone. “No need to be so formal, right?”

If Eric Maxim was taken aback by my impudence, he didn’t let on that he was, and that was certainly fine by me.

CHAPTER 3

Jasmine

After our meeting, Eric and I exchanged contact details. He’d sent over his own requirements for the evening in terms of dress, time and place, as well as etiquette. It was all very precise and direct. Much like his demeanor at the art gallery.

Though he didn’t seem to be a cruel man—just arrogant and demanding, and maybe a bit jaded—I did wonder if he would prove to be more exacting should his particulars not be fully met. Especially since I still couldn’t tell if his specific conditions were a product of being peculiar in taste, as Dominique told me, or if he simply didn’t have respect for the line of work—mine—he was so willing to throw money at.

Regardless, a substantial contract was drawn up for my time and appearance at the event, and everything was signed two days after our meeting, with the upfront payment hitting my account not long after. At least the man was prompt.

For the remaining week, my curiosity followed me, and I couldn’t shake it. Our interaction had been brief, but I wanted to know more about this mysterious Eric Maxim. Why was he so interested in the arts? Why, if he was a man who entertained escorts, did he have a desire for one who would appear as more than just that?

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Most of my clients didn't care if someone knew that I was paid for. Most thought of it as something to brag about, intently. Because if you could purchase a woman and have her do anything that you wanted her to do, it made you someone with money, someone with power.

Eric Maxim didn't strike me as someone like that. So, what kind of man was he? Unfortunately, Google didn't give me the answers I sought.

"Dominique, are you sure this is something you think I can handle?" I had asked her the evening I'd met Eric when I hadn't been able to shake my doubts. "He doesn't seem to like escorts. Or at the very least, he thinks we're all stupid and doesn't think all that much of us. I don't like clients like that, let alone ones that may be long-term."

"Trust me, Jasmine," she'd said over the phone, with that pacifying, calming tone she always used when I was getting too down on myself. "He's someone that takes a little time to warm up to. You'll be butter by the time you're done with him on your date. You'll see he's worth your time."

I sure the hell hoped so.

The night of our date, I was picked up from my apartment by the car that Eric sent for me—a sleek, midnight black Maserati with a driver in an equally black suit.

"Good evening, Miss Greene," the good-looking young man greeted me as he opened the car door and I slid into the leather backseat. "My name is Jeff, and I'm Mr. Maxim's personal driver."

“It’s nice to meet you, Jeff,” I said as I buckled up.

Jeff closed the door and settled into the driver’s seat before glancing over his shoulder at me. “Mr. Maxim wanted me to assure you that you would be well taken care of, and if there was anything that you needed, I would do my best to provide it for you.”

Thorough, isn’t he?

“I’m good, thank you.” I smiled, shaking my head. “But maybe some music on the way to the gallery?”

“Of course, Miss Greene,” he replied politely. “Any preferences?”

“Whatever you happen to have on there, Jeff.”

Much to my relief, Jeff wasn’t the talkative sort, but the low thrum of the pop station that was on filled the car enough that the lack of conversation between us didn’t feel awkward. I’d learned that the worst thing in situations like these were people trying to make small talk when they clearly were uncertain of what to say, or how to interact with you because you were an escort. People tended to forget that I was just a normal person, with normal interests.

The second worst thing, of course, were valets and chauffeurs who tried to hit on you because of what your work entailed. Imagine, thinking you’d get something for free that your boss was paying for.

Feeling a little reckless, I considered if it would get me into trouble if I tested out Jeff’s chivalry. Sometimes, you could gauge the kind of client someone was based on the kind of people they hired to be the closest to them. For rich men, if the people they employed who spent most of their time around them were creeps, then they were

usually slimeballs too. Why? Because eight out of ten times, it would be the boss who gave them permission to behave that way.

Curious to test my theory, I put on my best innocent face and leaned forward, letting my proximity waft the soft scent of my perfume Jeff's way.

"You been a chauffeur long, Jeff?" I asked sweetly.

He was quiet a moment before he answered.

"Few years now, Miss," he replied, his tone cordial. "Mr. Maxim hired me out of high school."

I raised a brow at that interesting fact. That Eric had entrusted this job to a teenager, instead of someone older and more experienced. "So, you're always around pretty women then. You ever get to talk to them after you shuttle them around? Get a kiss?" I let a brow wiggle suggestively, my mouth curved in a flirtatious smile that could make even the most indifferent of men buckle at the knees.

"No, Miss," he said, having no facial reaction, no voice inflection, nothing to indicate that he was in any way interested, moved, or otherwise affected by my presence. "I just drive the cars."

More silence. I sat back, head tilted at how little Jeff reacted. Was he just trying to play up the straight-laced, good boy routine? Sometimes they did that. Acted really nice, and polite, right up until the moment that they weren't and suddenly there was a wandering hand up your skirt.

Jeff didn't even spare a glance in the rearview mirror as I used it to adjust the slight plunge of my wine-red dress to reveal just enough cleavage to be enticing without showing so much that I might as well just air the girls out.

Alright. So maybe Jeff was an actual good guy with no ulterior motives to shuffling young women around for his ultra-rich boss. Noted.

I behaved the rest of the drive, humming to songs that came on the radio that I recognized. We were at the Spinel Fine Arts Exhibit and Gallery in no time, and Jeff pulled up to the curb, then exited the car to open the back door for me. He offered me a hand, which I took to keep myself steady as I slipped out of the vehicle in my heels.

“Miss Greene, I hope you have a wonderful evening,” he said.

I smiled at him. “Thank you, Jeff.”

There were already several fancy cars being parked as I ascended the stairs to the front of the gallery. Couples filed in, arms linked, chattering with each other. Would I have to look for Eric? Or would he, as he had done during our brief meeting, come find me on his own?

It turned out that it would be neither of these options.

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Eric waited for me at the top of the gallery's entrance stairs, and I didn't miss the appreciative glances of the women who walked past him. He was in another pressed and tailored suit, a three piece in a stunning jade green hue that few men could pull off as well as he did. His hair was styled back away from his face again, and just like before, those pale blue eyes stole my breath away and made me feel very inappropriate things as they flicked down the length of my body.

"There you are," he said, his arm out for me to take as I approached him.

"Eric," I greeted, as I looped my arm loosely through his, his date for the night, bought and paid for. I smiled up at him, feeling so petite next to his height.

This seemingly stoic man didn't return my smile, but as my gaze met his, I saw something far more intriguing. Was my mind playing tricks on me or was I really seeing a hungry gleam in his intense eyes as he stared down at me? Those same eyes daringly traversed a little lower, to my cleavage, before returning to my face again.

This time, the heat and desire in his gaze were unmistakable.

Huh. Maybe he's not so offended by escorts after all.

CHAPTER 4

Eric

I received the alert on my phone from Jeff that he would be arriving shortly with Jasmine. My anticipation had been where it usually was for nights like these—calm,

unbothered, eager to get the evening started. It was an important night and ingrained habits inherited from my father taught me that wasting time, no matter how little time it seemed to be, was one of the worst things a man could do.

Of course, when I saw Jasmine as she exited the car in a stunning burgundy dress that complimented her lithe body, as well as her gorgeous blonde, wavy hair I could easily imagine wrapped around my fist in the throes of passion, I wondered if my father was slightly off the mark about certain things. I could waste an eon simply admiring Jasmine like a fine piece of art, as if she were an exhibit here in this gallery, as if she were there just for me to enjoy.

She was beautiful. She ascended the stairs, all elegance and classically stated sex appeal, despite her young age. That I knew she held that appeal, and what I had seen of her mind and personality thus far, seemed to make my interest in her all the more apparent as she approached me. Would she be able to see the hunger that she inspired in me, even as I tried to keep it in check?

“There you are,” I said, being a gentleman and offering her my arm.

“Eric,” she replied in a sweet tone as she slid her hand into place, the move so natural, as if we truly were a couple.

The scent of her—something soft, not quite floral, but certainly delectable—wafted up into my nose and I automatically breathed her in. Her skin was like porcelain, her facial features absolutely exquisite, and my eyes seemed to have a mind of their own as they dipped down, stealing a glimpse of her breasts, so perfectly outlined by the clinging material of her burgundy dress.

Standing at my side, her body brushed against mine. She placed herself there naturally, all grace and sophistication. She didn’t allow her hand to roam over my chest in a possessive manner, didn’t attempt to touch or caress elsewhere, either, in a

show of ownership.

Those intimate overtures were something that I had come to expect with other eager-to-please escorts I'd hired, though the attention wasn't entirely something that I wanted, personally. While there was a time and a place for overt sexuality—and I could appreciate overt sexuality like any other man with a healthy libido—the older I got the more I had begun to appreciate the understated. The more I began to desire being more discreet when it came to public affection.

However, that didn't mean for all the respect I had for public restraint I didn't enjoy the feel of this small, petitewoman tucked against my side. Arousal thrummed through me, surprising even myself for breaking the finely held control I usually had.

“You were waiting out here all this time?” she asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

I shook my head. “No, Jeff let me know when you were close by, so I came out here to greet you.”

She seemed to consider that for a moment, then inclined her head. “Shall we, then?” she asked, nodding toward the entrance, a spark of excitement in her green eyes. “I've been dying to see this artwork you were so intent on showing off since you spoke about it last week.” Her eagerness was only barely held beneath her words.

Her enthusiasm warmed me. “I've been dying to show it to you, so in that regard, I think we call this a mutual feeling.”

I caught her surprised expression, schooled just so, as I led her into the venue. I even pulled her closer, simply enjoying the feel of her pressed into my side. She gave a little jump when I did—like she was shocked at the gesture, which made me wonder what kind of impression I'd left her with following our first meeting.

It did cross my mind that I might have been too direct with Jasmine. Dominique had told me that a normal experience with clients was something quite different than what she imagined her experience with me would be. Should I have been more friendly as opposed to so composed and clinical about what I needed from Jasmine? I almost sighed. Dominique was good at what she did, but she also wasn't above teasing me for my staunch, analytical ways if she wanted to be entertained.

No matter. I forced myself to relax and decided to be more invested in showing Jasmine the gallery than contemplating a potential course correction with her before the evening had even begun.

The gallery had been completely redecorated between my meeting with Jasmine last week and now. Dark drapery hung between wall-mounted pieces of art while red velvet ropes sectioned off sculptures that were placed intentionally throughout the open space. The painting of the woman and her death flowers was up on full display, as well as other works full of the macabre and the light and beautiful alike. The duality of life and death. The beauty and the horror in both. It was the theme of the night, and I explained this to Jasmine as I made the first proper rounds around the gallery, pointing to different pieces and gauging her interest and reactions to ones we might discuss.

"All of this artwork is so diverse," she said, her tone filled with awe as we moved on from a life-sized sculpture of a Native American woman.

I nodded in agreement. "Artists have been putting their pieces together for about six months now, all local from around Florida."

Her eyes brimmed with curiosity as she glanced up at me. "Around Florida, not just from Coral Gables?"

"Almost all of the artists come from outside of Coral Gables and typically not from

any of the major cities,” I explained. “The purpose is to showcase artists who would otherwise be barred from conventional events because of finances or other biases that art houses might have. Money buys a lot, but visibility is a currency that is often underappreciated.”

She studied my face for a long moment. “You give people a chance they wouldn’t otherwise get on their own, without support.”

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I smiled and shrugged. “Yes, myself and others who have entirely too much money to keep for ourselves and would rather put it to decent use before we’re not able to use it anymore,” I said, directing her toward an abstract painting. “I learned the value of artists and those who create from my mother, and the value of applying myself methodically and effectively from my father. Lessons that have served me well here.”

She looked impressed, and I didn’t think too long and hard as to why that mattered to me. Or how easy and comfortable she was to be around. Her red, glossy lips parted as if she were about to say something, but before she could comment, I heard someone call my name.

“Eric! You’re finally here.”

I grinned, turning us toward the source of the lilting, female voice. A beautiful Desi woman in a scarlet sari with gold accents approached, her brown eyes warm and her smile mischievous as she looked between me and Jasmine, still tucked close to my side.

“I was beginning to wonder if you were intending on standing us up tonight, but I see you have the company of a beautiful woman, so I won’t fault you too much on that.”

“Hello, Aanya,” I greeted her. “You know I would never stand up an occasion like this.”

A smirk kicked up one corner of her mouth. “One could only hope that you’d finally chosen to give yourself a vacation, or maybe take an evening off and treat yourself to something delightful.”

I raised my brows. “Art isn’t delightful?”

“Oh, it is, but we both know that even the most dedicated need a palate cleanser every now and then, and you’re hardly, if ever, in the mood to indulge yourself.” She looked to Jasmine, her smile widening. “And you haven’t even introduced me to this lovely flower on your arm tonight. How unexpectedly rude of you, Eric. I expected better,” she teased, then held her hand out to Jasmine. “Aanya. And you are?”

The poised woman at my side shook Aanya’s hand. “Jasmine,” she answered with a friendly smile. “Are you a backer for the gallery?”

Aanya laughed. “Oh, hardly. No, I’m one of the artists. Eric saw my work online a few years back, put in a word for a few workshops and grants, and here I am now, living the dream.”

“That sculpture over there is one of Aanya’s pieces,” I said.

I pointed not too far from where the three of us stood, toward an exhibit that featured a massive marble lotus blossom, and what looked to be gold work details around the edges and seeped into what was likely intentional cracks laid into the marble’s surface. It was a piece that I knew Aanya had been working on for a long time now, something that would end up being one of her best works of hand-sculpted marble to date. It was hard to find work like Aanya’s even in elite spheres. The difference was in the fact that Aanya had an uncommon respect and reverence for the craft and less interest in the commercialization of it.

“Ah, yes, my beautiful little lotus,” she said with a fond sigh. “It’s one of what will hopefully be several marble flowers. If we’re going to be all—” she waved her hand in front of her, a slight roll to her eyes “—philosophical, I wanted to take the concept of how men always love to reference flowers as a vagina metaphor and turn it into something that is utterly lifeless and completely devoid of any sexualism. It is merely

a thing to observe. Maybe even to comment on its beauty. But never particularly valued beyond either its utility or beauty.” She grinned and leaned closer to Jasmine. “Eric has told me that despite my convictions of appearing to loathe the pretentious, that I do manage to allow myself some nice philosophizing at times.”

Jasmine laughed lightly, then pulled from my arm to approach the sculpture. Aanya and I exchanged a look and followed.

“To be fair,” Jasmine said, studying the piece intently. “It’s something easy to feel when most of those flowers as vaginas metaphors are really only there for one purpose.” Jasmine looked to Aanya, amusement sparkling in her eyes. “To get the man creating those symbolisms laid.”

“Exactly!” Aanya said delightfully. “It almost makes the whole thing devoid of all meaning. Shame, really. I do enjoy the occasional orchid vagina art piece. There’s something about the way the petals fall that is actually quite delicate and feminine. Almost makes you want to reach out and touch them just to see if they’ll react, but it’s incredibly hard to capture that kind of whimsy and feeling in art, painting, sculpture, or otherwise. Are you an artist as well, Jasmine?”

“Once upon a time,” Jasmine answered enigmatically. “Now I’m more so a distant appreciator of the effort.” She nodded toward the lotus blossom sculpture. “You said you were sculpting more to go with this one?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve got a few designs sketched for the series, and I hope to start sculpting the second piece soon. I…”

Grateful to see the two of them hitting it off, which wasn’t always the case with my dates and other women, I decided to locate something to drink for all of us. It was the first time I felt like I could leave my guest with someone that I knew and not have to worry about what would be said—or done.

Surprisingly, I trusted that Jasmine wouldn't attempt to pull personal information about myself from Aanya, or pry disrespectfully to see if Aanya and I had ever slept together, which we hadn't. I didn't mix friendships with the bedroom, and I was certainly not Aanya's type. Jasmine seemed far more interested in the art and Aanya's approach than attempting to scheme something out of me as so many before her had tried.

I smirked to myself. If I were a lesser man, I may have felt a little put out about the situation.

As it was, when I returned with glasses of red wine for each of us, I couldn't be put out by the way Jasmine's eyes seemed to sparkle and her laugh tinkled in the air while she and Aanya were still speaking with each other. They looked like a pair of old friends with the way they stood close to each other, seemingly so comfortable that it was me who was the outsider here, not Jasmine who'd I'd invited into all of this.

It brought an unfamiliar warmth to my face that I quickly schooled before I handed the women their glasses of wine. "I hope that I'm not interrupting too much," I said, only half-joking. "You two seem to have hit it off. Perhaps Jasmine should be going home with you tonight?"

"Don't tempt me!" Aanya said, a naughty gleam in her eyes as she glanced back at Jasmine. "Be sure to tell me if he becomes an overbearing no fun zone bore though, will you? And I can whip him into shape for you no problem. I'm not afraid of this silver fox."

Jasmine chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind."

Aanya turned to me. "You have a good evening, Eric. Treat the lady nicely," she said with a saucy wink before heading off to talk to another patron.

“I like her,” Jasmine mused as she took a small sip of her wine. “Very open. Very funny. I’m impressed she hand sculpts out of solid marble. It’s such a difficult medium to work with, but the result under her hand is just...” She sighed wistfully, looking to the marble lotus blossom once more. “So beautiful.”

It certainly wasn’t the only thing that was beautiful. As she looked at Aanya’s sculpture, I witnessed that same longing in her eyes that I had seen when we had our meeting here. Like there were thousands of tiny gears whirling and twirling in her mind. Like she could see all the reasons why Aanya had made this sculpture and had a hundred reasons of her own as to why it was such a striking piece to begin with.

“I see you’ve found yourself taken with Aanya’s work,” I said, admiring the lotus right along with Jasmine. “She’s one of the most prolific artists that shows in this gallery, along with a few others that I help subsidize and fund. If you end up coming back to this gallery, you’ll likely see more of her work.”

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If Dominique's prediction of how well-matched Jasmine and I were held true, then she would most certainly see more of Aanya's work, because the other woman was presenting her sculptures in at least three more exhibits over the coming months, and those were events that I'd planned to bring a guest to.

Jasmine practically beamed up at me, her bright, genuine smile hitting me like a sucker punch to the chest. "Oh, I have to come back and see more of her work," she said, her enthusiasm almost infectious. "Even if it's on my own. There's something so simplistic about the lotus design but so alluring about it, too. You can tell how passionate she is about her work when she talks about it. There's nothing better than seeing that excitement in an artist's face, you know?"

I nodded, understanding what she meant. "It's one of the reasons I like this line of work. It's therapeutic, in a way." I smiled and inclined my head. "Shall we continue on?"

While Aanya was occupied flitting between patrons like the social butterfly that she was, I once again had Jasmine on my arm and walked her around the gallery. I introduced her to artists, art patrons, other backers, and a few of the curators who made themselves known for the event this evening.

Despite her young age, Jasmine took to each interaction with such an eager grace, slipped into intelligent conversation like it was a second skin and molded seamlessly to the atmosphere as though she was born into it. If I had not met her through Dominique, I would have assumed she was a colleague's daughter, brought up around this work, entrenched in this life.

Which made me curious about where Jasmine had come from. Every call girl, prostitute, escort, or cam girl had a story—usually a specific reason for why they’d chosen the line of work that they had. For some, it was desperation. Others, necessity—and those two things, desperation and necessity, were not necessarily the same.

I didn’t know Jasmine well enough to gauge what her reasons might be—but I had seen enough facets of her personality to be intrigued and to want to know more, if only to sate a bit of curiosity before it was time to part ways with her. Which was an anomaly for me, considering I didn’t usually find myself so fascinated with, and attracted to, my temporary arrangements.

Eventually, I meandered us toward the upper floors, where there was a smaller density of people. Truth be told, I should have been socializing, but I wanted to monopolize more of Jasmine’s presence than I wanted to play my role as a benefactor.

How ironic was that? Business normally consumed me and was my sole focus, but tonight I’d found myself distracted and enjoying myself in a way I never would have anticipated. Despite securing her company for just a few hours for the event, I didn’t want my time with Jasmine to end.

“How are you finding the evening so far?” I asked as I led us from the exhibits to a small balcony that looked out to the coastal side of Coral Gables.

The terrace was vacant and quiet and unlit, giving us a bit of privacy from the rest of the gallery. Jasmine leaned comfortably on the railing near the far wall, looking out toward the distant coastline. A placid, comfortable expression touched her delicate features.

“Honestly? I think I’m falling in love,” she said with a laugh—and then caught

herself. “You know, I mean with all of this.” She gestured her hand in a sweeping motion to indicate the interior of the gallery behind us. “Do you ever realize that you’ve been missing something more than you thought you were? Or even that you missed it at all? I suppose that’s what I mean to say.”

I hummed, hiding a smile behind a drink of wine at her endearing enthusiasm. “I understand what you mean,” I said after a moment, and set my glass on a nearby table before moving closer to her. “It’s hard not to fall in love with the art, the way that it makes people feel and the way an artist connects to their creations, and in turn how it unites them with others who appreciate the same things.” It was a kinship that my mother had instilled well within me.

“That exactly,” Jasmine said, nodding eagerly before she once again tried to tamp her rising exhilaration. “Ah, like I said, it’s been a long time since I’ve been somewhere like this and it just brings back a lot of memories.”

“No need to apologize,” I said, unable to remember the last time I’d dated someone who matched my passion for the arts like she did. “I like your excitement.”

A beautiful flush spread across her face as she stared up at me. Without thought or second guessing, I reached out and gently spread my fingers across the coloring on her cheek. Her skin flared hot beneath my touch, and she leaned into my palm. A soft, almost imperceptible tip of her head into my hold.

My cock stirred. It shouldn’t have been so easy to feel the tug of desire that wrapped around me—yet there it was. Undeniable and so goddamn irresistible. That surge of lust drew my eyes to the curve of her neck, to that arousing blush on her smooth, porcelain skin.

To her red, parted damp lips.

Up to her eyes.

There was a glossy, wide-eyed glow to her gaze. An indescribable curiosity and pure need that reflected back onto me. She was temptation personified, and the tip of my tongue darted out, wetting my own lips as I watched anticipation flicker in her eyes.

Without overthinking my actions, I leaned in and dipped my head, pressing my mouth to hers, watching as her lashes fluttered closed. The softness of her lips molded to my own as if they'd been created specifically for me. I caught the sweet taste of wine against her breath and the slight, nearly imperceptible gasp that escaped her as I gently tugged on her bottom lip with my teeth.

The slight moan in the back of her throat encouraged me to deepen that kiss, and I swept my tongue inside her mouth. A low growl of satisfaction rumbled in my chest as she responded eagerly to my sensual assault, participating whole-heartedly.

I knew what an obligatory kiss was, and this wasn't one of those bought and paid for perks. The hunger that erupted between us was mutual, the attraction starting at a slow burn and flaring into a full fledge fire that threatened to consume us both. With one hand holding her hip, I slid my palm from her cheek and around to the nape of her neck. My fingers threaded into the silken locks of her hair there, gripping just tight enough to guide her closer to me so I could feel the press of her curves against my hard body, and there was no mistaking how fucking thick my cock was for her.

Her soft little whimpers vibrated against our fused lips. Her hands explored as my mouth ravished hers, sliding up my chest and across my shoulders—at first tentative before they turned fervent, pushing into my hair and clutching the strands in her fingers as she angled her hips against mine, in a way that drove me insane with the need to bury my cock deep inside her body.

Alone and tucked away on that balcony from the eyes and ears of the patrons of the

gallery, we melded together. In a haze of lust, I took one step, then another, guiding her back until she was pressed up against the wall, my body pinning her there while her soft, illicit moans filled the air around us.

Just a kiss, just a taste...that had been my intention. But it was impossible to extinguish the spark when I felt the slight part of her thighs, giving me more access between them. How warm she was. How her breasts crushed against my chest and the way her hands were now sliding inside my suit jacket and around my waist, as if to anchor me closer.

Feeling my prized restraint starting to spin out of control, I tore my mouth from hers. "Fuck."

The slip of tongue was damn near embarrassing, yet the slight bite of her nails in my back prevented me from caring. I hissed, loving how I could feel the dig of them beneath my shirt. How her own desire could be felt so intensely...

There was no better sensation.

With a groan, I shoved my hands beneath the hem of her dress and gripped her ass, hoisting her up higher against the wall. There wasn't a damn thing I wanted more than to remove the layers of clothing between us. I wanted to sink into her, as she was, pliant and soft and hot and wet beneath me, moaning my name as she writhed and came all over my cock.

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Doing anything sexual in a public place was not something that I indulged in—ever. I could bring a girl to business venues, show her off, let her be the starlet on my arm, but pleasure never touched the hallowed halls that I had made my work.

Jasmine, though...Jasmine made it feel like it would be worth it to let all that control go without a care or thought in the world. Made it feel like taking this pleasure here was my right as much as it was her want.

And oh, I could tell she wanted it.

Her hips tilted and rocked toward mine, letting me feel the sultry warmth radiating from between her legs. One of them crooked, knee bent so my cock, straining beneath my slacks, pressed right up against that heat. As we kissed, she nipped and bit at my lips, soft, needy moans echoing in my ears. Her fingerstangled in my hair again and it seemed we were both content to let this make out session run its natural course until—

“Wait, Eric,” she breathed, panting for breath. “I thought...I mean, I thought that you...this here...isn’t...”

Poor thing couldn’t put her thoughts together, and I almost couldn’t, either. Wasn’t it my own rules that said this wasn’t something that happened at venues? That I didn’t want my partner for the evening vying for an indecent exposure charge, along with public embarrassment for the both of us in one go?

Yeah. Those were my own fucking rules, and I was so far gone that I was going to readily ignore them.

“Just this once,” I murmured.

It was as much a concession to her, as it was a reminder to myself. Just this once, I could indulge. Maybe that was the effect of being given the pleasure of seeing someone’s mind first, as I had Jasmine’s tonight. Her ability to discuss and understand my deepest passion turned me on as much as her body did.

Recklessly, my mouth pressed back to hers. I wanted to fuck her in the comfort of my bed, but right now I could make her come. Have her a writhing mess on this art house wall, have her hemmed up on it like one of those paintings in there that I was so invested in. The thought made me chuckle in my mind; was that a trace of forbidden sentimentality?

Whatever it was, in the moment it didn’t matter. Still bracing her against the wall, I moved one of my hands from her ass and around, sliding my palm between her legs. The heat of her pussy radiated from her core, and her panties, thin little scrap of fabric that they were, were already soaked. My cock throbbed in response; a tight ache that made me grit my teeth.

I brought my mouth near her ear. “Don’t forget to be quiet.”

It was the only warning she received as I slid my fingers over her pussy, along the outside of her panties, causing her body to buck against mine at that first illicit caress. It was such a gratifying tease, pushing swollen lips apart beneath the barrier of fabric to graze the hardened clit between. I pinched that nub of flesh between my fingers, giving it a slight tug.

“Oh, shit,” Jasmine panted out, trying hard to do what I’d asked and be quiet.

I released her clit but rubbed along her sex, increasing the friction of her panties against her slick flesh. I pulled back just enough to watch her face as I massaged her a

little harder, faster—the way her eyes lidded heavily and how she strained to hold back her moans by biting down on those kiss-swollen lips I could easily imagine wrapped around my cock as she sucked me off.

I held her gaze with mine as I continued to stroke rhythmically, mesmerized by how unabashed she was about allowing me this source of reckless pleasure, how her skin got pinker and pinker as the space between her thighs got wetter and wetter.

I had to cover her mouth with mine as she fell apart on my fingers, swallowing her soft, erotic whimpers in case someone walked by and heard. In the moment, it wasn't even that I didn't want someone to come investigate for the sake of my own rules—it was that I was greedy and possessive and I didn't think anyone else deserved to hear the sounds of Jasmine's orgasm with their own ears.

As her release shuddered through her, she clung to me like a pillar in the middle of a swelling ocean, like I was the only thing keeping her afloat as the sensations around her demanded that she dip below the surface and drown in pure bliss.

Fuck, it was a powerful, intoxicating sensation just watching her come apart for me. As that hot, wet flood ruined her panties and drenched my fingers, I knew that I couldn't have this, have her, tonight and only once. I knew that this chemistry, this thing that made me crave her, demanded that I have more of her. All of her.

Even before I'd pulled my fingers from between her legs, I'd made my decision. "I'll get you cleaned up, and then I'm taking you home to fuck you."

No if, ands, or buts. I wanted her to feel me everywhere. And we would only stop if she said the word, but the inviting look in her eyes told me that she was going to be all mine, to do with as I pleased.

CHAPTER 5

Jasmine

Being invited back to Eric's place wasn't exactly surprising. Dates, sex, it was all a part of the dance that I did. I enjoyed it. I was good at it. But this date with Eric at the gallery had taken a complete one-eighty from the potentially cold shouldering I'd expected throughout the evening after how our first meeting had gone.

Instead, he'd accomplished the opposite. First, by actually revealing a shockingly charming side to his demeanor, then heating me up and awakening an overwhelming lust I could barely contain. After that little tryst out on the balcony, my entire body tingled with the mere thought of all the things this man was about to do to me, and I welcomed each and every one of them.

With him sitting beside me in the small space within the backseat of the Maserati, I was hyper aware of his presence. How warm and big he was. The spice of his cologne as it clung to his skin. His hand slid over mine where they rested on my lap—then down to my bare thigh, slightly exposed with the rise of my dress.

His long, strong fingers daringly feathered along my leg, and I sucked in a breath, doing my best to cover the noise by clearing my throat and hoping that helped to disguise the sound from Jeff up front. If he heard, he didn't react; it was nice to see that his professionalism from earlier carried over.

Beside me, Eric chuckled beneath his breath, such a different man from the apathetic one who'd greeted me on the gallery steps. Teasing and tormenting me, his fingers danced up my thigh, higher and higher. Like little tantalizing whispers of pleasure to come. He wasn't so indifferent and controlled now as those teases to my thighs turned to him sliding those elegant fingers along the seam of my thin, lacey panties.

I barely caught my gasp and squirmed under Eric's illicit touch. I was still so wet from the first orgasm he'd given me out on the balcony. Still so very hot and restless

and needy. He said nothing, only smirked and put a finger to his lips, silently telling me to be quiet.

Could I?Again?

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Eyes gleaming with wicked intent, Eric pressed a large palm to one of my thighs, nudging it farther apart from the other, like he was Moses and I was the Red Sea, falling apart at his command. I knew that I shouldn't. Jeff was right up front, a few feet away. Sweet Jeff. Jeff, who had no interest in any of what was going on in the back of the car, even as Eric pushed my pussy lips apart beneath the damp material of my panties.

“Hey, Jeff?” Eric said, the even tone of his voice giving nothing away. “I'd like the music a little higher, please.”

Jeff obliged, just in time to cover the squeak I let out as Eric's fingers slipped beneath the fabric and stroked right over my still sensitive clit. My thighs shook and my stomach muscles clenched. A flood of pleasure made me lightheaded and caused my nipples to stiffen and ache against my lace bra. I vaguely registered the rising volume of the music as Eric turned toward me and leaned in, lips brushing against the shell of my ear.

“I apologize for my impatience,” he said huskily, sounding anything but contrite for his sinful behavior. “But I want to see you come apart again.”

Then, without warning, he sank two fingers into me. One digit after the other, until his palm was pressed against my clit and my pussy was full of his fingers.

This time, when I gasped, I didn't hold it back. The music swallowed any chance of it getting to the front of the car, and my head tilted back against the seat. Eric's lips settled at the heated, pulse-thumping column of my throat.

“You’re so fucking warm,” he whispered there, breath hot as it ghosted across my skin. “Warm...soft...slick and tight.” He groaned as he crooked his fingers and I hissed, rolling my hips so they’d stay at that deep, pleasure inducing spot where the tips of them teased.

“You like being finger fucked, don’t you?” he murmured, his tone dark and dirty. “I can feel it in the way you tighten around them as I bury them deep inside your sweet little body. The way your pussy grips my fingers when I try to drag them back out.”

There was no point in denying the truth. “Eric...”

I panted his name desperately, trying to keep my voice below the volume of the music in the car. The heel of his palm rubbed against my clit as his fingers thrust in and out slowly, leisurely, keeping me full just on his hand alone. I found myself rocking back and forth in the car seat, moving with his motions.

“That’s it. Just like that.” His damp lips skimmed their way back up to my ear. “Fuck yourself on my fingers and let yourself enjoy it. Imagine it’s my cock stretching you open and filling you up.”

I whimpered, unable to think of anything else as he continued to elevate my insatiable need, plying me with his expert strokes. My toes curled in my high heels, and I gripped the sleeve of his suit. Oh my God. I was so close. His teeth grazed the side of my neck, his palm adding more pressure to my hard and throbbing clit. I was so drenched I was sure I was going to leave a wet spot on the seat.

I wanted to. I wanted to leave the evidence of my pleasure on Eric’s perfectly cared for upholstery.

Hotter and hotter, wetter and wetter, my orgasm beckoned and I tightened around his fingers—

Right on the edge, he pulled them away.

“Ah,” he said, much too casually when I was on the verge of combusting. “Seems we’re home already. Jeff makes good time.”

I whimpered, exasperated and frustrated as the fingers previously inside me gently straightened out my panties and put my dress in place. But, before he got out of the car to go around to the other side and let me out, he made sure to lick each one of the fingers he’d withdrawn from my pussy. His tongue laved each digit, sucked each one into his mouth, removing any evidence that they’d been inside of me, soaked with my arousal.

He looked me in the eyes as he did so, the blue of them darkened with lust. “You taste fucking divine.”

Eric’s voice was husky, and I shivered at his words and his tone, feeling another rush of wetness flood between my thighs. I squeezed them together as he slid out of the car, and attempted to un-fluster myself by the time he was on the other side of the vehicle, letting me out.

My legs were shaking and my first step was a stumble, and thus, the un-flustering of my situation was a marked failure.

“Have a good night, Jeff. Feel free to drive her around and pick up something decent to eat before parking her,” Eric called as he closed the door behind us and hooked his arm in mine again to lead me through the front door of his high rise.

I couldn’t take in the gold and black motif with the awe that I usually would have. I couldn’t find intrigue in the echoing reverberation of my steps in line with his against the marble floors. I didn’t even respond to the receptionist at the front desk who greeted Eric.

“Good evening, Mr. Maxim,” she said with a smile. “I hope your evening was wonderful.”

“It was fantastic,” he replied, inclining his head toward her. “Thank you, Lydia.”

I couldn't pay full attention to any of this shit because all I could think about was the pulsing ache between my thighs. The strength in Eric's hands as he'd ramped up my desire in the car. The way that I wanted him to push between my legs again but instead of his fingers, I wanted his cock. I wanted to be completely unravelled by him.

Sexual tension crackled between us with every step, until we were finally behind the doors of the elevator. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I remembered Dominique mentioning that Eric lived on the top floor. Most likely, the penthouse suite.

It'd be a long ride up.

Before I could say anything, I was pressed back against the wall of the elevator. Eric's lips were on mine, and I could taste the sweetness of my own pussy when his tongue slipped into my mouth. I moaned. Why did I like it so much? It wasn't necessarily the taste—it was that he was kissing me so ravenously while it was still on his mouth. It was that he had me hiked up against the wall with my hands pinned above my head, dominating me...

It was that his control had snapped, that I could feel the hard press of his cock even through his slacks and my panties. The intensity of his hunger matched my own, and I revelled in this unrestrained side to the man who'd been the epitome of decorum for most of the night.

He rolled his hips against mine, groaning impatiently against my mouth. “I'm going to fuck you so long and hard that you can't walk straight by the time I'm done with

you,” he said, tugging gently on my bottom lip with his teeth. “And you’re going to enjoy every moment of it.”

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I had no doubt he'd fulfill that promise. "Eric. Please," I begged, as a delirious need rose up inside of me again. "I don't want to wait—"

He swallowed my pleas with his deep, filthy kisses, held me to the wall with the sheer power of his body. I wanted to touch him, wanted to grab him, wanted to return every single feeling of electric bliss that he was giving me.

I got the chance when he let go of my hands to grip my hips. Tongues and teeth clashed as I clasped his cock in my palm through his pants, stroked over the button and zipper and fabric that kept me from what I wanted. Clumsily, I fumbled with the button of his slacks, popping it open and blessedly getting my hand inside.

"Fuck—"

Eric didn't groan, he growled like an animal with my fingers fisted around his engorged cock. He bucked into my hold even as I stroked him, hips frenetic and his shaft as solid as a pillar of marble. My fingers barely managed to wrap all the way around his erection, and it was so goddamn thick and long.

"You want my cock inside you?" he asked, his voice taunting me.

My fingers squeezed just a little more around his girth, extracting another guttural groan from him. "Please," I said, breathing the one word against his mouth.

The elevator came to a smooth stop. Eric pulled me from the wall, and I didn't have the time to think before his hand slipped into mine, leading me through the elevator's open doors.

We didn't come into a hallway, but rather Eric's apartment itself. He drew me back into his arms, his hands tangling in my hair as his mouth claimed mine again, his tongue delving deep. We tumbled through the open space, too wrapped up in each other to pay attention to what was around us as I shoved his jacket off his shoulders, he yanked off his tie, and I pulled his dress shirt from the waistband of his slacks.

At least Eric was able to stumble around his furniture, through the halls in his penthouse, and lead me straight to the bedroom.

It was open, dim lights and black walls with white trim, a huge window off to the left that overlooked the city and sparkled with the night life lights shining outside. I wondered what it would be like to be pressed against the cool glass of that enclosure while he fucked me from behind, if the windowpane would fog up from the heat of sex, our bodies, and panting breaths.

I didn't get the chance to find out.

Eric impatiently pushed me onto my back on the huge, king-sized bed. The mattress was the single softest surface I had ever touched in my life and contrasted with the solid planes of his body as he soon followed, laying over me with his hard cock pressed between my legs.

My legs fell apart so easily for him. My hands pushed through his hair as his pushed through my clothes, cleaving a way through the fabric to get to my skin. His nails lightly scraped along my thighs, to my hips, to my ribs, shoving my dress up with it. As the dress went up and over my head, he went down, kissing between the valley of my breasts while I quickly shed my bra and tossed it aside.

He licked and sucked my stiff, aching nipples before his hot, damp mouth continued down to my navel, teeth nipping at the jut of my hipbone where the line of my panties stopped. My hips shamelessly raised to meet his mouth, and my hands raked through

his hair again, pulling him closer.

Eric chuckled against my skin. He bit me again, harder. I gasped, tightening my hold in his hair.

“Such an eager little thing,” he said, his voice deliciously rough. “I like it.”

His fingers hooked into my panties and yanked them down, leaving them to dangle on one of my ankles. He settled back between my spread legs, his head dipping down toward my needy sex. He exhaled a breath, a sigh that made me arch as it blew against my heated, sensitive skin.

“Please,” I whimpered, begged, prayed.

His answer was his mouth on my pussy, his lips parting through my slit to delve his tongue inside me. Eric wasn't shy about taking what he wanted; not as he held my thighs apart, fingers digging into the meat of them with a grip so sure I wondered if he was the embodiment of gluttony with how eagerly he devoured me.

He ate me like I hoped he'd fuck me. Tongue pushing in and out of me, then flicking against my clit when he'd pull it out just to torment me, his sinful mouth moving with the eager rolls of my hips. Every growl, every gluttonous groan and lick between my thighs sent extra shockwaves of pleasure through my body.

He sucked at my clit, fingers replacing his tongue, pushing deep and stretching me for his thick, fat cock. My back arched as I cried out and I suddenly tightened around his fingers, the flood of my orgasm destroying my equilibrium.

I panted, groaning from how sensitive I was and pulled his hair, but he didn't stop, prolonging the sweet, blissful pleasure. He withdrew his fingers only to replace them with his mouth again, lapping up every single drop that spilled from me.

“You taste like a fucking treat,” he rasped, giving me one last, long leisurely lick that made me twitch and shudder, then go limp. “I could devour you every goddamn night.”

I nodded, out of my mind. Yes, yes, yes. Were those words only racing through my mind or was I panting them out? Begging for it? Was I sobbing—

“You precious little thing.” Eric’s amused voice reached my ears as he brushed his fingers over my cheek, caressing the flush there. “Are you already spent?”

I shook my head. No, no, no. I wasn’t ready to be done.

“Good,” he said, sounding pleased. “Because we’re only getting started.”

He pulled away from me, and I whined. I looked up at him, pleading with my eyes because my voice still didn’t want to fucking work. Like I was some kind of smitten virgin and not a woman who was used to having sex with men.

Or maybe it was because what he chose to do was clearly as enjoyable for him as it was for me. A rarity for me.

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I propped myself up and watched Eric slip from the bed. His gaze on me was panther-like. Precise. Eyes intense as he looked at my stripped-down body with its thighs slick from my arousal and my messy, dishevelled hair, and he had the audacity to pin me with that heated, hungry gaze as he undressed in front of me. Every layer slowly, leisurely removed—from his dress shirt to those pants I'd just had my hand in, down to his socks, shoes, then those tight black boxer briefs. All of it gone, piece by piece, until it was just Eric standing there naked in front of me at the edge of his bed, a knowing look in his eyes. Like he knew how much I burned for him to be inside me.

Licking my lips, I let my eyes fall to the hard, jutting length that rested between his legs before letting my gaze trek back up his strong, muscular body to his eyes. For a man in his forties, he was in prime shape.

“You know, I wasn't sure if the night would turn out like this,” he admitted, grabbing a condom from the nightstand and putting it on before finally moving onto the bed, a bemused look on his gorgeous face. “I don't often bring my dates back to my home, but who knew I'd find you so fucking irresistible.”

No, our arrangement for the evening hadn't explicitly included sex. He'd only paid for me to accompany him to the event, but I wasn't complaining either. “Who knew I'd find you so fucking charming?” I volleyed back impudently.

Despite the slight sarcasm to my tone, he chuckled, the sound warm and sexy as he climbed up my prone body, then came to rest over me with his arms on either side of my head. His hips settled between my spread legs and I brazenly raised my knees higher at his sides, opening me wider for him, so ready and eager and desperate for what would come next. For that blissful moment when the promise of fucking was

fulfilled, and that pressure of his cockhead against my core became more than just a nudge.

Staring into his eyes, I slid my hands over his lightly furred chest and down to his stomach. I took his shaft in my hold, loving the way his lips parted and his lids hooded, how he thrust his hips into my hand, fucking my fist.

“I want to fuck you,” he said in a low, seductive tone. “Is that what you want, Jasmine? Or do you just want to play with me with your hand for now?”

Smiling mischievously, I squeezed my fingers around him. Eric groaned and for a moment I thought maybe I had turned the tide on this mind-numbing dance and gained some ground and some control.

It didn’t happen. Eric took my hand away from his shaft, pinning my wrist to the bed in the same moment he pressed insistently inside of me.

I gasped at the decadent heat of his cock, then groaned as he rammed forward without warning and bottomed out. His jaw clenched, and my eyes rolled back as he withdrew a few inches, then surged in again, sinking into the depths of my body and filling me in a way I hadn’t been in a long time.

The stretch...the depth...it was heavenly.

I gripped Eric’s fingers in my hand, hiked my legs up even higher as he slammed in and out of me at a pace that knocked the bed against the wall in a cadence of deep thrums. He drove into me faster, cock pulsing on every thrust, veins throbbing so hard that I could feel every groove sliding inside me against the most sensitive places of my body.

He exhaled a harsh breath. “Fuck.Fuck—”

Suddenly, Eric pulled out of me, flipped me over so I was on my knees, and placed my hands on the headboard. “Hold on, little flower,” he murmured, then drove back into me, the harsh slap of skin on skin and our gratifying moans filling the space in his room.

He leaned over me from behind and pressed his chest against my back, holding me in place with a strong arm wrapped around my middle while he relentlessly pummelled my body with his cock. He sank his teeth where the curve of my shoulder met my neck, delivering a jolt of pleasure I felt all the way down to where we were joined.

It was rough, wild, animalistic. Nothing like the restraint that he had had at our first meeting, or even some of the control that he had when he resisted fucking me in the gallery. Every bit of discipline, every carefully executed word and action was out the window as he claimed my body with his. As with every single needy arch of my back to meet his hips was met with harder, deeper thrusts, groans and moans and his fingers leaving crescent marks in my side and my hip where he gripped me tight.

I gasped, as another onslaught of pleasure threatened to consume me. “I’m—I’m gonna come—”

Eric’s response to that was to reach around my body and slip his fingers over my clit again, strumming it faster than even he fucked me, stealing the breath from my lungs. The tension in my body wound tighter and tighter. A few more plunges and my orgasm shook through my body like an earthquake. I cried out as my pussy spasmed around his dick as I came, hard, leaving me, and Eric, soaked in the slick deluge of my release.

“That’s it,” he growled in satisfaction. “Come all over my cock like a good fucking girl.”

Eric pulled me from the bedframe, setting my forearms on the mattress with my ass in

the air. He didn't stop, didn't relent his rough, unrefined thrusts as he fucked me through the last vestiges of my climax and his dick swelled inside me. With a low, gravelly groan, he shoved into me one last time, deep as he could go, settling in as his cock pulsed hard inside me. Warmth flooded my insides as Eric held me down, kept me still as he laid over my body, his own orgasm seemingly never ending.

Eric breathed deep against my shoulder, and I had my face buried in the messy comforter below me. It smelled like sweat and sex and that enticing, addicting cologne that Eric wore. I breathed it in like it was the elixir to life, wanting to keep it in my lungs even as Eric withdrew from my body then turned me over onto my back like a limp—and sated—ragdoll and looked down at me.

His salt and pepper hair was mussed all over. Completely out of place from where my fingers had run through it and where the sweat from fucking had separated the strands. Yet, even like this, with his tan skin flushed and his eyes glazed, he managed to be even more beautiful than when he was put together, all neat and tidy.

“Let me clean you up,” he said.

I managed to turn to my side and snuggled into one of his pillows as he pulled away from me, surprised that he was offering himself to do so. Most clients, even the nicest ones, tended to leave me to my own devices once the sex was done. They had gotten what they had paid for—so that was fair. But there was something intimate in having someone clean you after a heavy banger that most didn't broach into.

Eric was gone for a while, and then came back in a clean set of black silken boxers. He had two fluffy towels in his hands, which, when he pushed me onto my back and pressed them gently between my thighs, were warm and wet.

“Oh...” I groaned, my head tilting back and a smile on my face at how soothing it was, especially against swollen (even if satisfied) flesh. “Oh, fuck, that feels good.”

Eric smiled down at me. “Good. It’s supposed to. I’m sorry if I was a little too rough with you—”

“No,” I said, interrupting him. “No, that was a lot of things, but definitely not too rough. It was...fuck, it was good.” I sighed.

Eric laughed. “It was good for me, too.” He reached out, gently brushing the hair out of my face, his suddenly serious gaze searching my eyes. “If it’s not too bold of a request, would you be comfortable staying the night? I’m obviously fine with paying more for your extra time.”

Surprise rippled through me. I hadn’t thought that he would ask for more time, aka sex. Hell, I hadn’t thought he’d bring me back to his apartment just based on our first interaction last week. But even when sex was involved in an arrangement, it usually ended with a kiss goodnight and an Uber ride back to my apartment.

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Hell, would I even be able to sit comfortably in the back of an Uber, I wondered in amusement? I didn't think so with the way I still throbbed between my legs.

Shockingly, I wanted to stay, and it had nothing to do with money, and everything to do with this enigma of a man who was already starting to get under my skin. A man I wanted to know better—even as I realized how unwise that particular desire was.

“I would love to, Eric.”

CHAPTER 6

Jasmine

I woke up the next morning to the scent of bacon, hot, fresh bread, and coffee.

I stirred in the massive bed I was left in, silk sheets knotted and curled around my naked body. The scent of Eric's cologne and our night of debauchery still clung to the sheets. It made for a wild, wonderful combination, especially given the reminder of how many times we'd fucked was a large part of the reason why my stomach growled so viciously at the scent of breakfast.

Was Eric cooking his own food? Or did he have a live-in chef? Maybe one that came specially when he wanted to show off a gourmet meal for his guests? Guests he, by admission of himself and everyone around him, didn't have many of.

I rolled around on the bed, getting more tangled in the sheets before I got less untangled and finally managed to free myself from the silk prison that was keeping

me from breakfast.

It was when I finally let my feet hit the ground, I realized that this outing had left me without proper pajamas to run around in. Well, it wouldn't necessarily be the first time that I had done the walk of shame.

Finding my dress from the night before, I slipped it on without the bra and panties, almost making it into a nightie. I winced as I ran my fingers through my hair in a futile attempt to comb the tangles and matted flatness on the one side of my head that I had slept on. Maybe I would look halfway appealing.

The next hurdle would prove to be trekking through Eric's apartment. I left the bedroom, fairly sure that his place covered the entire top floor of the building. There were numerous rooms, halls, and open spaces that made it feel like it could have been a labyrinth instead of an apartment. There was art everywhere. Paintings. Sculptures. Mirrored art works. It was almost too easy to get distracted by it all.

Almost. There was the scent of breakfast to follow.

And follow it I did. Right through two hallways that we somehow were able to navigate from the front door to his bedroom the night before, and into the massive kitchen where all the magic was happening.

There were skillets and pots on the stoves—stoves, yes, multiple of those damn things—and several plates already set out with various spreads of bread, fruits, bacon, sausage. All of it looked and smelled mouth-watering.

But none of it was anywhere near as mouth-watering as the man who was heading the operation.

Eric stood bare chested and in the black silk boxers that he had worn to bed the night

before. He moved around his kitchen like liquid, like he was the master and every tool, utensil, cut of meat, was merely an extension of himself.

I inwardly sighed. Was his beauty just limitless?

Without even looking up at me, he suddenly spoke, startling me.

“Don’t just stand there. Come over and start taking your pick of what I’ve already cooked.” Then, he looked up, a faint, unapologetic smirk on his face. “Sorry for making you sleep in so late.”

I raised a brow as I approached, since he was responsible for completely exhausting me. I plucked a piece of bacon off one of the plates and made a conscious effort not to stare at him too boldly.

“What time is it?” I asked curiously.

“A little after one.”

I promptly choked on the piece of bacon that I had taken. “Oh, shit.”

“Is that a problem?”

I shook my head. “No. No, it’s not that it’s a problem, it’s that I didn’t expect it to be so late. I’m not usually, uh...” I felt my face grow hot with a flush, and I stole another piece of bacon and definitely did not let my eyes settle on how toned his body was.

“You’re not used to being put out of commission after a single night with a stranger?” he teased.

“Well, when you put it that way...” I let myself smile, just a little. “I guess it was a very good experience. You, uh...” Fuck like a beast. Know how to eat pussy like a champ. Have the stamina of a god, despite your age. “You at least didn’t make Dominique bragging about you turn out to be a big fat lie.”

To my surprise, he groaned as he flipped over the pancakes in the skillet he was manning. “She didn’t.”

“She did.” I propped a hip against the counter near him. “Said those who you ended up with tended to leave without complaints.”

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He rolled his eyes. “Dominique likes to talk, but I suppose when you’ve had the kind of life she’s had, you can’t really blame her for being as open as she is.” His expression softened. “Anyway, I’m glad I could leave you satisfied. It means that the conversation following breakfast will probably go smoother than I hope.”

“Conversation?”

“Yes. After breakfast. We both need to eat something good and filling and I don’t do business on an empty stomach.” He looked over to me, a sexy curve to his full lips as his gaze raked over me. “Besides, distracting my mouth is a good idea when I’m tempted to occupy it with other things.”

Heat flooded between my thighs again, but to my credit, I didn’t rise to the bait. I was too hungry for that.

Eric set up the spread of breakfast at the large island in the center of his kitchen. I piled my plate high, not shy about what I ate and certainly not about how much I ate. My stomach was making too much noise at this point for me to care.

“So, since we’re not talking business before breakfast,” I said after we’d settled at a small table in a nook of the kitchen and we started to tuck into our breakfasts, “what about non-business curiosity? I’ve been dying to know how you know Dominique. The way you two talk about each other, at first I thought maybe she just knew you through clients, but you seem to actually know her personally.”

“I do. Ironically, she was friends with my father.” At my intrigued expression, he laughed. “No, not that kind of ‘friends.’ She entertained a friend of his, and through

that friend, they became friends. I suppose you could say, she's very much like an aunt to me."

I nodded, taking a bite of a delicious, fluffy pancake smothered in butter and syrup.

"And you?" he asked, his eyes meeting mine from across the table. "I know Dominique tends to set her sights on those she considers special. It's difficult to pinpoint how specifically she finds such people, however. Each has their own story."

Each has their own story. That was one way to put it.

I was quiet and contemplative for a moment as I ate my breakfast. I'd learned that a good rule to have for this kind of work was to allow things to be friendly enough to keep your clients feeling an intimate connection, but not so personal that there was too strong of an attachment. It was much smarter to separate business from real life, and that principle worked for me. Opening up candidly about my parents was difficult even with Dominique, and she was the only person alive who could say that they knew me the best.

Eating another self-indulgent piece of bacon, I put on a smile, like it wasn't a big deal. It wasn't like I had to even talk about my parents to Eric; he hadn't asked about them, specifically. He'd asked how I'd come to meet Dominique.

"I dropped out of college freshman year when I was eighteen after I lost my parents," I said. Truth. "It was a difficult time—" also the truth "—and since I wasn't in college, I needed to do something with my time but also make money. I didn't start with escorting. I started with camming. Truth be told, I was very green at the beginning, but as I learned how to market myself, how to interact with the men that watched me, I learned how to create an experience that drew people in and kept those people coming back." I ate another bite of pancake before going on. "For a while, about a year or so, this went well. I started getting more and more clients who really liked my

one-on-one work. My first ‘escorting’ job came of that.” I shook my head, remembering the not so pleasant experience. “Ugh, it was a disaster.”

“Disaster? Yet you’re here now as one of Dominique’s jewels,” he said, his expression clear of any judgement. “Clearly the story isn’t done?”

Reluctantly, I shook my head. “Far from. I was new to the idea of escorting but hadn’t really thought that it could be much different than going on a date. I just thought of it as a date that was paid for.” I picked up a ripe blueberry but didn’t put it in my mouth as I continued. “The problem was the guy who hired me was a complete creep when we actually met up, and we hadn’t made any formal contracts because I didn’t know any better. He was a younger member of a board of directors for a hedge fund corporation, and from what I could tell, was only in that position because his father knew people who knew people.”

Eric rolled his eyes. “Nepotism at its finest.”

“Exactly.” I set the fruit back down and instead took a sip of my coffee, giving myself a moment before sharing more. “There was this dinner function that he was taking me to, and it seemed everyone there was bringing a lady entertainer. Only all of them were proper escorts and understood what the night was about. I hadn’t realized that I would be expected to act as this man’s submissive, let alone be comfortable with the kind of humiliation that he wanted to put me through.”

I swallowed hard. Even now, I could easily recall how he’d wanted me to be his little bitch. How that too-tight, too-cheap for an executive’s son collar had been put around my neck before other indignities began. I shuddered at the memory.

I met Eric’s gaze and continued on. “Anyway, Dominique was there as a guest of one of the older execs. He wasn’t really there for the showing off or the sex. He and Dominique were constantly talking to each other in decent and friendly conversation.

She kept looking at me, though, while I dealt with that asshole. I wanted—desperately wanted—to leave, but it was a good paycheck and I needed the money, and I wasn't sure how I would fair if I left suddenly or made him feel like I wasn't grateful. Before we left for the night Dominique pulled me aside and asked me if I was doing okay. If I needed anything. I thought that maybe she had to be some kind of psychic because I had kept everything together up until she looked me in the eyes and asked me if I was alright, and if I even wanted to go home with that man. I broke down and told her that I didn't, that he was just...horrible, but that I needed the money."

I heard the scratch of my own voice as I spoke, but I'd come this far and there was enough compassion on Eric's face to make me feel comfortable enough to finish. "So, she tells me to wait there, in the bathroom where she'd pulled me off to, and I listen to her because Dominique has this disarming way of speaking that makes everything seem like it's going to be okay, even when you think it's not. She comes back a few minutes later, a check in her hand, and asks if I would like to go out to dinner with her and the man she's with, no strings attached. I'm free to say no, and the check is mine regardless."

I could still remember how shocked I'd been by her offer. "I have no idea how to respond, so I just nod my head yes. She's this honestly gorgeous older woman, she seems worldly, and the man she was with was kind, too, even flirtatious. They take me to this classy, refurbished speakeasy where there's low jazz playing, people dancing. We eat, and she asks me about myself. Where I come from. How long I've been escorting. When I tell her that it was my first time, that I webcam for a living, she nods her head and says, 'I thought I recognized you'. I thought maybe I was in another bad situation—sometimes you hear about people who take an interest in a specific girl, and then they stalk them or...or do other weird and bad shit to them. That wasn't Dominique. She sees I'm about to bolt and just smiles at me and says, 'Don't think anything bad of it. I was hoping to find a way to get in contact with you, but it seems you just fell into my lap tonight. I like your work but I think you can do

more than just peep shows from your bedroom, and make a lot more money’.”

I smiled a little. To others, the last part of that memory wouldn’t be a good one. But to me, I could only ever look back on it fondly because Dominique had changed my life, for the better.

I shifted in my chair, still shocked to see that Eric was watching me avidly, still so invested in my history, when most clients didn’t care less about my past. “Anyway, to make a long story short, she became my mentor. Taught me how to, one, vet potential clients, and two, the power of a solid, safe contract. I’ve only ever had one other situation where I felt like I couldn’t just leave if I wanted to, but that had more to do with the client than with my set up. Dominique has been good to me...she helped me through that bad patch and she’s become a trusted friend. Escorting isn’t what I expected to be doing, but I don’t regret it.”

Eric nodded, his eyes keen on me. “Honestly, that sounds like Dominique,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “She’s not a fixer upper. She’s a polisher. She sees a rock and knows beneath it there’s a geode, waiting to burst forth with the right amount of attention.”

“You think that’s how Dominique sees me?” I asked before I could stop myself. It was a description I hadn’t expected. Then again, Eric was into the arts and speaking like an artiste wasn’t outside of his wheelhouse.

“I think Dominique sees what anyone with a functioning mind would see,” he said, looking at me with a tilted head. “A dedicated, beautiful woman doing work that requires skills most don’t associate with your line of business—but anyone would be crazy to squander.”

Before I could respond, or even express thoughts that weren’t just a gibberish embodiment of the blush I was certain was on my face, Eric finished his glass of

orange juice and began cleaning up the kitchen while I cleared the table. A short while later, with everything put away, he turned around to face me, the large island in the kitchen separating us.

His direct gaze met mine. “Now that we’re done eating,” he said, in that brisk, straight-forward manner that I had first experienced in my ‘interview’ with him, “I think now is as good a time as any to bring my proposal to you. I drew up a potential contract this morning. If you’re agreeable, I’d like to stay on as your client, exclusively. I have formal business, events, charity functions, and semi-formal meetings within the art industry. I frequent galleries, music halls, contribute to local school programs for the arts. I would like a regular date for such things. As you actually know your way around the art world, and I enjoyed your company last night at the gallery, I would like that date to be you. You, of course, are free to decline. You’re not obligated because of last night, and you will still be compensated for our nightcap even if you choose to make this a one-time venture.”

The way that he could go from casual conversation to business was, honestly, impressive. It didn’t stop the mental whiplash, of course, but my mind reeled as I tried to process it all.

I cleared my throat. “Well, I know my way around art if we’re talking about paintings. Sculptures. Those kinds of things. I may have to brush up and do some research if you’re also someone who ventures into the music world.” Orchestra and opera were not usually my thing.

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Eric shook his head with an amused smirk. “That you’d consider brushing up means you’ve got a mind that’s open, which is rare and appreciated. Don’t worry. While my patience is a finite source, given last night I don’t believe it will be a problem in the way it’s been a problem for me in the past.”

He came around the island, brushing close to me as he passed by—close enough for me to smell the lingering hints of his cologne from the night before, and the very specific combination of morning sleep and cooking remnants as he did. Was it an intentional gesture? One to turn my head the way it did so I’d watch him walk away, so I could see that there was no good reason to say no to such a request considering how great he was in bed?

Probably not, but it made me feel better to think so than to admit my head was on a swivel for the man, and it wasn’t just the security of the position he was offering that was making it do so. Part of it was the lingering ache in my thighs and hips and between my legs as I waited for him to return, and part of it was the pleasure of watching his toned back ripple in movement as he disappeared down the hall.

Well, it wasn’t like Dominique hooked me up with him for just a one-time deal. Eric was offering me exactly what I wanted. A stable, reliable arrangement.

Eric returned a short while later, sweaty over his hips as opposed to just his boxers, somewhat to my disappointment. In his hands was a set of papers he handed over to me.

“I have a complete outline of all events I have planned for the next six months,” he explained. “Date, locations, times. Level of formality versus casual, and any

projected expenses that I would cover on top of your fees, plus a retainer bonus for any invitations I may extend your way.”

The formal way he’d broached the subject of sex almost made me smile, considering I’d shamelessly welcome any invitation he extended my way, regardless of any bonus or fees.

He continued, still in business mode. “There are additional details in there as well, a section where we may negotiate certain things in the bedroom and outside of it, as well as providing each other with a clean bill of health going forward so we don’t have to worry about condoms, if you’re agreeable. There’s also a clause to include you retaining rights to decline sex or any act you’re uncomfortable with, with assurance in writing from myself that it will not affect your pay or my treatment of you before, during, or afterward.”

I raised a brow in surprise. “You included a consent clause?”

Eric tilted his head as he looked at me. “Of course,” he said, as though the notion that he would not was offensive to him.

“It’s just, usually, I’m the one that brings consent clauses into contracts.” I looked back down at the agreement, flipping through the pages until I found the clause he was referencing. Yep. There it was.

In the case of Miss Greene and her autonomy over her body, she retains exclusive rights to decline any level and type of sexual act with Mister Maxim, with no fear of repercussion to her person, or to her monetary security thus.

A very, very formal consent clause.

After giving Eric a puzzled if not intrigued look, I sat back down at the table and read

over the contract in full. He was a very detailed man, no stone left unturned. It was the most thorough contract I had ever been presented with, and it ensured equal consideration for the both of us within its pages. I would be given time to outline my preferences and limits, things that Eric would accept—within reason, unless it caused him to violate his own personal boundaries.

The contract already detailed the things that Eric absolutely would not budge on—no contacting family, friends, or colleagues I may meet while out with him without permission. No venturing into a specific room down the main hall of his apartment all the way at the end without permission. No taking things from his apartment, car, or other properties without permission.

That line, without permission, popped up rather frequently. So maybe it wasn't that he refused to budge on personal matters, but that he wished for the courtesy to consider them first.

Interesting. And fair.

“When do you want this signed?” I asked him when I was done perusing the entire document. “And the parts where I should add my own limits and preferences and such?”

“Before the date of the next event,” he said, leaning against the nearby counter and crossing his arms over his bare chest. “So, you have three weeks. I would prefer within a week, as that would mean I would have the time to get you fitted for a dress for the venue.”

That was new. Most of my clients either specified what they wanted me to wear and left me to my own devices or provided a stipend for me to buy something appropriate to the event. That Eric wanted to be hands-on about my attire, so to speak, was yet another surprise about the man.

I looked back through the contract to the timetable of events to see which one he was referring to. The first one scheduled seemed to be a...luncheon?

I glanced up at him with a small frown. “I need to be fitted for a luncheon?”

He smiled. “It’s a special event for an eccentric acquaintance of mine. If you’re agreeing, you’ll be attending a 1920’s themed luncheon for his birthday. He isn’t the sort to do formal occasions, but he does like costume parties. I think this might be the tamest introduction to him. Last year it was a murder-mystery dinner, and the year before that it was an escape room.”

I stared at him, blinking.

“What?” he said.

I shook my head, chuckling to myself. “I’m sorry, I’m just trying to picture the man who wore a bespoke suit and strolled through an art gallery last night doing—an escape room?”

For the first time, Eric had the nerve to look sheepish. “We all have our tiny pleasures and interests in life,” he said with a shrug. “Felix is one of those people whose pleasures and interests err on spending lots of ‘fun money’ to feel a little youthful again. I am, possibly regrettably, soft hearted in that way for him.”

Ah, so there was history there.

I hadn’t signed the contract yet, but from what I’d read I was all in. I smiled, giving Eric a little nod. “Well, in that case, I believe you should pencil me in for a dress fitting, Mr. Maxim.”

CHAPTER 7

Eric

I arrived at Baudelaire at ten AM sharp, a boutique on the west side of Coral Gables that catered to custom clothing, costume fitting, and anything in between that might strike the fancy of someone with too much money to spend and plenty of time in which to spend it. For many of Felix's parties, I had purchased suits here. The owner, Meriwether, had known me for nearly fifteen years, and there was nowhere better to get a suit fitted, no matter what people said about overpriced designer label clothes.

Walking through the front door a half hour early, the melodic chime signalled my arrival. Not a moment later a squat, older woman with fly away grey curls pinned away from her face came around from the back. She may have been tiny, but she was a firecracker in personality and could wrangle even the toughest client into submission.

"Eric! So nice of you to come back. After that fiasco with that strumpet you brought the last time, I thought you were gone for good, too embarrassed to come back to my humble shop and browse my wares." She grinned, showing off two rows of perfect veneers. "Of course, you're never one to run away from a good thing, are you? It's nice to see our relationship is still intact."

I tried not to wince at the unpleasant reminder of that last visit. "And it's nice to see that you're still as lively and trouble making as ever, Meri," I said with a grin.

We walked between several prominent displays of pre-made gowns and suits, a few period pieces—looking like they were styled for eighteenth century England fashion, probably for themed parties—and to the section of the boutique that I always booked

for fittings with my girls. A nice, private room with plenty of light and mirrors to capture all angles, and a bar for drinks if we wished to indulge. Depending on how long the fitting went, there was the possibility we'd order something to eat, but that depended entirely on Jasmine.

Admittedly, after my night, and then the next day with Jasmine, I was more impressed with her than I had expected I would be. I'd been wholly intrigued by the conversation we'd had during breakfast and hearing how she'd ended up as an escort. She clearly considered Dominique her saviour from a bad situation, which made me even more curious about the particulars of her becoming first a cam girl, then an escort. For as much as Jasmine had shared with me, I had no doubt there had been more she'd kept close to the vest. Not that I blamed her.

She was young, yes, but clearly an old soul. She was full of wisdom and insight and possessed an emotional maturity that most of the women I had dated lacked. It had been a week since I'd last seen her, and she'd consumed my thoughts to the point of distraction. An anomaly for me, considering no one in recent memory had preoccupied my mind the way she had.

As I sat down on a plush, red velvet settee and wine was poured for me, I couldn't deny the anticipation coursing through me. I sipped my wine, enjoying the sweet tartness that hit my tongue before looking back to Meriwether.

The older woman stared at me with a knowing smile and a cheeky, raised brow, as if she were in on some secret that she had yet to share with me. "What?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I'm just very interested in this girl you've brought today. After last time, I was certain you were done with your lady entertainers. What's different?"

In a wry tone, I said, "What's different is she's shown she's not likely to be a woman who gets drunk in a fitting room boutique and spills red wine all over polished

hardwood floors and restored traditional Chinese garments that are, quite frankly, irreplaceable.”

Because I was such a good customer, Meriwether had insisted that I didn’t need to pay back the acquisition and restoration cost of the piece, but it would have been insanity not to reimburse her. Besides, thestrumpetin question certainly wouldn’t have had the funds to do such a thing, and she wouldn’t have had the opportunity to ruin the garment had I not brought her here in the first place, so the fault was mine.

“I think you’ll like her,” I continued. “She’s quite charming. I think Felix will enjoy her company and I imagine that she’ll find him delightfully entertaining. No historical garments harmed in the process.”

Meriwether chuckled. “Mhmm. Well, I’ll bring her back when she comes in. You relax and enjoy the quiet. I made sure that the only people here today were myself and Stephanie, who is busy in the back tailoring a few pieces for me, so you’ll have the shop to yourself and your lady. I’ll bring out the pieces I selected when she arrives.”

Meri walked out of the fitting area and I waited patiently for Jasmine, enjoying my wine. I just finished my drink when the front door chimed again, then the soft voices of Meriwether and Jasmine carrying over.

“Welcome, welcome, dearie,” Meri greeted her in a jovial voice. “You must be Miss Jasmine.”

“Just Jasmine,” she said in a sweet, friendly tone. “Uhm, is Eric Maxim here?”

“Just back this way. Come, I’ll take you to him.”

I couldn’t hold back the amused quirk of my lips as Meriwether chattered with

Jasmine, asking how her day was (it was lovely so far), if she had ever been to Baudelaire (she hadn't), and how she felt about the 1920s (she loved the fashion of the era and wished she had the face for a short bob hairstyle).

I set my glass down on the small table beside the settee as they came into the private fitting area, Jasmine in a pair of jeans and a loose red blouse. Hair up in a ponytail and minimal makeup on her face, she looked a vision of casual comfort. It was a difference that I wasn't opposed to and liked very much.

I offered Jasmine a smile and stood. "You're early," I said, even though I was pleased she wasn't late as others had been. But she still had about fifteen minutes before the probably-should-book-it-here time frame that I had given her.

She glanced around the beautifully appointed fitting room with a bit of awe in her eyes. "I figured for something like this it would be best to arrive early. I've never been here before, so I wasn't sure what to expect."

"Only the best personal treatment that Coral Gables, Florida has to offer," Meriwether said proudly. "I can guarantee you've never been to a boutique like mine and I doubt that you ever will. I'd apologize in advance for ruining any future experiences of yours, but I'd have to actually be sorry for that." Meriwether gave her a wink, and there was a slight flush on Jasmine's cheeks in response.

I shook my head and looked to Meriwether, knowing how long winded the other woman could be. "The dresses?"

Meriwether clicked her tongue. "Oh, you never let me have any fun, no matter how well I treat you, Eric. The audacity."

Still, she fluttered out of the room to retrieve the dresses for the event, leaving Jasmine and me alone.

“Sorry,” I said, turning to her. “Meri’s very bold in personality, but she’s truly one of the sweetest people I know. She’ll be the one that handles any fittings for any dinners that you’ll be needing formal dresses for.”

Jasmine smiled and nodded, approaching where I was still standing by the settee. “She is quite nice and welcoming. I didn’t expect it. Honestly, most of the boutiques in Coral Gables are run by...very particular people.”

“It’s alright to call them uppity,” I said, enjoying the slight surprise on Jasmine’s face that I’d say such a thing. I shrugged a shoulder. “I understand the way that most boutiques treat women in your line of work. Eager to accept the money as swiftly as they are to pass judgement. I don’t like subjecting the girls I spend time with to those kinds of places. Meriwether simply doesn’t care. She likes creating a memorable experience and showing off her pieces to willing test subjects,” I said with a wink.

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Jasmine gave a soft laugh. It was a beautiful, tinkling thing. Like chimes, with a little bit of depth to the timbre. “Well, as long as she’s not asking for blood or my first-born child or anything like that—”

“Oh, heavens no, dear,” Meri exclaimed from behind us. “I’d ask for the second one. Always less trouble than the first.”

Meriwether came back, a cart rolling with her. There were several dresses on it, about ten in total, all in different colors, cuts, and level of detail in beading and fringe, but all of them were signature 1920s flapper dresses and gowns. A perfect selection to choose from—and if none of these were up to par for Jasmine’s tastes, I knew that Meriwether would have at least ten more to come back with just to prove that she wasn’t a half-stepper when it came to her business.

It was part of what made working with her so easy and pleasant.

Meriwether scooted the cart in front of Jasmine and me, a self-satisfied smile on her face as she gestured grandly to the spread of fabrics. “Alright missy. Let’s get you started.”

I sat once more as Meriwether ushered her to the changing room. I felt—and stamped down—the compulsion to follow. That I even had the feeling was surprising to me, but I decided I could blame it on the fact that I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about our first night together. The softness of her skin still lingered on my fingertips. Her taste, the sweet sound of her moans. I hadn’t had an experience that had stayed with me so bone deep in such a long time; maybe that was why I was hyper-fixating on her so deeply.

Then again, it had also been a while since I'd had decent sex in general, and Jasmine had proven to be a perfect match for my voracious appetite.

Those thoughts made me anticipate her emergence from the dressing room even more than I already was. Made me want to drink in her appearance, see the reaction on her face to the way she looked in the first gown that Meriwether put her in. When I heard the door open and the first dull footsteps coming my way, I looked up, taken aback by how stunning she looked.

The first was an emerald green dress with black beading. Even given the design of the dress, not particularly intended to highlight curves and body shape, there was no missing Jasmine's figure beneath the glittering, beautiful fabric. It fell over her body like a waterfall, and I couldn't hold back the smile at the flush on her face as she came out, doing a little twirl for me, as if seeking my approval.

"I've never worn a dress like this," she admitted, almost a bit shy. "It's very different."

"Do you like it?" I asked, standing.

I came up behind her, putting my hands on her shoulders. A soft, near imperceptible gasp came from her at my touch. It pleased me far more than it should have as I turned her toward the multitude of mirrors that she had yet to allow herself to look in. Her lips fell apart as she took in the sight before her—her own reflection staring back at her like she had stepped out of a photograph from the 1920s, but instead of muted sepia, in full vibrant color.

"Do you like it?" I asked again.

She regarded herself for a moment, before meeting my gaze in the mirror. She bit her lip uncertainly. "I do like it, but...I don't know if green is my color."

I chuckled. “Fair enough,” I said, and looked over to Meriwether.

“Good thing we’ve got a selection of colors, eh?” Meriwether smirked, ushering Jasmine back into the dressing room.

What followed were no more green dresses, but a selection of other colors. Blue, violet, a champagne number with iridescent beading and sequins. Meriwether would bring Jasmine out from the dressing room, she would see herself in the mirror and be amazed by the captivating way she looked, yet there wasn’t one that caused a specific spark in her eyes to form just yet.

What I wanted was for her to find something that would elicit excitement. It was one thing for a man to doll a woman up in one’s own idea of beauty, or for one’s own pleasure. It was another thing to simply see what she did when choosing for herself what she wanted, what she liked.

Which is why, when she came out in the last dress, I paused, almost holding my breath for her reaction.

This one was midnight black, with ruby red beading. If the first accented her curves and the soft, round turns of her body, this one only served to do the same, and add a seductive, classy hit to the mix.

But it was the way that Jasmine walked out, her back straighter than the other times, her shoulders more squared, her chin up. She walked with the confidence and sexual empowerment of a woman who knew that she was gorgeous and felt it deep in her bones.

This was the dress. I could tell as she stood in front of the mirror, taking herself in—not with wide, undecided eyes this time at her appearance, but with a bright smirk and the corner of her mouth pulled between her teeth, as if she were pleased

with herself.

“I do believe we’ve found the one, dear,” Meriwether said, clearly witnessing what I did, too. “Now, go on and get up on that pedestal there and I can figure out the adjustments I’ll need to make before—”

Before Jasmine could step up onto the pedestal, from the front of the store, the phone rang. Meriwether rolled her eyes at the intrusion. “One moment.”

She skittered off, and Jasmine and I were left alone.

Jasmine stood on the pedestal Meriwether put all her sizing clients on, staying there as Meri’s voice drifted from the front of the boutique. Her irritation faded into the background as Jasmine and I stared at each other, a magnetism in our gazes—me sitting on the settee and her before me. As if, if we were alone, perhaps in my office, I would be sitting here, observing her, waiting for her to approach me.

What would happen if she did? I could picture a few illicit things I’d want to do to her. Every single one more tempting than the one that came before.

“My God, I swear some people are just incompetent,” Meriwether said, breaking the silence, and heated awareness, building between myself and Jasmine.

The shop owner came back into the fitting room, an annoyed look on her face that told me someone was going to get the wrong side of her otherwise fluffy personality.

“Trouble?” I asked, taking my eyes off Jasmine to give attention to Meriwether.

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“Oh, you can say that again,” Meriwether huffed. “I have to rush out and settle an issue with a textile order from a seller. I wouldn’t usually leave like this, but this is something I have to handle in person.” She sighed, looking to me. “Do you want to reschedule?”

I tilted my head. “How long will you be?”

“An hour. No longer than that. It’s two blocks over and I have a car.”

“Then we can wait,” I assured her, since I had no other pressing plans for the day. “Lock up when you leave and we’ll keep an eye on the boutique. Maybe send an order for the bistro while we do.”

Relief flitted across the other woman’s face. “Ah, you’re a gem, Eric. Be back in a flash. Stephanie! Come with me. We’re going to bust some sense into Geraldine and her bad taste in fabrics!”

Meriwether and the other girl working left, locking the door behind them, leaving the soft music playing and us alone. Truly alone.

The air was thick with that knowledge. I could feel it crackling in the space between the two of us, and rather than let it continue, unresolved, I pushed myself to my feet. I approached her as she watched, coming to stand in front of her. She looked up at me, eyes beautiful, round. Endearing and trusting. I slid my fingers along her jaw and tucked my thumb beneath her chin, tilting her head back a bit more so that those eyes remained on me.

“You’re very beautiful in this dress, you know,” I said, my voice low and husky.

“T-thank you.” Her words were breathless, and a pretty pink flush suffused her cheeks, as if she wasn’t used to such compliments.

As I continued to stare into her eyes, her lips parted, her chest rising and falling a bit more rapidly. Was it my proximity, or the unwavering way in which I looked at her? Or was it something else entirely?

I asked no questions because it didn’t matter. Instead, I leaned in, pressing my mouth to hers, kissing her openly where she stood. Jasmine melted into me like butter, a soft groan in the back of her throat that I was all too willing to capitalize on. My tongue slipped between her lips, and my fingers tangled into the hair at the base of her neck, enjoying its silkiness from where it had fallen loose from her ponytail in between changing dresses.

“If you wanted them, I’d buy you every single dress you just tried on,” I said against her mouth before moving my head back a few inches to look into those soulful eyes again. “But I think with how much you like this one, I’ll just settle on making this a memorable experience. If you’ll permit me?”

Confusion flickered across her features, even as she nodded her consent to whatever I intended.

Holding her sultry gaze, I slid my hand down the front of her body, fingers trailing between her full, firm breasts, then over the beading on her stomach. I didn’t go lower, though, teasing her with the thought that I might touch her there, lower, that I might do more to her than merely touch. The allure of us beingsomewhere we might be caught was more appealing than it should have been. Like the gallery showing, Jasmine pushed me past levels of comfort and desire that made me want to break my own limits.

She licked her damp lower lip, her expression hesitant. “Here?” she asked, and I knew she meant here, this place, but I also couldn’t help but read here, where I was touching her, where I wanted to go lower.

“Here,” I repeated, letting my hand slip down to the hem of her dress. I pushed it up, and felt my dick harden at the first brush of my fingers against her silky, smooth thighs. “And here.”

Jasmine bit her lip, throat tight with a swallow. “You come with surprises, Eric,” she breathed out. “I didn’t think you’d want to fuck me here.”

I smirked. “Is that not something you want?” I asked, voice curious as I moved my hand higher, stroking my fingers along the slit of her pussy hidden beneath thin panties.

Her breath hitched again. “I want it,” she admitted shamelessly. “But... won’t Meriwether return?”

“In an hour.”

Her incredulous look made me laugh. Brow quirked, mouth set in a line that told me she, too, remembered our last time together. Remembered that an hour wouldn’t be near enough for how much we would want of each other.

“It’s alright,” I said with a sinful smile. “It isn’t a fuck I’m vying for, anyway.”

I removed my fingers from between her legs, earning a slight, protesting sound as I backed her toward the door to the dressing room. Because yes, it wouldn’t do to potentially have someone see what we were doing from the street because I decided to fondle her in front of the big bay windows there. This intimate moment was for me to revel in, me to watch her fall to pieces as I pleased her.

Backed into the dressing room, I pressed myself fully to her, pinning her smaller form against the cool, crème colored wall. My body aligned against hers, firm between her legs, which was beginning to become a comfortable place for myself. Like I belonged there and her body knew that I did, too. It was a satisfying feeling.

I rolled my hips, just to let her feel the hard bulge in my pants before I slipped my hand beneath the hem of her dress and between us, fingers sliding once more over the slit of her pussy. Her panties were already saturated, and as I stroked a little deeper, her lashes fell half-mast, her skin flushed, and her breath quickened.

Loving how easily she gave herself over to me, I brushed my lips along the column of her neck and felt her shiver. “Hold up your dress so we don’t ruin it.”

It was all I said as I spread the lips of her pussy beneath that silk panel, finding and playing with her clit between my fingers. She gasped, haphazardly hiking up the hem of her dress to her stomach as her thighs spread for me, one leg lifting and hooking at my hip as she rocked her own against me.

“That feel good?” I breathed against her ear.

She nodded jerkily. “Yeah, it does.”

Her head fell back against the wall, giving my mouth permission to descend upon her throat with lips and teeth grazing along the pulse. I sucked there, enjoying the way I could feel her heartbeat jump beneath my tongue, knowing that I was the one who put the skip to it. She whimpered desperately as I circled and pressed against her clit, the friction of damp fabric increasing the sensations.

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There was something intrinsically gratifying about pleasing this woman. Touching her. Watching her be pleased without any inhibitions. I was rock hard and couldn't think about anything other than simply enjoying her body like this.

When she started writhing in earnest, whines and moans deepening, panties soaked all the way through so even her thighs were damp, I pushed the fabric aside and sunk two fingers deep into her. She let out a wild, heady groan, fingers fisting in her dress to keep herself from dropping it and possibly getting it as messy as she currently was.

“Oh God—right there,” she said, lust and need infusing her voice.

I crooked my fingers a little more, rubbing right where she begged, sending waves of pleasure through her body that I could feel in the telltale constriction of her around me. I relished the tightness, the wetness, the heat. The inarticulate sounds she made as I worked my fingers in and out of her, while letting the heel of my palm grind against her clit until she finally tilted her head back and moaned my name.

Eric. So deep and guttural and reverent, even in her feminine tone.

I stilled my fingers inside her and just let her feel how they filled her up as she rocked against them through her orgasm. She panted, shaking, and I kept her anchored against the wall until she stopped trembling. Only then did I finally withdraw my fingers from her sated pussy.

“Mmm.” She hummed placidly, her face soft with bliss.

I chuckled. “You good?”

She nodded, her lashes fluttering and her eyes opening, meeting mine. “Yeah. That just felt really good,” she breathed out, letting her leg fall from where she’d hooked it against my hip. Then, she grimaced, clearly realizing how soaked her panties now were, how wet and sticky she was between her thighs. “Sorry. I hope I didn’t make too much of a mess?”

“Oh, yeah, you did.”

I raised my fingers to my mouth to lick each digit, one by one, in front of her—making sure she watched, making sure she heard the slight groan in the back of my throat at the taste of her hitting my tongue. Her face flushed, and that in and of itself was enough to satisfy me more than I could have asked for, for the day.

I smirked, then said, “No mess that couldn’t easily and eagerly be cleaned up.”

She flushed adorably, and busied herself in straightening her panties again, and the dress. Smiling, I gently grasped her arm and led the way out of the dressing room and into the main section of the boutique once more.

“Why don’t you get yourself cleaned up,” I suggested, indicating the private restroom in the dressing area. “And when you come back, I’ll order us lunch. We still have plenty of time before Meriwether gets back from her little meeting bullying someone into submission.”

CHAPTER 8

Eric

The rest of Jasmine’s fitting went without a fuss, though *fuss* was the wrong word for letting myself get carried away by fingering her in a dressing room stall. Still, we had her dress, ready to be delivered to her door before the day of Felix’s party, and I

ordered another black dress simply because I felt like doing so. It would be delivered with her outfit for the luncheon. Something extra on top of what was the required dress code.

The day of the event for Felix, I picked up Jasmine myself in my Audi R8. Since we were going to be well acquainted with each other over the next few months, it seemed fitting to drive her myself in these situations, instead of using Jeff. And, admittedly, her company outside the bedroom was unexpectedly appealing and I liked spending time with her.

I mulled this over only as long as it took Jasmine to trod down the front stairs of her modest complex. She was a vision in that now-tailored black flapper dress, the red beading on it shining like hundreds of little tear-drop rubies and spherical garnets. She had long, gorgeous legs that went on and on, caressed by dark stockings that led to heels that only seemed to elevate the elegance of her supple calves.

Idly, I wondered how upset she would be if I put runs through them later when I ripped them off her legs so I could fuck her.

The full package of her, complete with her thick, silky blonde hair styled into delicate waves that flowed to her shoulders, made my mouth run dry—easily fixed with a swallow before she slipped into the car.

This woman was going to be the death of my good senses. And I was starting not to give a goddamn fuck because for the first time in forever, I was completely enamoured and intended to enjoy everything about her, for as long as it lasted.

I leaned over before Jasmine could get buckled in, before she could even say anything, and curled my hand around to the nape of her neck and kissed her. She responded as though we were familiar lovers, lips parting naturally to accept the sweep of my tongue inside. The sweet scent of feminine perfume wafted up, making

her all the more enticing as I took liberties with the softness of her mouth.

“You’re stunning,” I murmured against her lips as I pulled away. “The dress suits you perfectly.”

Her cheeks were nearly as red as the beading on her dress. “I’m glad you like the outfit,” she said, smoothing a hand along the fabric covering her thighs. “I was actually a little worried about fitting the aesthetic well enough, since you mentioned that your friend Felix has an eye for the accurate.”

I grinned at her. “He does, but he’s also easily distracted by tall drinks, shiny objects, and gorgeous women.”

Jasmine laughed, giving a little snort with it that she attempted to cover up with her hand. Her face pinkened even more, and I chuckled as I drove us out of the parking lot.

“Snorting while laughing is an endearing trait,” I said, trying to placate the embarrassment evident on her face.

“It’s definitely not,” she said, settling comfortably back into the leather seat, her eyes sparkling humorously. “But I suppose this one time I can take the compliment. Just this one time, though.”

“Oh, of course,” I drawled. “Naturally.”

She laughed again, this time much more ladylike.

As we headed toward our destination, I glanced her way and asked, “Is there anything you would like to know about Felix and the party? I know that the information on all events was in the calendar packet I gave to you, but if there is anything that I could elaborate on?”

Jasmine thought a moment, then she nodded. “Actually, yes. Something serious in fact.” She leaned in, brow up. “What kind of food is going to be there?”

Her vivacious personality was incredibly refreshing. As was her appetite for food in general when most of my dates would only pick at their meal. “Felix is all about seafood,” I told her. “So probably some shrimp ceviche, all sorts of salmon dishes, tempura shellfish. He has access to a Michelin star chef who specialises in seafood. There’s never a dull meal with him.”

The euphoric look on Jasmine’s face gave the immediate impression that she was fast tracking her way to drooling over the food. “Oh, I love seafood!” she said, her voice enthusiastic. “It’s my favorite.”

My brow quirked. “That’s good to know. So, what you’re telling me is I need to spoil you endlessly with little shrimps and scallops?”

“Yes, please.” Her eyes lit up, her mouth an upturned pout. “I’d do just about anything for some good seafood.”

I grinned, enjoying our easy, and flirtatious, banter. “Don’t tempt me while I’m

driving, or I might have to pull over into the first deserted parking lot and take full advantage of what you're offering."

The flush on her skin was beautiful and brilliant, and I had to resist the urge to reach out and run my fingers along that perfect skin of hers just to see if I could make her flush that much deeper.

There was a strong temptation to blow off the luncheon entirely, but I knew that the longer I waited to seduce Jasmine, the sweeter the reward would be when she and I were finally able to be alone, on our own time.

By the time we arrived at Felix's place, the party had already started. Most people arrived early when it came to Felix's get togethers. He was the kind of gregarious person who people undeniably wanted to always be around, as much as possible.

As we walked into his elaborate mansion, there was every manner of wealthy guest in attendance, each dressed in a distinguished piece of 1920's garb. Though there were plenty of women dressed fashionably and dripping in jewels and beaded couture, there was no denying that Jasmine, herself, was the most stunning and head-turning creature in the room. Her elegance and grace, her understated beauty, that silky blonde hair, all combined to elevate her in a way that no other woman could compete with.

It was obvious in the appreciative and envious looks cast her way as we mingled and I introduced her to friends and acquaintances in my social circle. Of course, true to her unpretentious nature, Jasmine didn't even notice those overt glances, too absorbed in appreciating the authentic, time-accurate art and décor that Felix had brought in for the party.

"Eric! There you are, old sport!"

Speak of the devil and he shall appear, I thought in amusement. Jasmine at my side, I turned toward the direction of Felix's voice. He was a burly, jovial man, almost twenty years my senior, and had more vigor than any man his age ought to. He looked the epitome of a 1920's gangster, reminiscent of Al Capone in his dark, three-piece pin striped suit and fedora hat.

Walking up to Jasmine and me, his arms opened wide, welcoming me in without hesitation. I embraced him, shaking my head at his eccentricity as he continued on.

"You don't call, you don't text, you barely socialize with me anymore!" Felix chastised dramatically. "I'm surprised that you even came!" His attention shifted to Jasmine and his face lit up. "Let me guess, this exquisite lady has been keeping you distracted!"

I rolled my eyes. "Behave, Felix. This is Jasmine, a friend of mine," I said casually. "Jasmine, this is Felix. He's an absolute menace to everything that moves."

Jasmine laughed. "I'm sure he's not a menace at all."

She held her hand out so Felix could shake it. His level of enchantment with Jasmine grew as he lifted her hand and placed a kiss on her knuckles. Because he posed no threat, and there was no lust on his expression as I'd seen on other male guests' faces, I found his behavior bearable.

"Oh, I am a menace, but only to the people who deserve it. I'm sure that you, my dear, will avoid my more malcontenttendencies." He winked at her, eliciting an amused chuckle from Jasmine.

Then he turned back to me, suddenly serious. "How are your parents doing, Eric?" he asked.

I tensed at the personal question and all the implications surrounding it. I couldn't blame Felix for asking, since he and my father had once been good friends before...everything changed. "They're doing well," I assured him, and catching Jasmine's curious look, I quickly rerouted the conversation before it went any further. "Anyway, Felix, I see you have some new pieces around..."

Mentioning the art was the perfect way to distract him and leave the complicated discussion about my parents behind. It launched us into a proper tour, Felix leading and Jasmine absolutely enraptured as he showed off the relics and art pieces he'd gotten a hold of to make the party more authentic. They went back and forth, a friendly tit for tat that I was all too happy to observe. Jasmine's face never lost its light and enthusiasm; she seemed to thrive off spaces like this, with people like Felix.

People who had depth and passion.

Where had this woman been hiding in all of Coral Gables? That I had never come across her before Dominique put us in touch was damn near criminal.

A short while later we sat down at Felix's table, at his insistence, and our meal was served. The discussion between Felix and Jasmine turned to a lively debate of all things seafood, followed by a visit to the table by the Michelin star chef who'd prepared all the courses. I had the pleasure of watching Jasmine charm yet another man in the room as she gushed about his various dishes and showered him with praise for the outstanding meal and hors d'oeuvres he'd prepared.

By the time the luncheon came to an end and it was time to leave the party, Felix and Jasmine had exchanged contact information. I didn't mind this, mainly because Felix was harmless and despite his flirtations, Jasmine was not his type. But it amused me to no end how flustered she'd gotten when he suggested swapping numbers, her eyes darting to me for permission, which I appreciated and gave with a slight nod of my head.

Felix waved his hand, laughing as he misinterpreted her deer in the headlights look she gave me. “Oh, don’t worry dear. I’m not trying anything nefarious,” he assured her. “I want to be able to invite you myself next time. And maybe bend your ear about some possible purchases I would like to make at a later date. You have a keen eye and impeccable tastes when it comes to art.”

That genuine and accurate praise had startled Jasmine and flushed her cheeks with embarrassment. I was beginning to notice that any compliment about her intelligence and art acumen caused an uncomfortable and self-conscious reaction in her. I could only surmise that she was more accustomed to the sort of flattery that men spouted when their only goal was getting her into their bed and nothing else.

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It was unfortunate and a damn shame, when there was so much more to her than that.

CHAPTER 9

Jasmine

After Felix's party, work became something less than work and more of an enjoyable activity I looked forward to, which was a refreshing change for me. As the weeks passed with Eric as my sole client, we fell into a comfortable routine of attending the events on his calendar and me accompanying him to business dinners as his date, which inevitably ended back at his place to work off the sexual tension that always burned bright between us when we were together.

Sex with Eric was the best I'd ever had, always leaving me beyond sated. And much to my shock and delight, as our arrangement evolved, Eric surprised me with his personality, his likes and dislikes. Which, honestly, was a feat in and of itself.

Six years into this business I'd become a bit jaded, and it was nearly impossible to be surprised by anything anymore. When it came to this line of work, most men assumed that they were giving you an experience that no one ever had before. Tasting fancy wines, trying on pretty clothes, going to high-end bars, casinos, strip clubs—all of it, contextualized with that damnable phrase of "I'll bet you've never done something like this before".

My time with Eric was so different. He never felt the need to show off his wealth, or overtly impress me. Our relationship evolved in a way that I saw a completely different side to the man than the uptight one I'd originally met at the Spinel Fine

Arts Exhibit and Gallery a few months ago. Someone with a lighter side. Someone with a wicked sense of humor at times, yet so much heart when it came to helping struggling artists gain their footing in the industry.

I discovered little quirks about Eric, such as how he liked to pick up mushroom Swiss burgers from a locally owned hole in the wall burger joint that wasn't located in the heart of Coral Gables, but along its outskirts where the normal, middle-income people lived. He liked it dripping in that unbelievable honey mustard sauce that they drizzled over it, with a side of what they called 'Holier-Than-Thou' fries, which were topped in a melted blend of every kind of cheese imaginable, chopped French onions, and bacon.

It was learning that not only did he like jazz, which at this point was a common staple for well-off men who needed to appear cultured, but he had a selection of heavy metal records in his apartment, and a record player, and when he worked late nights he liked to put one on—low, of course, to not interrupt the work flow—and let the music rather than a cup of coffee or a glass of whiskey get him through the hours of paperwork he needed to peruse.

The weeks with Eric went by incredibly fast, then a month, and another. Despite my initial hesitation toward him, I couldn't deny the strong chemistry between us. More so than I'd felt with any other man. It was a good working chemistry—personalities melding well, our sexual energies perfectly matched and through the roof.

I decided I would have to get Dominique something special to thank her for putting Eric in my path, I thought with a smile as I was getting ready for a dinner with him and a benefactor. He was supposed to be solidifying plans to fund an expansion at the gallery where we'd met, and I secretly loved that he shared those aspects of his business with me. And even sought my opinion on things, like what I had to contribute mattered to him.

I was nearly done with my hair when my phone rang. It was Eric, and my heart skipped a beat and butterflies fluttered in my stomach. Not necessary a good thing when it came to a client. A part of me recognized that my emotions were getting involved, and I did my best to tamp down my reaction so I didn't sound so breathless with anticipation when I picked up his call.

I connected the line and kept my voice neutral. "Hello?"

"Jasmine," he said, sounding a bit haggard, along with a strange waver in his deep, usually smooth voice. "I apologize for calling on such short notice. I'm going to have to cancel tonight's dinner."

"Okay," I said, concern twisting through me as I pressed the phone to my ear and walked out of the bathroom, into my bedroom.

Eric never cancelled anything—at least not in the span of time that I had known him. He was a man who meticulously planned his life that even his free time was basically factored into all of his time management.

Something urgent had clearly happened. But what?

I bit my bottom lip as I heard him moving around and what sounded like papers being shuffled in the background. It was the first time in my work escorting that I truly didn't know what I should do in this situation. Usually, I felt nothing when a date abruptly cancelled—no disappointment, no worry over thereasons why they no longer needed me. So why did I feel this strong urge to rush to Eric's side and make sure that everything was okay? Thathe was okay?

That deep, genuine concern swirling through me was not good. Not good at all.

"I'm also rearranging some things around for the next few days," he went on.

“Something unexpected came up, and I need to be elsewhere.”

I was definitely curious, but I did what I did best. Accommodate the client without pressure or demands. “I understand.”

There was a pause, then, “Also, I have a favor to ask of you. I would like for you to come with me. This is something that is very different from our usual outings, far more extended, and not something that I had intended to come up quite so soon.”

I was, for a moment, tongue-tied. “Sure. What is it?”

He exhaled a deep breath, shocking me with his next words. “We’re going to New York to see my parents.”

I didn’t get much further explanation from Eric after that, not that I needed one when I was essentially at his beck and call. He told me that I should pack enough for a weekend and assured me that I would be compensated for the time spent in New York and all the expenses included with it. All a part of our arrangement, of course—though that foolish part of me wished accompanying him wasn’t such an impersonal transaction.

He hadn’t told me exactly what meeting his parents entailed, why it was so sudden, or what I needed to be there for to begin with, but this was the nature of what I did. To be what other people needed me to be because they needed it and I was the only person that could give it to them.

I sighed as I finished packing my suitcase. I had no problems with this because pleasing the client was my job, but I also couldn’t deny the burning curiosity and apprehension that warred its way through me. I recalled the brief conversation at Felix’s party, when the other man had asked about Eric’s parents, and how quickly he’d diverted that subject. In our time together, we’d never discussed his parents,

mostly because I'd seen his uncomfortable reaction that day. It wasn't my place to ask, and he hadn't offered an explanation. I understood, because I hadn't shared anything about my mother and father, either.

So why was he taking me to meet his parents?

My phone alerted me when Eric was there, his text coming in with a chime that startled me back to the present. I grabbed my bags and carted them down. To my surprise, Eric was waiting outside the car for me, a pensive look on his handsome face. He'd driven to my place, not Jeff. Quietly, almost solemnly, he took my bags out of my hands and put them in the trunk before we settled in the front seats of the car.

We said nothing to each other, and the ride was silent.

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I couldn't bring myself to ask the questions that were buzzing around in my head, and Eric seemed too preoccupied to entertain a conversation. But judging by his serious demeanor, this didn't seem like a casual let's go meet my parents situation. This seemed almost...dire. Which made me feel as though I was sitting on pins and needles all the way to the airport.

When we arrived, rather than go through the usual airport route, we pulled around to a different lot, where there was a small, private plane on the tarmac. Eric must have called ahead of time because he hadn't been on his phone the entire ride there. His eyes had been fixated on the road, his hands wrapped tight around the steering wheel.

There didn't seem to be a good or right time to broach the subject of...everything, even as we pulled up next to the private plane.

Eric spoke with the pilot, and I was led toward the plane by the valet after he returned from stowing away our bags. He was sharp, well-kempt, and had a smile that I'm sure would be dazzling if I wasn't so out of sorts.

Going through the motions, one moment I was outside of the aircraft, making my way up that inclined staircase that led inside, and the next I was seated. No matter how luxurious I thought the leather seats probably were, I couldn't actually get comfortable. I couldn't allow myself to really feel the plushness, or let the AC keep my sun-dried skin cool because it was too warm with anxiety that I couldn't think of anything else other than what would happen when Eric got on the plane. Would he speak to me? Would he be wrapped up in his own thoughts too much as he was on the drive here? Would there be a good time to even consider asking him what it was I was doing here and why?

It didn't even occur to me until that moment that I had agreed to this without asking for details. That I just trusted Eric when he said that he needed me.

After a short while, a stewardess came by to offer me a drink and ask if I would like something complimentary to eat. I declined, my stomach in knots, and Eric eventually made his way onto the plane. He took the seat adjacent to mine on the other side of the aisle and stared ahead stoically.

Silence.

More silence.

The announcement from the pilot that we were about to take off and that it would be a two-hour flight came through the intercom, in that perfectly packaged pilot's voice that always put people at ease. It did little to soothe me, though, as I sat there in the quiet save for the low rumble of the plane's engine.

It was a modestly staffed plane. Other than the initial question of whether or not we wanted food and drink, we weren't bothered. The crew seemed to know when to leave Eric to his own devices and seemingly, his guests as well. Their discreet actions made it so there was a sense of privacy between the two of us, but it didn't make me any more inclined to ask the questions that I wanted, and it didn't seem to make Eric any more inclined to speak, either. At least not until about a half hour into the flight.

"I'm sorry for any inconvenience this may have caused," he said, his voice startling me so that I glanced his way, while he stared straight ahead, his body still tense. "And not fully explaining myself. I understand in situations like this, it's not the ideal spot to be put into."

Finally, he looked over to me. His eyes were tired, puffy underneath and reddish in the whites of them. He hadn't been crying, I didn't think. But he certainly hadn't had

a decent amount of sleep, either.

He cleared his throat. “If you’ll give me this flight, and let me get us checked into our hotel, after we get settled I can explain everything I need of you on this trip. Please?”

This was the first time that he had ever asked for anything quite like this. Something personal, and clearly, emotional. I nodded. “Of course.”

In normal situations I wouldn’t have trusted a client to whisk me away like this, on such short notice, clearly in some kind of distress. It was asking to be compromised, roped into something that you legitimately didn’t want to do. But Eric...there was something about the imploring way that he looked at me that tapped directly into my compassionate side.

Knowing I’d get answers soon enough, I laid back, closed my eyes, and let the hum of the plane lull me to sleep for a nap.

I was woken up by the soft nudge of someone at my shoulder, and a gentle, “Miss? We’re about to land. Mr. Maxim should be out of the bathroom shortly. He’s freshening up. You’re welcome to do the same, Miss Greene?”

I blinked, eyes somewhat bleary, and shook my head. Maybe I’d take the initiative on the plane ride home, but honestly all I wanted at this point was a long soak in a bath and we certainly didn’t have time for that kind of freshening up while on a plane.

“No, thank you,” I said, my voice hoarse from sleep. “I’ll just wait for Eric.”

The stewardess smiled and gave a nod, continuing on her way.

When Eric exited and returned to his seat, I was buckling up to prepare for the descent. His hair was smoothed back, not a strand out of place. His suit had been

buttoned up properly and not open, haphazard, like it had been when he'd picked me up. Most notably, his eyes were no longer puffy and red like he had lost sleep for several days, but alert and awake behind a pair of silver framed glasses that I had yet to see him wear—even though I'd discovered a while back that he wore contacts—but gave him a very distinguished, attractive look.

He gave me a courtesy nod as he buckled himself back in. The only thing close to words spoken was a sigh as he leaned his head back against the head rest.

If our drive to the airport had been quiet and awkward, then our ride from the airport in Baxterville, New York was just the same. We didn't speak, and I hung back when we finally arrived at The Ville Hotel, where we would be staying. It was modelled after Grecian architecture, pillars and archways everywhere. Gold motifs and lots of red and royal blues, purples, and greens. I wished that I had been able to admire the scenery more as we came to our room, one of the apparent two penthouse suites that the hotel boasted.

“Eric—” I started as the door closed behind the two of us. Now that we were alone, I wanted the answers he'd promised.

“I'm going to take a shower,” he said, abruptly cutting me off before I could say anything at all. “There's two, if you'd like to take your own.”

I frowned as I was dismissed as though this wasn't a huge inflation of our contract. I resisted the urge to follow him down the hallway, deciding that if I was going to actually have to put my foot down with this man, at least I would do it when I was freshly washed and pampered in the kind of amenities that a five-star hotel like this would offer me.

I took my toiletries into the bathroom that Eric didn't occupy. His shower sounded from across the suite as I started mine up, and I craved to be in that shower with him,

too. The first proper out of state trip that we'd taken together, and it was shrouded in all of this mystery and uncertainty...

I sighed, looking around the bathroom. It was decked out in marble, and was large enough for a walk-in shower, and a free-standing marble tub. The countertops were all white granite, and the mirrors were the shiniest, most reflective I'd ever seen. Like the rest of the hotel, there were accents in gold, and I could not help but give a wistful little huff.

"Wish I could really enjoy this shit," I muttered irritably.

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Rather than take a long soak in the bath, I decided to take my time in the shower. God, the water pressure was something to kill for, the heat enough to turn me into a lobster if I really wanted to. I washed my hair, cleaned the makeup from my face, and freshened up the shave on my legs and pits. Once I'd cherry picked my way through the full-sized, complimentary body washes that they had provided, I stepped out of the bathroom in a comfortable pair of cotton shorts and casual-but-fashionable shirt. After running a comb through my hair, I returned to the main section of the suite, where Eric sat on a plush, red-velvet chair.

He was leaning back, wearing a white t-shirt and plain black boxers that were probably as expensive as a single outfit in my closet. His hair, still damp, had not been combed back and neatly put into place as it usually was. He had his glasses on once again, instead of his contacts. Despite the shower, he still looked so weary, and all my earlier annoyance instantly vanished.

Silence hung between us, as it had for most of the day, but I went ahead and walked his way. Nor could I stop myself from getting into his space whether he wanted it or not. I sat down on the floor beside that low set chair and let my head rest against his knee—my way of silently comforting him.

“Tell me why I’m here?” I asked softly.

It was not a demand, but a gentle request. I let myself be unexpectedly brought out here, under a premise that I had not prepared for, yet the way that Eric had gone about it and even the wariness—no, the bone-deep reluctance—to tell me what was going on, made me think that it was something bigger than even I could imagine.

I waited patiently, and eventually, he answered.

“My parents live up here in an assisted living facility,” he explained, his voice low and steady. “Considering my age, I imagine you understand that they’re not the youngest people, considering they had me in their late thirties. My mother has had dementia for the last five years, my father the last three. Between running the business, and keeping them comfortable, this was the best solution, for them. They’re the most familiar with New York. It keeps them calm, and for me, it keeps them safe because there aren’t many people who know about their condition, nor do I want them to.”

He reached out and gently ran his fingers through my damp hair, slowly and methodically, as if the action soothed him as much as it did me as I continued to keep my head on his thigh. I was just content that he was touching me in some way after all the distance between us today.

“Honestly, it’s a miracle that they even remember me, though it’s not much,” he said, sounding heart-breakingly sad. “They always wanted me to marry, settle down, have children. I was always too married to work to let that be a reality. So...usually when I would come to visit them, I’d bring whatever girl I had most recently dated. When my parents had to be admitted to the facility because of their dementia, I kept doing it. Now, they think it’s the same girl, even when it’s not.”

I closed my eyes, my throat growing thick as I listened to his story and heard the pain in his voice, while he continued to absently pet my head.

“They always ask about the children that we ‘haven’t had yet’ and I pay her handsomely to play along, because it makes them happy to talk about the grandkids they’d always wanted and believe are real. It’s easier to perpetuate the ruse than to try and convince people who can’t even remember their names some days to understand that the fantasy in their minds just doesn’t exist,” he said gruffly. “I had planned on

eventually explaining all of this to you, to see how you might feel about accompanying me for a visit that I'd schedule months from now so it was planned and you were prepared, but I received a call earlier today that my father had an accident. He fell and set his hip out of order. A whole ordeal. He kept asking for me, and my wife. Wanting me to come visit and take care of him."

Eric exhaled a deep breath, and I lifted my head and glanced up at him, meeting his dark, somewhat tormented gaze. "I'm so sorry," I whispered.

"No, I'm sorry." He gave me a faint smile as his hand settled at the side of my face and his thumb stroked along my cheek. "This should have been something that I put into your contract. I understand this. I know that unexpected things happen all the time, and honestly, I should have prepared for this better. It's...I try to guard my parents as best as I can. The last time I brought someone around them, it didn't go well. She thought that joking about them being 'forgetful' was fucking peak comedy."

I winced and Eric scoffed, disgusted. "I am sorry," he said again, his eyes softening. "I'm in a place right now where I am trying to do the best thing I can for my parents and I apologize for bringing you into this situation, but I just couldn't face them alone."

There was more vulnerability in his words than he'd ever displayed with me, and it made my heart tighten in my chest. When I was sure that he was done speaking, I rose to my feet and then settled onto his lap, grateful that he allowed me to do so.

His pain resonated within the deepest part of me, because I knew what it was like to lose parents. His weren't dead, but they weren't themselves, either. They weren't the mother and father that he had grown up with, weren't the parents that had shaped him into the man that he had become. They were something different, and he was having to navigate that the best way that he knew how. They didn't even live in the same state as he did, and I couldn't recall if I had seen pictures of himself with his parents

in his apartment. It was, truly, as though they were no longer there, as if those memories and reminders of how they'd once been were too much for him to bear.

"I understand," I said after a moment. "I mean, different situation, but you're trying to figure out how to live knowing that who you knew your parents to be aren't there anymore in here," I said, tapping my temple. "But if you need me to help you cope with this, Eric, then I can do that. Just tell me what I need to do."

I reached out, brushing my fingers through the damp strands of hair that had fallen over his forehead. He took my hand in his hold, pressing it to his chest, right over his steadily beating heart.

"Thank you," he said softly, the earlier tension in his body now gone. "I promise I won't be so out of sorts tomorrow."

"I think in this case, you're allowed to be out of sorts, Eric. You're dealing with some pretty heavy stuff. You can't be Mr. Business all the time." I sat up a little more, an idea popping into my head that would hopefully put us back on course. "Say, why don't we order in tonight for dinner? Get something really bad for us. Pizza. Maybe some wings. We relax tonight, that way come tomorrow, you can have your head a little more cleared."

Eric chuckled, his blue eyes a bit brighter now that he'd shared his burden with me. "You've got a deal. I'll get us the biggest supreme pizza you could possibly find in New York, and I know the perfect place to get wings. How do you feel about honey barbeque?"

I grinned, as if he didn't already know how I felt about food in general. "I feel like I might have to let my clothes out at the seams. Honey barbeque wings are my weakness."

“Oh?” His brows rose, and a wicked smile curved his lips. “I wish I had known that sooner. You know I’d do just about anything to get you out of your clothes.”

Relief and that familiar desire trickled through me. And just like that, we were mostly back on track.

CHAPTER 10

Jasmine

An hour later, Eric and I had a New York supreme pizza, and two orders of wings spread out on the California king-sized bed in front of the suite’s bedroom television. We randomly chose a channel, mostly so that there would be something going on in the background while we ate.

As we dug in, I focused on trying to get Eric to relax even more. Eased something of a smile and then laughter out of him when the movie on the television showed something funny, or one of us made an off-hand snarky comment about it. Coaxed him to recline back against the pillows instead of sitting so straight-backed and proper like he always did. Encouraged him to slouch like he was a college frat boy and not a man with an art empire at his fingertips.

Fingertips that were, currently, greasy and a little barbeque-y and messy.

“You know, when I come here to New York, we usually eat at The Fontaine,” he explained, sucking sauce off his thumb. “The stuffed pasta there is something to die for, but I think I might have to make this a part of the usual rotation.”

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I tried not to think of the possibility that in the future, I might not be a part of that rotation. “You’ve never eaten at this place before?” I asked, curious as I nibbled on a piece of chicken.

“No. Actually, I haven’t had pizza in...” He paused, his head tilted, eyes squint just so. His lips moved, silent and wordless, before he clicked his tongue. “At least fifteen years?”

I looked at him incredulously. “Fifteenyears?” I asked in mock horror. I couldn’t image going a month, let alone fifteen years without pizza or wings.

He nodded. “Late night, and I think at that point I was deep in acquisitions and working on pitches for buying and selling certain individual pieces of art for artists that I was connected with. I needed something to give me...I don’t know. A kick of serotonin and my mind immediately went to pizza. Granted, it was nothing like this. Some place named Dominos, if I remember correctly. Oh, but my taste buds were happy and so was my brain.” He laughed, the sound making me smile. “Then again, my body wasn’t so happy afterward, but that’s what happens when you hit your thirties.”

He said as much, following the statement by happily biting at the end of the newest slice that he had in his hand.

“Have you had time at all—ever—just for yourself?” I asked tentatively.

He seemed like a man that never stopped—and had never stopped—in years. Maybe ever. I could imagine a younger version of himself that was only young in appearance

but worked and toiled away like the same man he was today. He had a respect and interest for work that I didn't think came late in his life. He was far too invested and far too reverent of what he did for it to be a recent phenomenon of a man who was choosing to get himself in order in his later years.

As if echoing my thoughts, Eric shook his head. "No, not really. I've gone on vacations but those usually have some sort of work-related component to them, too. A dinner. A deal being signed. An event to attend. It's always just come naturally to me, so I don't think I've ever really paused. It feels almost like a waste to do so, you know?"

"Is that why you don't have a wife? Kids?" I risked asking him, even knowing how personal the question was.

"Yes," he said, surprising me by not skirting the answer. "Granted, I've tried traditional dating before, but women come into those situations with very specific ideals in mind. I can explain to someone that I work, what my work is, and that I take it seriously. The initial few times that I'm late for a casual date, there's acceptance. But after a while, those women want more than I can give. They demanded more of my time, were always unhappy with the hours I worked, and it usually led to a lot of arguments and frustration, more so than enjoyable time spent together. Now, I'm older, more set in my ways, and it's just easier being on my own than trying to conform to someone else's expectations."

He shrugged and met my gaze as he wiped his fingers on a napkin. "I find women in your line of work are far more honest and willing to receive honesty, in that regard. We always know what we're getting into when we come together like this. There are no surprises—well," He ducked his head apologetically. "Usually no surprises. On a good day, we interact in the parameters that we set with each other, and both parties understand what's expected."

It all sounded so detached and impersonal, which it was. As an escort, I knew this, lived by that mantra so far, and yet those words from Eric were difficult to hear for reasons I didn't want to examine too closely.

"A rigid outlook, for a man who takes so much stock with art," I commented, trying to sound light and teasing. "Art, which requires a degree of fluidity..." I let the words dangle between us.

Eric tilted his head, regarding me a moment before his expression softened a little. "I think for me, it's the fact that those I've been partnered with haven't seen it that way, or are fluid enough, as you say, to accept me as I am. More often than not it was a constant battle of trying to change and avoid being changed, rather than the effortless melding that I had always hoped I'd experience—as my parents had."

At the mention of his parents, Eric sobered just a little. His brows furrowed, and he stared down at the spread of food that was half-eaten between the two of us that we both seemed to be done devouring.

"Ah, it's getting late," he said, and I recognized the subject change for what it was. "I'll clean up and we'll call it a night?"

I nodded, but smiled and said, "We can call it a night, but I'm going to help you clean up."

It didn't take much time to do so. Cardboard boxes in the garbage, the left-over pizza and our wings designated to the last remaining pizza box altogether and put into the room's fridge. The atmosphere was much different from other times we'd been together once nighttime settled in, along with the expectation of sex.

I think we both felt that distinction. We lingered around the bed, seemingly uncertain about how to proceed. There was nothing sexual in the air after our tumultuous day

and all the emotions surrounding it, and that was new territory for the both of us.

“Shall we, then?” Eric said, indicating the bed.

There was something endearing in the way that he said it, in how he pulled back the sheets and let me slip under the covers first. He followed, leaving a small space between the two of us as we lay facing each other.

With the lights off, moonlight was the only thing illuminating the room. The silvery light cast over Eric’s face, brightening his eyes like some sort of ethereal creature in the night. This would be the first time we’d sleep together without having sex, yet there was something so much more intimate about this shared moment between us.

Taking a risk, I scooted closer to him, eventually settling with my head on Eric’s chest and my body nestled comfortable and close to his warmth and familiar scent. A soft, nearly imperceptible sound came from his throat, and I held my breath, bracing myself for him to ask that I move, or tell me to turn over, or any number of things that were likely to come out of his mouth because this...this was not what we were used to with each other, and I was pushing the boundaries of a line that we had already pushed and pulled quite a bit today.

So, when he moved, his arm coming to wrap around me and keep me pressed to him with his chin rested atop my head? I stayed there, closed my eyes, and let the steady beat of his heart lull me to sleep.

The morning came too quickly. I wanted to remain cocooned beneath the blankets, Eric’s chest my pillow, and his soft sleeping breaths the thing that kept my own body suspended beneath the sweet, sweet veil of subconsciousness. But today was an important day. I needed to be there for Eric, and no amount of this...new thing, this type of non-sexual intimacy that required something different than I’d ever given a client before Eric, could change that fact.

I allowed myself to stay pressed to Eric's side just long enough to begin feeling him stir, too. He stretched, back arching as he kept his arms around me, like he was unwilling to let me go. Maybe he was just deep in his comfort. I didn't dare let myself think that it was something else.

"It's morning," I murmured when I was sure that he was actually waking. "Shall we get up?"

"Mm. Let me stay here a little while longer," he said in a husky voice. "I don't want to get up just yet."

He nuzzled his face into my hair, sleepily, with a soft sigh. I flushed, and in the space between us could feel how that warmth filled it in. I knew that he was probably just putting off the inevitable of what was to happen today, but it didn't mean that I couldn't enjoy this closeness to him, either—even though all this newness posed a threat to my heart.

I chalked it up to the fact that this new territory was something I was still trying to navigate competently.

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Eventually, though, we had to get up. In the sleepy, early morning hours, we cleaned up, dressed, and headed down to the hotel's in-house dining room for breakfast. It was a quiet affair, little said until we actually received our food and began to eat.

“So, anything important that I should know before we see your parents today?” I asked, wondering how much of a charade I would need to put on. Playing a part tended to be the most used skill set of my job, and while I had played the part before of girlfriend, lover, date, I had never played the part of wife.

Eric took a drink of his coffee before answering.

“They won't expect any specific stories,” he said as he continued to eat his breakfast while he talked. “Usually, they recall things that I've told them, or things from the past, but I prefer to keep it simple so they don't get confused. We don't have children, work is going well, we'll come visit for Christmas.” He exhaled a soft sigh, tapping his fingers absently against the tabletop. “Mostly, they speak as though it's about ten years ago. They'll focus on me, my mother will likely dote on you and speak to you about wifely duties and the struggles you must have at being committed to a man who is utterly devoted to his work, while also praising you because you're still with me and, of course you're beautiful and you must be intelligent to have caught my eye and kept my attention for so long. Just like the women of her time.”

His description made me smile. “She sounds like a wonderful woman.”

“She is,” he said, and I could hear that soft, fond spot he had for his parent. “My mother will speak of anything that has to do with art, fashion, music, philosophy. My father is more reserved. For both of them conversation may be a little fragmented. If

you follow my lead, it is unlikely that they will become confused. That is something that I try to avoid.”

I absently pushed around the eggs on my plate with my fork. “Why is that?”

A small frown furrowed between his brows. “When they get confused, they start to try piecing the fragments together, and they become more aware that something isn’t right. When that happens, they go into a furious panicked mode that is very hard to come down from. I’ve witnessed it many times before, but I would prefer that you not be subject to it. They can’t control themselves. It’s something that not everyone understands, or respects.”

“I see.” I gave him an understanding nod. “Follow your lead it is, then.”

A visible look of relief passed over his features before he resumed eating his breakfast. “Let’s finish up. I have a car picking us up at ten.”

CHAPTER 11

Eric

I was not naturally an anxious man. For me, life had obstacles and those impediments were there to be defeated, using the skills, tools, resources, and experience available to myself in order to overcome them.

My parents, however, were an obstacle that I had yet to truly learn how to navigate.

When I received the call about my father’s fall, I panicked. It was such an uncomfortable feeling to have, panic. Like all of the control in the world could not contain the storm that barrelled its way through my mind. The concern for my father’s health. How my mother would fair. The fact that I would need to go see them

in person. The realization that if I went on my own it would only make their mental health worse because I had created a situation where they now expected me to be accompanied by someone, lest they start to piece together in their fragmented memories that something was off, that they were off, that their whole lives were off...

It was a grave that I had dug for myself in thinking that the best thing for them was to let them live out their fantasies of having their one and only son be as happy in a relationship as they had been—and still, in a way, were. It put me in a situation where I had to open up my familial private life to random females who came and went as the seasons did, and now, put me in the same position with Jasmine, who I genuinely liked and enjoyed, to do something that was not technically discussed previously in our contract.

That Jasmine had agreed to come with me before I had the mind to explain things fully to her had been astonishing, in hindsight. That she had been empathetic to my situation, even if I couldn't find the words to tell her just how deeply the loss of my parents affected me, was just as surprising. Because even though they were still alive, their decline into dementia still felt like losing them. The fact that my mother and father, so strong in their heyday, were now deteriorating...

I pushed the heartbreaking thought out of my head. It wouldn't do well to have myself too wrapped up in my worries and concerns before I went to see them. My mother could spot inner turmoil even with her mind not all the way there, and the disturbance would upset her.

But I couldn't stop wondering, had I done the right thing, bringing them to this care facility when I lived so far away?

Had I done the right thing, dragging Jasmine here to meet them?

Was there really a right or a wrong way to do any of this?

The questions circling in my mind seemed endless, with no easy answers.

I had checked out completely on the drive to the Wellington Later Life Care Facility, where my parents stayed. The sprawling grounds, contained behind a large, beautiful red brick wall and iron gate, gave off the air of safety. But every time I came here, I could not help but feel that it had to be little more than a pretty prison for people that were fortunate enough to be cast off by family wealthy enough to afford such luxurious assisted living. As if that could ever ease my profound guilt over the situation.

“Mr. Maxim?”

I jolted, caught up in my own fragmented thoughts as Paula, the receptionist at the front desk, called my attention back to the fact that I was supposed to be checking myself and Jasmine in.

I cleared my throat, forcing myself to focus on our upcoming visit. “Sorry. My head spaced out there a little bit.”

The woman smiled, generous and kind. “No worries, Mr. Maxim. I understand that you’re here to see your parents. Richard took a bit of a fall, though I hear he’s been talking non-stop about getting to see you and your wife again since we told him you’d be coming to visit soon.”

She looked to Jasmine, her warm smile never wavering. Paula was one of those who I interacted with here on a regular basis. She knew the charade well and was more than willing to play along in order to keep my parents happy. The entire staff were all very discreet, and never said anything inappropriate to anyone that I brought here.

“What shall we call you, Miss—?”

“Jasmine,” she answered beside me.

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Paula's smile seemed to brighten even more. "Oh. What a beautiful name." She looked over the desk, clicked her tongue and turned her attention back to me. "Ring, Mr. Maxim?"

Shit. I had almost forgot.

At least the rings were in my jacket pocket, where I'd put them earlier. I had a set made after a visit where my mother specifically hyper-fixated on the fact that neither myself nor the woman I had brought at the time—my supposed wife—wore rings. It had been a point of blasphemy for my mother who was all about decorum and tradition, and I hadn't been able to get around her scrutiny the entire visit. She had enough faculties at the time to question if I had been trying to trick her, and the only thing that had assuaged my mother's dismayed demeanor was informing her that we were planning on getting new rings for an anniversary that didn't exist. Now, she loved looking at them each time I came.

I pulled the set out of my pocket, slipping my band onto my finger easily before looking down to Jasmine. She had not spoken much since we'd arrived. I couldn't tell if it was nerves, or if she could tell that I was filled with anxiety and that was throwing our balance off. I wasn't usually like this. I was always calm, collected, and sane. That was how my parents had raised me to be. The fact that it was so easy to put a crack in the façade...

Jasmine held her left hand out toward me. She'd dressed in a pretty, but modest floral dress for the occasion, and she smiled up at me, her head tilted to the side, her hair falling over her shoulder in soft waves. "Well? Shouldn't you properly ring your wife, Mr. Maxim?" she teased.

I let out a puff of a laugh. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around? Me grounding her? Giving her guidance? Making her feel calm and reassured?

Is this what mutual exchange felt like? That effortless melding...

I mentally shook the fanciful thought from my head. I gently took her hand, slipping the wedding band on her finger first, and then its partner, the would-be engagement ring. They were impressive sets, beautiful white gold, the engagement ring a brilliant, glittering diamond set elegantly into the center with a twining band of smaller diamonds surrounding the larger stone. The rings fit perfectly. Slid on without resistance and the design suited her slender fingers, too. Almost as if it had been designed specifically for her.

The thought made my chest tighten, made me feel things like pride and possession and a whole host of other emotions that were completely foreign to me.

When I realized that I was staring too long, I cleared my throat and laced my fingers with hers. Not because it was for show, but because I genuinely wanted to hold her hand in mine.

I lifted my gaze back up to hers and exhaled a deep breath. "Well, let's go see Mother and Father."

I guided Jasmine toward my parent's apartment. At this point, I knew the layout of the facility like it were my own apartment. I had spent months before deciding on this place, looking over floor plans, perusing testimonials, reading professional feedback on the facility's amenities, its quality-of-life implementations, and actually visiting several times just so that I was reassured this was a reputable, safe establishment my parents would eventually call their home. I'd come here enough in the last five years that it was almost second nature even if I couldn't be here every day.

Everything was warm toned. There were browns, deep reds, burnt oranges, in the color scheme. I had expected white when I first began looking into extended care facilities. White, on white, on more white. Clinical, sanitized, and detached, like a hospital or those elderly homes that people hear horror stories about that abuse their patients and leave them to fend for themselves more often than not, which had always been my greatest fear for them.

I'd committed all of this to memory. The layout, the colors, how happy and cared for the patients we passed looked. I did this every single time I came here, because if I didn't it always felt wrong, in a way. More wrong than it did in general when I really allowed myself to consider that I could leave of my own free will, and they could not.

"Eric," came Jasmine's soft voice.

I once again pulled myself out of my unsolicited thoughts and looked down at her, slowing my pace. We were in the wide hall. Their hall. "Yes?" I asked, hearing the gruffness in my voice.

"Relax," she said, giving my hand a squeeze.

"I am relaxed."

She gave me a deadpan look, along with a soft scoff as she stopped walking, halting us entirely before we reached my parents' door. "You are not relaxed. You've been stiff and tense ever since we moved away from the receptionist desk."

I both hated, and liked, how perceptive she was. Hated it because she too easily saw that weakness in me. Liked it because I'd been on my own for so long that I couldn't remember the last time anyone cared enough about me to make sure I was truly okay—and meant it.

She guided us over to the side, just out of the way of the walking path. Her hand slid from mine and she reached up, brushing her fingers along my cheek in a way that made my heartbeat fall back to a regular rhythm, instead of racing erratically in my chest as we neared my parents' apartment.

“Whatever is on your mind, we got this,” she whispered, so only I could hear, her beautiful eyes shining with genuine sincerity. “I said I would help you with your parents, didn’t I? So, relax. You’re not alone, Eric.”

You’re not alone, Eric. I eased out a long breath. Coming from her, those words did something to me inside, made me feel calmer, more stable somehow.

Without warning, she leaned up, softly pressing her lips to mine. We hadn’t so much as fooled around the night before; the last twenty-four plus hours had been devoid of any sexual contact, even in the basic sense. But now, her mouth on mine was electric. A spark that snapped me to focus on her, on her words, on her true and honorable intentions when so many before her had treated this situation as an unpleasant, but necessary job to gain a paycheck.

From the depths of my soul, I knew that wasn’t the case with Jasmine. I also realized I hadn’t brought her here just for the sake of keeping up the façade to my parents that I had barricaded myself into. I had brought her here because to some extent I knew that I would need her support and I hoped—no, I knew after our few months together—that Jasmine would be able to give it to me.

My fingers slipped into her silky, unbound hair, pulling her closer as I deepened our kiss. There was a hunger in me that I could not explain and was not wholly sexual. I just wanted to be closer to her. I wanted to taste her, and smell her, feel her warmth on my skin and...fuck if I knew how to handle all these new and unfamiliar emotions.

With a soft, nearly imperceptible groan, I pulled away before things got intense. Or,

more intense than they already felt.

“We got this,” I repeated to her, the words sounding almost silly coming from my mouth, but the sentiment was all the same.

She smiled and nodded. “We got this.”

Feeling more centered, we finished walking to the end of the hall, hand in hand, where my parents’ apartment was located. Their door was red, and for some reason had a Christmas wreath hung on the outside. It must have been my mother’s doing. Possibly, she was in the early Christmas spirit, or, more likely, she thought that it was high time for Christmas to be here already since that was her favorite time of the year.

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Gently, I knocked on the door. I didn't like walking in unannounced since I never knew where their mental state might be. Sometimes I was a stranger when they looked at me, and then there were those precious times they immediately knew I was their son. I always hoped for the latter, even though the former was becoming more frequent.

From the other side there was a little thump, the sound of quickly treading footsteps, and then finally the click at the lock on the door being undone. A few seconds later the door opened, with my mother on the other side.

Born and raised in France, my mother had always been a waifish woman. She had not cleared even five feet in her youth, and as she had gotten older only seemed to have lost inches as the years went on. She was significantly shorter than myself and even more so than petite Jasmine, who looked down at my mother comically before she schooled her expression with a warm smile, as though this weren't the first time she was meeting my mother—and the first impression wasn't of her in an oversized Christmas sweater that I recognized as my father's and, presumably, no pants, since her legs were bare.

I drew in a relieved breath as my mother's face broke into a wide, beaming smile of recognition. She stepped toward me, her thin arms instinctually wrapping around my middle as she held me tight.

"Eric! You're here!" she exclaimed, and I could still hear the lilting French accent in her voice, despite her moving to America after marrying my father in her early twenties. "Your father and I didn't know when you'd be coming. They said you were going to visit, but that was weeks ago."

It was just yesterday.

I hugged her back, waiting until she had her fill and released me, but at the moment, she was content to keep me in her arms. “Well, you know me,” I said, going along with her personal perception of time as opposed to the reality of time that I knew. “I got caught up with work. I’m sorry. I’ll be sure to make it up to you.”

She sighed happily. “You make it up to me just being here, darling.”

Her head rested on my chest, and I cradled her there, her thin wisps of grey hair soft like a powdered cloud beneath my fingertips. It was almost like embracing a juvenile, really. It was a strange feeling that I had yet to truly come to understand or even know how to navigate. Being a caretaker to those who had taken care of me for most of my life was not something that I had ever considered being a part of my future. Foolishly, I had always pictured my parents in my adult years being the way they had always been. Young. Spry. Unmovable in their ways and unshakable in their countenance.

“Eric?”

A feeble yet still somehow clear male voice came from an adjoining room. I pulled back from my mother to look in the direction of their bedroom, where I knew my father was likely resting. Like a mischievous child, my mother grabbed my hand, pulling me toward her bedroom. I quickly looked back to Jasmine, who smiled at me and took the free hand I offered, following us along on what probably looked like from the outside as a pair of people being led on an adventure.

Well, for Jasmine it might be one into the realms of the unknown. For me, I wasn’t entirely sure what to call it, adventure or not.

Their room was one I had been in many times. My mother liked to show off her décor

every time I visited—which would sometimes be pristine, artistic accoutrements, and at other times would resemble more the machinations of a child putting a miss-match of anything they liked together as opposed to designs that made sense.

Today, it seemed a combination of both. I noticed new framed fashion magazines on the wall that hadn't been there the last time I'd been here, and they'd changed to a red, black, and white color scheme with semi-modern furnishings. It was not common in most late-life care facilities to allow such free decorating, but given how expensive the place was, I'd made sure there was a considerable amount of wiggle room when it came to such things. I also provided a generous stipend every month to suit my mother's whims. She only had to order online during those times she remembered, or through catalogues that she managed to get her hands on.

My attention focused on these new details, the haphazard way that it was put together, because it stalled me from having to look at my father. Shame was a deep-rooted thing, though it wasn't shame for my father. Shame and guilt for oneself was so much richer, so much more potent.

My father was nowhere near as small as my mother. He had still managed to maintain his above six-foot height—which I'd inherited—along with his broad shoulders and chest, even in his older age. I could not help but take that in with the juxtaposition of his weary, wrinkle-lined face and feel my chest tighten just a little more when that face crinkled into a smile.

“Eric. You're back.”

My mother went around to the far side of their bed, sitting on the edge. She pressed her hand to his forehead, a gentle caress that my father leaned into. Jasmine came up beside me, an almost mirror to their own gestures as she slid her hand in my hold.

It gave me the push to speak.

“I heard you hurt yourself, Father,” I said, moving to the open side of the bed and closer to him, bringing Jasmine with me. “So, I wanted to come see how you were.”

He waved his hand in the air in a familiar gesture, like it wasn’t a big deal. “All I did was tumble a little.”

“You hurt your hip, Richard,” my mother scolded him before cuddling down at his side, almost in the way a child would comfort a parent—or seek comfort from them. He sighed and cuddled her in kind.

I had no idea what to say. It would be like my father, with or without his condition, to blow off a whole broken hip as if it were nothing—though I was grateful it had been a minor injury in comparison. He’d likely gotten hurt fooling around, doing something he thought he had the physical capacity to handle, only to have it bite him in the ass.

The distraction came when my father seemed to finally notice Jasmine in the room. His face at first held a flicker of confusion—and of course I worried. But then, a deeper, warmer smile spread across his face.

“Oh. Hello dear. Welcome back,” he said, as if he were greeting an old friend. “Did Eric drag you across country again? Just for my little accident?”

Here was the true test, how Jasmine and my parents would interact with each other. I had no way of knowing how well this would go. They didn’t recall enough to remember the previous woman’s face; only enough to remember that I had brought a woman, that she was my “wife,” and that they liked her well enough to be cordial.

Jasmine didn’t miss a beat.

“I insisted,” she said, releasing my hand to reach out and take my father’s. “I couldn’t imagine sitting back home wondering how you were, and I know that you’re a little

stubborn, so I had to see for myself that you were alright.” She gave him a genuinely sweet smile. “I’m glad you’re okay. You had us worried.”

My father tilted his head, like he was trying to comprehend something, before he shook off the notion and laughed. “All you young people are the same! Always worrying about what us old people are doing. I’ll have you know, back in my day, I’d be up and about and spry in no time.”

I shook my head, even though I was glad to see him in good spirits. “You hurt your hip, Father.”

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He scoffed. “It’s nothing more than a bruise. Had worse in the Army. These kids don’t understand that. But—” He leaned forward a little, grinning, and at least he’d remembered to put his teeth in today. “The staff does bring me candy now. Soft toffees, because of my tumble. Only thing that’s keeping me from running around the yard right now!”

I grinned, even as Jasmine tried to stifle a little laugh. My father was certainly as stubborn as she’d teased him about. No injury or ailment was as bad as anything he had dealt with in the military. And why would it be? He’d engaged in warfare. What was a little bruised hip to a man like that?

Jasmine leaned a little closer to my father, her voice low and conspiratorial when she spoke. “So, about those toffees...enough to share?”

It was my mother who spoke up. “Oh, yes! He doesn’t need nearly as many as what they give him.”

“What? It’s not like it’ll rot my teeth anymore.” My father snickered, reaching his fingers into his mouth to pull out of the top set of his false teeth.

They came out with a metallic little click, being the kind that snapped into the gums with small magnets that were situated into the bones and a matching set in the teeth themselves.

Mother bopped him on the shoulder. “Don’t just pop them out like that! It’s impolite.” She shook her head, looking to Jasmine and me. “Can you believe him?”

I found it amusing to see my parents so playful, when they'd once been so distinguished and dignified, which was where I'd gotten my own formal personality from. It made me wonder if at some point in my life I'd ever become less rigid and more relaxed.

"I dunno," Jasmine said, following my father's lead just as mischievously. "I think he's on to something. Imagine all the sweets you could eat if cavities weren't a problem."

My father nodded. "Aye. See. She has the right idea."

I shook my head, looking to my mother. "The toffees? Tell me where they are and I can get us all one."

My mother beamed, her brow furrowing for a moment as she thought, then finally answered. "They're in the candy jar in the kitchen, dear."

Nodding, I looked to Jasmine. I didn't want to ask outright if she'd be okay alone with my parents, but I couldn't help the hesitance, either. Without even having to voice it, though, Jasmine smiled at me.

"I'll be fine in here," she said in a gregarious tone, and shooed me away with her hand in a playful manner. "I hear that I'm great company."

Nodding, I made my way out of my parents' room and back into the main living area of the apartment. It was at least clean, I noticed. Even the kitchen. I saw small reassurances placed here and there that told me that my parents weren't worse for wear here. They were still thriving. Happy. In love with each other. They just...

I sighed as I pulled four toffees from the candy jar. You're worrying too fucking much.

And I'd put all of that on Jasmine. Yet for all that, she seemed to be handling my parents well. I was honestly surprised. This whole thing had been a massive, unplanned gamble on my part that should have gone wrong by now, as it had in the past. She could have said no. She could have judged me for how I chose to take care of my parents. She could have ridiculed the way that they were.

Could have, yet she didn't.

Unsure of what to do with the way I felt about the situation, I came back to my parents' room. Hearing the three of them speaking, I paused just outside the door.

"...I know it's probably too soon, but you know what would really brighten up things around here? Grandchildren."

My face reddened at my mother's voice, but I stayed where I was, admittedly curious about how Jasmine would answer.

A small, nervous—or perhaps embarrassed—laugh came.

"Well, you know Eric. Work, work, work," she said in an easy-going tone, handling the time alone with my parents like a champ. "We're not really thinking about having kids right now."

"But at some point?" My mother's voice was so damn hopeful, which in turn made me feel oddly wistful that I'd never given my parents something so simple, all because of how particular I'd always been when it came to women.

Until Jasmine, trickled through my mind.

A beat of silence passed before Jasmine responded to my mother's request. "Well, it's not completely off the table. Maybe a few of those emptier rooms in the

apartment could be filled with pattering feet. But, until then, Eric and I are enjoying having time to ourselves.”

It was my father I heard this time, giving a slight snort. “Emilie and I didn’t have Eric until we were in our thirties. We liked our ‘wrapped up in each other’ time, too.”

My mother clicked her tongue. “Richard just forgets how nice it was to have a baby between the two of us.”

The wording made my blood run a bit colder. They were talking about memories now. Recollections. This was usually when it was a prime time to step in and make sure that they didn’t try to push those memories too far into places where there were gaps. Areas where they wouldn’t know what to say or why things didn’t make sense the way they used to.

But that didn’t come.

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“I know exactly what it was like!” my father responded jovially. “All those late nights. Eric was such a fussy baby. Coming home on leave was almost like coming back to a whole second job.” He laughed heartily. “But I loved it. When you have a child of your own, you’ll understand how much of your world is really just theirs. You’re making sure that it’s the best possible place for them to thrive. I think sometimes that I was too hard on him...sometimes...”

My father’s voice trailed off, and hearing the confusion in his tone that told me he was grasping at other memories, or fading out of the current ones, I finally stepped into the room.

“Got your toffees,” I said, as though I hadn’t heard a large portion of their conversation.

My father was immediately distracted by the treat, and both he and my mother were quick and willing to take their sweets and indulge in them.

I handed one off to Jasmine, as well. I searched her face as her eyes met mine, unable to help but wonder what she was thinking after all that talk of babies. If marriage and children were something she wanted for herself eventually. And why did the thought of any other man giving her those things make me feel like I’d been sucker punched in the stomach?

CHAPTER 12

Jasmine

We stayed only an hour. It didn't take long, or much it seemed, to tire Eric's parents out. They were far more lucid than I had expected them to be. Though it was odd interacting with them like we had met each other before, they didn't seem to realize that I was a new person introduced in their lives, just as Eric had said.

They were sweet people. I had braced myself for any number of unfavorable outcomes, from his parents having an outburst to them potentially asking questions I had no idea how to answer, to them not liking me and upsetting Eric because of my presence there.

None of those things happened.

As we rode back to the hotel in silence, I wondered how Eric felt about our time with his parents. He hadn't said a word since we'd left them peacefully napping in their apartment in the carefacility, only giving instructions to the driver to take us straight back to the hotel.

It wasn't particularly late; too soon for a dinner, but it didn't seem like he wanted to do much of anything at the moment but return to what probably felt like the safety of obscurity within the confines of the hotel's walls.

Maybe he needed a break, and I think I did, too. We went our separate ways once we got back to our suite, the both of us beelining for a shower. The hot water and the sounds of it trickling down and hitting the tiled bathroom floor proved calming, even if my curiosity about this entire situation hadn't waned. The only problem was, would Eric be up to talking about it? Allowing me more insight to the personal life that he had just let me witness? In all honesty, I wished that I had gotten to see more of it. There was so much to Eric's story that I felt had yet to be discovered.

When I came out of the shower into our main room, Eric was already seated on the bed. He had his towel around his shoulders and wore nothing else but his boxers. I

had my own oversized t-shirt on, bra-less. For people who had been naked and intimate with each other already, this felt more vulnerable.

Before I could figure out what question I needed, or wanted, to ask first, Eric spoke.

“You were really good with my parents today,” he said softly, meeting my gaze, his own grateful. “I didn’t expect them to be so coherent and social. That doesn’t always happen.”

I eyed him a moment and, deciding it was probably okay, sat beside him on the bed.

“Were they a little more back to normal today?” I asked.

Eric let out a small laugh that had a sad tinge to it. “Somewhat, though my father was never so openly emotional or so light-hearted when I was growing up. I get my serious personality from him, and Mother was always more proper. Today, they were very different from how they used to be, which was nice to see. But in terms of them being better, it’s been a very long time since I’ve seen them happy like that, or able to recall small things about the past without it causing them distress.”

He glanced over to me. “I know that it likely won’t last. Things like dementia don’t have a reversal, only treatment that gets progressively more and more specialized and focused. But today it felt like I had parents again for the first time in a long time. So, I thank you for that.”

I swallowed, not expecting such an answer, and had no idea how I was supposed to respond to something like that. As if my being there made some sort of monumental difference. I was only a stranger, really, to them. Less of a stranger to Eric, but certainly not the figure of his wife that I pretended to play today for his father and mother.

“I don’t think it was all me,” I said, placing my hands in my lap. “I think they were really happy to see you, and your presence probably helped boost their spirits. I just needed to be there so they didn’t ask too many questions and get upset, right? So, it worked.”

“Hmm.”

Then, he did something unexpected for a man so proper and in control of his actions. He flopped inelegantly onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. “This feels strange,” he murmured. “To have expected the worst and to now be so confused by the fact that it actually turned out alright.”

“Parental baggage is strange,” I conceded. “I don’t think it’s supposed to make sense.”

“Fair.” He hesitated, before turning his head toward me and continuing. “You understand because of your own parents, don’t you?” he guessed, his expression astute. “You said you lost them your freshman year in college. You haven’t said explicitly how you lost them, but I feel like it’s the reason you can relate to my situation with my parents, but on a different level?”

Other than that one time, the morning after our first sleep over, I’d never mentioned my parents again, and he hadn’t asked specifics. I was honestly shocked that he remembered, and even more surprised he was bringing up something so personal now. Then again, we’d just been through something very emotional together, a bonding of sorts I never would have anticipated.

Normally I’d tell a client this was strictly a no-fly zone when it came to our arrangement, but it seemed unfair to withhold my own past when he’d shared so much about his parents. Besides, some things couldn’t be put back behind walls once there weren’t any more walls to speak of. And the ones between us were slowly,

inevitably, crumbling the more time we spent together, and I was helpless to refuse this man anything, I realized.

“Yes...I dropped out of school because my parents died. They were killed in a car crash my first year of college. A hit and run, and they’ve never found the person responsible,” I said, feeling that anger and frustration I’d suppressed over the years swirl to the surface. That someone had basically gotten away with my parents’ murder, without facing any consequences. “I had a full ride scholarship, and I’d barely started my first semester when I received a call from one of my dad’s co-workers that they were in the hospital.”

Eric moved so he laid on his side, facing me, his expression compassionate. “Were they in the hospital long?”

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I shook my head, my chest growing tight as I recalled all the horrifying details I'd been faced with. "My mother was in a coma for about a day. My father died about two hours after arriving at the hospital from internal injuries. I didn't...I didn't get to say goodbye to them. They were already dead by the time I was able to get back home."

"I'm very sorry," he said in a soft, understanding tone. "So you lost your parents. But mine aren't dead."

"But they're not the same as they were," I countered. I resituated myself on the bed, moving up onto the mattress and sitting cross legged in front of him. "I know what it's like to lose parents, but I know what it's like to lose them swiftly, in an instant. I don't know what it's like to watch them diminish in front of me, not knowing what I might come back to when I see them again, but I can imagine that's an equally painful way to lose a parent."

He nodded, and a beat of silence followed before he asked, "So, because your parents died, that's how you started doing this?"

This, being an escort. "It's how I started camming," I corrected, giving him a faint smile. "I was so lost after they died, so overcome with grief and anger that whoever slammed into the side of their car and drove them off the road and into a ravine was never found or held accountable. I didn't know what to do after they were gone. Didn't have the support that I would have had. Emotionally. Financially. Neither of my parents had life insurance policies, and they didn't have a lot of money in general."

Swallowing hard as the terrible memories swamped me, I absently reached out, brushing my fingers through Eric's hair, which was so soft and damp. "My life...it felt like a train wreck and at some point I needed to find a way to support myself. But the places that did hire me quickly realized I was shit at the job because I was so out of sorts and distracted and trying to process my grief over my parents and how they'd died, and they fired me just as fast."

"Assholes," he muttered, his lips tight with anger on my behalf.

"It was difficult at the time, but I get it now. They had a business to run and I was more a liability than a productive employee." I shrugged and continued on. "When I dropped out of college, I only had a few weeks before I had to move out of the dorm and find a new place to live. My parents didn't own our house. They rented the same place for years and always made payments on time, but the landlord didn't care that I was now homeless. He'd had a steady stream of income for years, and now he didn't. It didn't matter to him that I was going through one of the worst things a teenager could ever experience in their life."

Another inarticulate, irate sound from Eric, but he said nothing, letting me finish without interrupting.

I exhaled a breath, my fingers now picking at non-existent lint on the comforter between us. "So...I started looking around for a way to make quick money while I crashed on a high school friend's couch. They'd stayed in the area, hadn't gone off to college, and lived with four other people in a small apartment. They sold weed and did gaming livestreams. I'm not exactly great at video games, but Tamara made the joke about doing something a little less PG. And down the rabbit hole I went," I said wryly.

"Did you actually like camming?" Eric asked carefully.

It was as though this was the first time that he seemed to consider that I might not be doing this line of work because it was something that I enjoyed, because now he knew the extent of the negative context to it all. That he cared enough to ask, to even have this discussion when we'd never really ventured into this realm of my life before, felt as though it was changing the dynamic between us once again.

"Did I like it? Not initially," I replied honestly, giving him even more of a deep dive into my past. "At first, it was just a temporary thing so I could get on my feet and not have to always crash on someone else's couch," I said, opening up even more. "It probably didn't help that I didn't feel much of anything right after my parents' deaths. I was completely numb, so I didn't feel shame. I didn't feel apprehension. I'd locked down my emotions, because if I tried to feel, I'd have to feel their loss, too. And some days, considering the person that had killed them had gotten off scot-free, it was just too much for me to bear."

Eric nodded, and now it was him that reached out to touch me, his fingers gently stroking along my leg. Not in a sexual way, but warm and comforting. "Have you gotten to the point where you've accepted what's happened to your parents?"

I hesitated before responding but didn't look away from him.

When it came to clients, I'd learned it was best to tell them what they wanted to hear. The answer that would make them feel good in the moment because my problems weren't really theirs to worry about or be burdened with. But Eric was no longer a typical client, and this was not a typical situation. I had never been with a person who had brought me this far into their personal life, let me see behind the layers of bravado that were often put up by the kind of wealthy, pretentious men that bought my time.

He deserved more than just what Escort Jasmine would say to ease that crease that had settled into his brow, and that's what allowed me to be even more open and

honest with him. “No, not completely,” I said. “The anger and grief of losing them, and how I lost them, comes and goes. It’s rarely ever there all the time like it used to be, and mostly it’s just a little thing in the back of my mind. There are still good days, and bad days, but I think at some point the good starts to outweigh the bad. It’s not always easy, that’s for sure. The good thing for you is even if your parents aren’t who they used to be, you still have time to make moments with them, even if they aren’t the moments that you would have expected to have, you know?”

“Yes...and thank you for the reminder to cherish the time I do still have left with them,” he said, his voice a little gruff. “I forget to appreciate days like today because of my own guilt.”

I smiled at him. “You’re welcome.”

I laid down beside Eric on the bed and dared to scoot a little closer to him. I tucked myself into his side, cuddling against him, and when he anchored an arm around me and pulled me closer, I sighed contentedly. I didn’t push for anything more, and neither did he, even with the touch of skin against bare skin with how little we were wearing.

All I wanted in that moment, all I needed, was to feel like I mattered to someone—something that had been lacking in my life for so long. And with the way Eric stroked his hand along my back and just held me without any expectations, I felt cared for, protected, secure.

There didn’t need to be anything more.

“You wanna order in again instead of going out to eat?” I asked after a while had passed, lifting my head to look into his beautiful blue eyes. “We could carb load and get really fat on garlic bread and pasta and soda. It’s early still, but it’s been a long day, you know?”

Eric considered my suggestion for a moment, an indulgent grin gradually forming on his lips. “Yeah. I would like that.”

CHAPTER 13

Jasmine

Light filtered into the hotel room through the parted drapes the following morning, and I burrowed closer to the man beside me beneath the covers, reluctant to wake up because Eric was an incredible person to snuggle against. His body temperature always seemed to be at a comfortable toasty warm. Not so much that my body pressed to his made me overheated, and not so little that it was more like hugging a block of ice than a hunk of man.

I didn’t want to move even as I began to stir. There was something about the way that Eric’s chest rose and fell softly with small snores that kept me lulled beneath a veneer of restfulness, and I had no desire to pull myself out of it anytime soon.

His arm was cradled around my waist, keeping me close to him. Foolishly, I felt almost like it was an intentional thing, and not something that just happened because, well, you snuggled accidentally while you slept. I wanted to believe that he held me that close because even subconsciously, he wanted me that near him.

It was a too fanciful notion, and I pushed the thought away as quickly as I had allowed it to enter my mind. I knew what Eric and I were to each other. Possibly more friends than just client and escort, but I knew better than to start entertaining more romantic notions about us, or even our future together.

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I chalked it up to the heightened emotions that came with our talk from yesterday. When you were vulnerable, you were always more open and susceptible to feelings and I couldn't allow myself to catch those any more than I already had. There was always an end date to these contracts and arrangements, and as much as I wished differently with Eric, I knew we'd part ways eventually. He'd made it clear from the beginning that he wasn't a man to commit for the long term, and I'd do well to remember that.

Eventually, Eric began to stir, too.

"It's morning," he muttered, his voice groggy and rough, tinged in that sleepy gruffness that was fairly irresistible.

Despite how emotionally draining yesterday had been, he'd slept well, it seemed. "Yes, it is," I said, lifting my head and propping my chin on his chest to admire his handsome face, complete with that sexy morning stubble. "Sun's peeking through, trying to wake us up and energize us for the day, but I could lay here for hours and just bask in the left over carb coma that we enjoyed last night."

Eric groaned at the reminder. "The past two nights are going to set back any and all good eating and workouts that I've had for the last few months. You're a bad influence, but I think it might have been worth it. Nobody makes garlic knots like that back home."

We laughed, and after a moment Eric rolled over to prop himself on top of me. The mood shifted just as fast, my pulse, and other body parts, quickening in response to his arousing proximity. His face wasn't as playful now, though there was a sort of

peaceful placidness to his expression that I hadn't seen before. He cupped my cheek, his thumb caressing along the rise of bone beneath my eye. I couldn't look away from him; I didn't want to, held there in the magnitude of his gaze.

"Thank you," he said. "For yesterday, and last night."

Before I could reply, he dipped his head and pressed his lips to mine, softer and sweeter than any other kiss he'd ever given me before, but that touch of our mouths was like a match to tinder. In that moment I wanted to consume him, and let him consume me, too. Anyway he wanted.

He tangled his hands in my hair, tipped my head back, and delved his tongue into my mouth. I skimmed my fingers along his bare back, melting into the kiss with a groan.

There was no rush as we kissed. No haste like we were used to. Even as he settled his hips between my spread thighs, the tantalizing way we pressed together making his cock grow hard against my core, we leisurely explored. More sensual touches, more seductive kisses, and the soft roll of our bodies against each other elevating our mutual desire. The hard planes of his muscles against the softer curves of my body felt like the perfect fusion of opposites, especially when we moved against each other.

One layer of clothes slowly shed after another, thrown haphazardly aside. My shirt. His boxers. My panties. They mixed with the sheets on the bed, and when we were both naked, he moved over me once again, burying his face against my neck.

He brushed his lips there, then lower, over the pulse at the base of my throat, making me shiver. He lazily licked the curve of my shoulder, then gently bit, forcing an arch into my back and an arousing gasp to escape my lips. My nails found the muscles in his back, clinging and digging there as he suckled at my flesh and shifted to the side so that he could fit his hand between my legs. His fingers pushed inside me gently,

like he was strumming softly at the strings of a harp. The pleasure that came from it, such a delicate touch.

A damn near fucking loving touch, and the thought made my heart constrict in my chest. His eyes held mine, and they were desperate and needy and a reflection of everything I felt inside but had been trying to resist.

I should have stopped this. This was far too intimate, even for my job description. Too slow. Too passionate. Too much like a melding of raw and tender feelings and I knew, I knew, it could only be because he was vulnerable right now but...

Fuck, I was too. I always was when I thought about my parents, but I had never, ever, told a client about them. I had never had a man who understood the pain that it was, let alone a man who cared to listen in the first place. Certainly not a client.

This work was about them, after all. Not me.

Yet I felt myself falling into the abyss with Eric anyway, helpless to stop the freefall that I knew would most likely leave me with a broken heart down the road. "Please," I whispered, my hips undulating against his hand, his fingers. "Eric, please..."

I wanted to give the same way that he was. Give into this stupid, stupid emotion I knew we couldn't entertain but were going to anyway, because I'd made the mistake of not letting him be the only vulnerable person in this room. I was right there with him.

What a fool I was.

A fool that came apart under Eric's expert fingers as they moved between my legs and stroked my eager, sensitive flesh. A fool that let him finger fuck me slowly, let him leave his mark of kisses along my throat and my breasts like a trail of stitches that

were supposed to sew up all my broken parts because I had helped start mending his.

So, I touched him, too. Caressed my own hand along his body as I moaned softly for him, slipping further down between his thighs to wrap my fingers tight around his thick cock.

His groan was music. Deep and drawn out as I stroked him to the languid pace that matched the way he thrust his fingers inside me. It was a tandem motion between the two of us, giving, receiving, giving again. Right until it was too much and he finally pushed my hand away and eased into me, his cock spreading me open, slow and gentle, like I was something precious.

The feel of his flesh cleaving my own was something that felt like it ought to be a religious experience, matched by the mutual gasps of pleasure we let out as he pinned me to the mattress beneath him, just like that.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” he grit out.

He pulled back, only enough so that he could look me in the eyes as he started to move inside me, but not so far that it felt like there was space between us. His forehead pressed to mine, and our eyes remained locked as we lost ourselves in this rhythm of one.

Love making was such a cliché thing to call it. It wasn’t that. It was something far less easily describable. I was seeing him for who he was, striped down bare, and letting him glimpse the parts of myself that I’d always kept under lock and key.

There was nothing more intimate between two people than that.

CHAPTER 14

Jasmine

Four Weeks Later

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I tried to concentrate on the book I'd recently bought to distract me, but my thoughts had a mind of their own and kept circling back to the questions I had no answers for.

Had I done something wrong with Eric? Or had I done exactly what he'd wanted from me, and he no longer needed me anymore?

These were anxiety-ridden worries I wasn't accustomed to having when it came to clients, and I hated that they sprung up so easily for me as the weeks after visiting Eric's parents passed by, and I heard little to nothing from him.

What was truly embarrassing wasn't just the fact that I kept obsessing over the situation. It was the way all that vulnerability had funneled down into that morning sex that we had before we came back to Florida. It had felt different, because what that trip had entailed was something different, and now I felt myself regretting ever giving in to the feelings that had allowed Eric to see me so damn vulnerable.

In the last few weeks since returning from New York, I'd had no communication with him, and any of the events I was supposed to accompany him to had been changed or cancelled in the joint calendar we both had access to. There had been no explanation, and honestly, as a paying client, he didn't owe me one. I had to remind myself, numerous times, that our arrangement wasn't the type that I could just pick up the phone and demand answers like I was his girlfriend—and honestly, if it had been any other client I would have been thrilled and relieved to have a month to myself, paid in full.

I had to keep reminding myself that Eric and I had a contract, not a relationship. Ours was an "as needed" business arrangement, and up to this point my fee was still being

promptly deposited into my bank account like a retainer, so there was no reason—business-wise—for me to be as upset as I was. Eric had no obligation to me, other than financially, which he'd continued to fulfill.

Emotionally, however, was a whole other story because the truth was, I was disappointed by him essentially ghosting me, and that fucking hurt.

“Stupid, stupid,” I chastised myself, not for the first time in the last few weeks.

I was still stewing on the entire scenario on the way to Florie's later that day, where I was meeting Dominique for an afternoon lunch. I needed her advice and wisdom, because I had no idea what to do about the predicament I'd found myself in, or what to do next. I had every reason to end the contract on my end, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Not without some kind of explanation from Eric.

Which left us at a stalemate.

I arrived in my Uber just as Dominique stepped out of her car, an elegant brow raised as soon as she saw me. “You look like you're ready to skin something alive, dear.”

“I just might,” I muttered, stepping in beside her to walk into Florie's.

We didn't say much until we were seated, orders for our drinks and meals taken, and then we were left to our own devices.

“Alright, spill,” Dominique said once our wine was poured and the waiter left our table. “I thought we were just going to have a lovely, uneventful lunch, but that look on your face tells me that something more is going on than just you wanting to have tea time with your favorite old madame.”

I didn't hold back. I explained the situation with Eric from start to finish, from him

calling me to take the trip with him to visit his mother and father in New York, to me telling him everything about my own parents, and even the intimate level of sex we'd had before we left. I didn't leave out any detail, mostly because Dominique could smell omission from a mile away, and partly because I wanted to know that I was one hundred percent vindicated in my feelings that Eric's silence was bullshit. Or at the very least, have her put her foot down and tell me that I definitely crossed a line, and I should never do it again because remaining impersonal was the nature of the work that we were involved in.

To my surprise, she did none of that. She was quiet after I was done speaking and sat there in thought, her fingers trailing along the line of her jaw, which she did when she was in a particularly deep state of thought.

"I see," she finally said after our lunch orders were delivered to the table. "So, basically, Eric needed you, you answered the call, and it went better than the two of you expected. You were both vulnerable, and you indulged it despite your better instinct telling you that it was something that you wouldn't be able to take back. Now, he's stopped talking to you, but hasn't ended your contract. Has he continued paying you?"

"Yes, and that's the part I don't understand!" I said, bristling all over again as I pushed my salad around on my plate. "Why won't he just cut me loose?"

"Hmm." Was her only response.

I sighed, annoyed. "So, what's the verdict? Do I need to start looking for another long time client? Was the whole thing just really stupid of me? Because that's what it's starting to feel like. I don't understand what I did wrong."

Dominique took a bite of her grilled salmon and tilted her head. "What makes you think that you did anything wrong?"

“He’s not talking to me?” I waved a hand in the air. “He’s cancelled all of our plans?”

Dominique laughed, even though I found absolutely nothing humorous about the situation. “Jas, had you done something wrong, you wouldn’t still be on his payroll for events that he’s cancelling himself. Tell me something. When you were returning to Florida after that intimate night together, how did everything feel to you as it was settling in?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what were the emotions you felt when the high of needing to provide for him, and the euphoria of finding someone who you could relate to, started to wear off?”

I was silent. Dominique raised her brow. “Well?” she prompted. “Don’t keep me in all of this suspense, my dear.”

“It was kind of terrifying,” I admitted truthfully. “All of this shit we unloaded with one another, it’s a lot to process, you know? I didn’t know what he was going to think of me once it all settled in. I worried that maybe he’d pity me for the choices I’d had to make to survive, or how sad it was that I couldn’t get my shit together after my parents died. Maybe he’d think I was...” I shifted in my seat, hedging around what I wanted to say, but forced it out anyway. “That he’d think I was emotionally easy, and I didn’t want him thinking of me that way. It’s fucking embarrassing.”

Dominique clicked her tongue. “So the problem is that you opened up far more than you ever had with any other client, and you were fearful of being judged for it after the fact? Especially with a man you’re only with because of work.”

Well, when she put it like that, it only made the situation worse, didn’t it? Either way, I nodded. “Yeah. That, exactly.”

Dominique chuckled. “And you’re under the impression that you’re the only one who’s feeling that way?”

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I opened my mouth, only to close it again before I could say anything. I hadn't considered that Eric might have felt the same way.

Dominique smirked. "I'm not going to tell you definitively what's going through Eric's mind right now, but if he hasn't outright chosen to end your contract, I would simply suggest that you hold out and see what happens. I do know Eric well enough to say that he isn't a man to punish the women who entertain him over his own emotions. But in this line of work emotions are a messy concept for men that they steadfastly avoid, which is why the arrangement works both ways because it's transactional, without those expectations. Trust me. I've been through so many men at this point, and that remains the one and only constant between all of them."

Unlike most of my conversations with Dominique, I did not end up leaving my lunch with her feeling any more confident or any less agitated. My irritation only seemed to escalate the longer it took Eric to contact me. Fine, maybe he was feeling all jumbled up inside, too, but did he really think it was so easy for me to spill my guts in turn and let him see the most vulnerable pieces of me?

I couldn't help but feel used, and that was a feeling that was not easily placated by a little luncheon and a vague, "everything will be fine if you give it time".

So, when Eric did finally send me a message by an impersonal email, I was not overcome with giddy excitement or even relief that I would continue to have work without worry. I was just more annoyed. But I was nothing if not a professional who honored their contract and obligations.

He wanted me to attend an investor's ball for one of the galleries that he was a part of

keeping afloat. Money donated by like-minded rich folk, smaller business owners who liked to invest in the local communities, and such. I almost didn't care about it, but I knew that if I pettily blew him off so he'd feel the same sting I'd been living with the past month, it wouldn't reflect badly on him. No, it would make me look like the spurned woman who wasn't getting what she wanted.

Christ. This felt like amateur escort bullshit.

The small amount of petty that I was able to muster, however, was in the way I dressed. Eric preferred I wear a certain aesthetic to his venues, and I knew this. Allowing myself to be attractive wasn't the issue; anything in the realm of risqué, however, was.

He'd been a jackass as far as I was concerned, so rather than any of the number of outfits he'd bought for me to suit the circles Eric ran with, I chose a knee-length red dress. It hugged my figure and with the way the neckline plunged, gave a good look at cleavage I knew Eric would frown upon. Whether or not I was playing with fire was a secondary concern of mine. I just wanted...fuck, I didn't know. I wanted it to be known that I wasn't happy with the way I'd been treated, and Eric would see that first hand, loud and clear, when he saw me.

And if Jeff's reaction to seeing me when he picked me up from my apartment was anything to go by, then I was on the right track. His eyes were wide by the time I slipped into the backseat, and he cleared his throat when he realized that I noticed that he was staring.

"Miss Greene," he said, nodding his head politely. "Good to see you again. Are you sure you're...ready for me to take you to meet Mr. Maxim?"

I gave him the sweetest of smiles. "Of course, Jeff. Why wouldn't I be?"

He seemed to be momentarily flustered by my rebuttal, then quickly recovered. “No reason, Miss. Just making sure, as usual,” he finally replied, then shut my door, got behind the wheel, and pulled away from the apartment.

Jeff had never before asked me if I was sure I was ready to meet Eric. The fact that he thought, or rather knew, my dress might displease Eric would have made me laugh if I cared enough. I was in a mood, and unfortunately for Eric, he was going to bear the brunt of that mood as I saw fit.

When we arrived at the venue, I knew that Eric would be waiting for me. If it was Jeff that picked me up, he always alerted Eric when we were on the way, so that he could escort me in. Usually, he seemed excited, in his own reserved way, to see me. I had to wonder if Jeff gave him the heads up about my appearance before we arrived, however, because Eric was exactly curbside, and he looked stone-faced as Jeff pulled up beside him.

That unreadable expression remained as he opened the door for me and saw me. “Jasmine,” he said, almost through his teeth, like he had his mouth clenched on something tough.

I put on my best ‘fuck you’ smile, slipping my hand into his own outstretched one as he helped me out of the car. “Eric,” I said, my own voice candy coated and indifferent. “It’s good to see you again.”

His expression faltered just a little there at my tone, before his mouth settled back into a disapproving frown that delighted me. “What are you wearing?”

“Clothes,” I said, deadpan.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “Yes, but why these clothes?”

Such an obtuse man, and the fact that he hadn't yet realized the reason why I was being so defiant only upped my current rebellious behavior. I looked directly into his eyes, even knowing I was risking his ire before we walked in to the gallery. "Is there something wrong with the way I'm dressed, Eric?"

His eyes roamed over my frame, a mix of confusion and frustration passing over his handsome features as he looked back at me. "Was I unclear in what you were to wear tonight?"

I shook my head, and gave him a slight shrug of my shoulder. "Nope. You were perfectly clear."

He had the fucking gall to look shocked. "So you dressed like this on purpose?"

My own anger finally crested and spilled over. "Dressed like what, Eric? Like an escort? Like a person you're paying to come to these little events whenever your whims desire? Like a whore?"

The spiel came out of my mouth before I could stop it, but all the agitation, hurt, and disappointment that had plagued me for weeks spewed out in that little tirade, the vitriol of my feelings forcing themselves from within for Eric to feel, too.

Eric seemed taken aback, and additionally, more displeased than he had been before. He must have been banking on me being confused about his wardrobe request as opposed to being outright defiant of his stupid rules, but that was going to be his problem, not mine. According to our contract, my one and only job was to stay by his side, make decent and intelligent conversation, and make him look good.

That, I could do, so I slipped my arm in his and looked at him expectantly. "Shall we, Mr. Maxim?"

He did not justify my question with a response.

Eric led us up the stairs and into the venue, which was styled after old Roman architecture with arches and pillars set into the building. It was not the gallery that these investors were putting their money and time into, but it was large enough to cater to them all and show off some of the pieces of sculpted works that would eventually call the gallery their home.

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It was not necessarily Eric's first choice in venue—his first choice would have been the gallery itself—but another investor had insisted and used his money and charm to secure it. I knew this, because it was something that Eric had spoken about before, when we had initially met and he had been explaining the various events I would be expected to accompany him to. I wondered if he realized that I had actually paid attention to those details, or if he just assumed I'd discard those facts since he was so easily capable of doing the same thing.

We said nothing more to each other, but the tension between us was now palpable. Even though I was cordial and put on a smile, I wondered if others could feel that conflict, too, as we walked by. I wanted that to be the case. To make it impossible for Eric to ignore my feelings or hide behind his carefully constructed veneer of being totally in control of everything at all times. A part of me wanted to shatter that control, but he remained just as cool and stoic as ever.

Maybe that's why, unlike other events we'd attended together, Eric didn't go out of his way to introduce me to people. If someone approached him, he would merely call me his date, but I could tell that even doing that much was uncomfortable for him.

Each time I put on a wide smile, though. Told the person my name. Really emphasized that I was here with Eric and even fawned over him, which I knew he hated. I didn't push any farther than that, but it was enough that I could practically feel his temperature rising beside me with each new interaction, until he finally pulled me out of sight of other people, behind one of the massive pillars that served as form and decor for the venue.

“What are you doing, Jasmine?” he asked, his tone sharp and his eyes flaring with

displeasure. “I don’t understand why you’re acting like this.”

My heart withered a bit, but I held tight to my own indignation. “Well, that makes both of us for not understanding how the other’s acting,” I snapped back. “I’m just trying to have a good time, Eric. You want me here to be something pretty on your arm, that’s what I’m doing, isn’t it? If you’re not happy with me, you could ask someone else to come with you—”

“My, my,” came a male voice from behind us. “I had heard that Eric Maxim had someone pretty on his arm tonight, but I would have never thought that it was Jasmine Greene.”

The both of us straightened at the intrusion, though I had to be the only one whose spine went cold at the familiarity of that voice. When I looked over and verified who it was, that chill turned straight to ice.

James Dupont used to be a client of mine—one of the first after I became an escort under Dominique’s wing. He was, in a word, a bastard. Far too possessive to warrant dealing with, and while arrogance was something that ran in most of the circles of the men that I entertained, James’ conceit bordered on dangerous. He had a quick temper for a slighted ego, and what was worse, he didn’t like being told no, to anything, even on clauses that were negotiated in contracts and were one hundred percent a no-go.

What the hell was he doing here? I didn’t have time to deal with him and Eric’s shit, too.

Eric pulled away from me, though he stayed at my side. I would have clocked it as protectiveness if it weren’t for the fact that I couldn’t convince myself, even in this, that Eric cared that much about me.

“James,” Eric said stiffly. “I didn’t realize you knew Jasmine.”

“Knowing is a bit of a stretch,” I interjected.

James smirked, a toothy grin showing off what were abnormally pointed canines, giving him a wolfish appearance. “I think that’s a little harsh, don’t you, Jasmine?” His gaze all but undressed me as it flitted down my body with a familiarity that made me nauseous. “We got along just fine with each other a while back,” he said, looking to Eric. “You know what I mean, right?”

Yep, still a raging asshole.

Eric’s eyes narrowed just so at James’ offensive words and tone, but he looked down at me rather than keep that scrutiny on James. Another round of annoyance coursed through me; was it somehow the problem? In this world, it was ridiculous to think I hadn’t escorted for anyone in Eric’s social circle, except Eric. That wasn’t how this worked.

Then again, James hadn’t liked client overlap, either.

“I’m Eric’s date for tonight,” I said clearly. “That’s all.”

“Hmm. I’m sure.” Smirking, James slid another look to Eric. “Dinner’s almost ready. I expect you and Jasmine will be there, too? I hear catering is planning something delicious for all of us. Lots of imported meats and desserts.”

Eric shook his head. “No. We’re leaving early.”

This was a surprise to me. Eric never left venues early, not since that first one, but that had been under very different circumstances than this. Was another man having known me really enough grounds to do that?

James seemed to delight in the obvious tension between Eric and me. “But the

investors—”

“Can tell me all about their thoughts in an email,” he said through clenched teeth. “We’re leaving.”

Eric took my arm, no room for protest as he led me out of the venue and back out to the parking lot. We’d been here barely an hour, maybe a little over it if I was being generous, and suddenly now we were leaving?

“What’s your problem tonight, Eric?” I asked as he typed away on his phone—presumably calling for Jeff to come get us unexpectedly early. “There was no reason for us to leave so soon.”

“There are plenty of reasons,” he muttered irritably. Finally, he put his phone away and looked at me. “I didn’t expect you to know someone like James.”

The accusation in his voice stung. “So, you can know him, but I can’t have worked for him before? You seem to know him well yourself.”

“He’s the reason the venue was here instead of the gallery,” he said in a harsh tone, indicating there was some kind of bad blood between the two. “We’re not close.”

“And you think that James and I are close?” I asked incredulously. “Just because I worked for him before?”

“Working for someone doesn’t mean you didn’t get close.”

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Again, more assertion in his tone. I bristled, about to snap at him when Jeff pulled up with the car. He stepped out, opening the back door for us.

I gave Eric a glare before slipping in, Eric following not long after.

“Shall we head to your place, sir?” Jeff asked, which had been our normal routine before the weekend with Eric’s parents.

“Yes—”

“No,” I said, cutting off Eric, pissed that he’d even make that assumption when I was so fucking furious with him. “Take me to my apartment. Mr. Maxim and I won’t be staying with each other tonight.”

Eric sighed, and Jeff looked between the two of us with an uneasy glance before shutting the door and getting back into the front of the car. He started the vehicle, driving off with the strained silence stretching between Eric and me.

CHAPTER 15

Jasmine

I looked out the car’s side window, content to say nothing more to Eric since clearly everything about me was wrong tonight, from my clothing and defiance (which admittedly was intentional) to my associations with James (not intentional at all).

But Eric couldn’t leave well enough alone. “Is this because I haven’t spoken to you

since our last meeting?” he asked.

Meeting? Is that what he was calling that wholly intimate weekend together? I turned my head toward him and hid my hurt with a scoff. “You can’t even say what it was outright, but you expect me to answer you?”

He sighed, the sound rife with exasperation. “You’re being immature.”

That lit me up. “You fucking ghosted me!”

“I don’t think that’s what I would call it,” he said, too calmly, too rationally.

“Oh? You wouldn’t?” I refused to let him off easy, when I’d suffered for the past month. “So, after dragging me across the country, having me tell you shit about myself no one else knows in response to trying to help you with shit no one else knows, you don’t speak to me and you cancel all our arrangements, that’s not ghosting?”

“I kept paying you.”

“Because that makes it so much better and eases your conscience, doesn’t it? And then this—” I indicated my outfit, my agitation building even more. “Fine, I broke guidelines by dressing like this, but I don’t need you having a conniption fit about me knowing someone that runs in your circles because of work. I’m an escort, Eric. The likelihood that I’ve fucked all of your colleagues is a lot higher than you having fucked all of mine.”

“I—”

“And you know what,” I went on, refusing to let him get a word in edgewise. “It’s really fucking shitty that after all this time of you not talking to me, the most emotion

that you show me is because one, I'm dressing like the thing you pay me to do, and two, because of a confirmed association with someone else. You don't own me because I work for you. You can't just do whatever you want to do and put me through an emotional wringer just because you pay me. That's fucked up."

"Jasmine—"

"What!?" I nearly screeched, the hurt inside of me bubbling to the surface.

Eric sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, as if my tirade had given him a headache. "I swear, this is ridiculous."

God, he was such a fucking man. "Yeah, imagine being me."

From the front of the car, Jeff cleared his throat. "Uhm...we're at Miss Greene's. Shall I..."

"I'll let myself up," I said abruptly, done with everything and everyone for the evening. "Good night."

I let myself out of the car, not waiting for Eric or Jeff to get out and come around, but doing so myself. Coming out tonight had obviously been a huge mistake and to be perfectly honest, I questioned whether or not my little act of defiance was worth it. I'd let myself slip past the emotional barrier that I had always kept up for myself, and what it was getting me was nothing but bullshit and heartache.

I was content to storm up to my apartment and spend the rest of the evening on my own, but Jeff had other ideas and decided to escort me, anyway. I heard the car door close behind me as I trekked to my building, along with the sound of shoes padding a few feet behind me.

But it was Eric's voice that called out to me. "Jasmine, wait."

"Leave me alone, Eric," I said, ignoring his request. "You're very clearly good at leaving people alone. For weeks. With no word. So do me a favor and go back to doing that because right now I have no time or patience for you."

"Jasmine, if you would just calm down and let me explain—"

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We started up the stairs leading to my apartment, but I didn't let up. "You could have explained things weeks ago. You talk about mature, that would have been the mature thing to do. But you expect me to act like nothing happened? What kind of horse shit is that, Eric?"

"I'm not saying ignoring you was the right thing to do," he said, sounding almost apologetic as I unlocked my apartment door and stepped inside. "I'm just saying I've had a lot going on in my mind and it's a lot of shit I have no idea how to compartmentalize or process or even talk about—"

"Talk about it?" I finally whirled around, unleashing another bout of my wrath on him. "You couldn't talk about it? What do you think anything that I said that weekend was easy to talk about? But I did, because you needed it, because I thought that us together like that and opening up like that was the thing to do because...fuck, I don't know, we're friends, or something? I talked about things that are still too painful to even talk about with Dominique, so don't give me that too hard shit, Eric."

Eric simply stared at me. Had the nerve to say not a damn word while he looked me in my face. It took a special kind of audacity, to be a man like that. To look a scorned woman in her eyes when she was fuming, when she... fuck, when she was hurt to the core, even if she wouldn't dare say those specific words to him.

But what was I supposed to do? Act like I wasn't utterly disappointed, devastated even? Like there wasn't some part of me that desperately needed him to say something? Like maybe an apology to start?

My nostrils flared, eyes narrowed on him, and he kept that calm, cool gaze that

burned and spurned me all at once and just made me even more irate, even if it also made the pit of my stomach warm with an unexpected flutter.

He stepped in, and I stood my ground, even as his advance put him in my personal space, nearly chest to chest if I'd actually had the height for my own chest to touch his.

Wordlessly, he reached behind him, pushing the door of my apartment closed. His eyes never left mine. "Where is your bedroom, Jasmine?"

Admittedly, his unexpected request startled me, but I didn't budge. "Why do you need to know where my bedroom is? We can talk right here. In fact, open that door. Let the neighbors hear the conversation for all I care, Eric."

He scoffed, just faintly, though there was an inkling of a smirk that tugged at the corners of his mouth, arrogant fucking man. "Where is your bedroom, Jasmine?"

This time, his voice was silken smooth. Deep. So damn seductive and I hated that my traitorous body was already starting to respond to that alluring tone.

I wanted to tell him to go fuck off somewhere, but just as much as I wanted to do that, I craved what that tone would lead to. What delicious, beautiful dangers that would bring me. Funny, any other man I would caution what he would do to me, like this. Yet with all the darkness in Eric's tone, in his eyes even, I trusted where this might lead, because I trusted him.

Not with my heart—no, not that—but with my body.

And right now, my traitorous body craved his, despite the wringer he'd put me through tonight. Hell, the past month. I wanted the release of all the tension bottled up inside me that I knew he could give me. I wanted the kind of rough, unrefined

angry-fuck that was filled with aggression and hostility.

None of that slow and gentle and intimate shit. Right now, I knew that wasn't what he was offering.

I didn't answer him. I merely scoffed and turned my back to him. I led him through my apartment, a shorter distance from the front door to my room than the expanse of his penthouse, for sure, but it made it so I didn't have to wait long—and neither did he.

As soon as we were inside, his hand was on the back of my neck. A sure grip, one that sent a shiver down the length of my spine as he turned me. He didn't even have to use force. Just the presence of his fingers at my nape, the underlying strength that I felt there, in that grip. It was a silent command to my body to comply, and I did.

Facing him, his expression was composed. Almost like we hadn't been arguing so heatedly. A man with so much control over himself...why was it so tempting right now? Why did it make me vibrate with need even though I was still so goddamn furious with him?

“Take off your clothes, Jasmine.”

I wet my lips with the tip of my tongue as I lifted my chin. “And if I don't?”

He didn't reply to my defiant challenge, not verbally anyway. Eric tilted his head, brow raised, as though contemplating himself what he would do if I didn't obey. His hand left my nape and slid around to my throat. I was only allowed a soft gasp at the firm pressure against my pulse.

He leaned closer to me. “I said...take off your clothes, Jasmine.”

His hand remained there at my throat, a warm, steady presence. Entranced, more than I had initially expected to be, I didn't hesitate to comply. I kept my eyes on his as I reached around and undid my zipper, then slid my arms out of my dress sleeves. There was so little fabric, the slinky material fell so easily off my frame. Pooled at my feet, it stayed there; his intensely sexual gaze kept me rooted to the spot. I didn't even step out of it.

"Allof it, Jasmine." His voice was calm, the demand in those words not so much.

With him, my obedience in the bedroom came as naturally as breathing. No bra, I was already bare chested. So it was me leaning down, straining against the pressure created by Eric's hand on my throat. He didn't move. Face placid as though he were waiting around for a gallery to open. As if, almost, he were merely looking at an incredibly boring piece of art.

My fingers brushed just inside my thighs—damp with my arousal—as I pushed my panties down, let them fall into the pile between my legs. When had I gotten so wet? When he took my throat in his hand? Or before that, even, when we were arguing?

It started there, I concluded. That damned argument damning me to this place, right here. Ire and arousal were so easily made friends, even in the tamest situations. This, what Eric and I were doing? Was hardly tame. It was the farthest thing from tame, and that's how I wanted it.

When I was completely bare, only then did Eric's fingers slide away from my neck. Oh, so slow. A lingering phantom caress. He'd ceased touching me, but I knew I was to stay where I was.

His eyes flared with a scorching heat as he took in my naked body. "You're so beautiful, Jasmine. So goddamn headstrong. I like that about you, but you know what your problem is?" He leaned in, nuzzling his nose against my neck, inhaling deeply

of my scent. “You clearly haven’t learned my expectations. It’s alright. We’ll figure it out together. As long as it takes.”

Before I could say anything, even think to say anything to defy him, he had his hand on my throat again, pushing me back onto my bed. My upper half fell against the plush comforter, my legs hanging off the edge. Eric shoved my feet apart with his shoes, then moved between my spread thighs, keeping them wide open to his avid, hungry gaze.

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I wasn't a shy person, but being exposed before him like this sent an electric heat through me, made the tips of my breasts furl into tight, hard points. I wore nothing, and he had yet to touch his clothes. To even give a hint that he was going to remove them at all.

Grabbing my thighs, he yanked my ass to the edge of the mattress, forcing my legs wider apart against his hips, until my pussy pressed against the fly of his slacks, forcing me to feel the hardness of his cock beneath layers of clothing. My insides clenched with the thought of him thrusting into me like this, with his hand on my throat, the force of it weighing me down as he ravaged my pussy.

Instead, he stared down at me. His head, tilted in contemplation. Was he as affected as I was? Did his body burn like mine did? I desperately wanted to know. Wanted to see a crack in that cool, composed façade of his.

“Eric...” I breathed.

Aching, pulsing, needing to be filled, I reached toward the thin leather belt around his waist. I barely touched the buckle before Eric snatched my hand. He gathered both of my wrists, yanked my arms above my head, and pinned them to the bed with one of his hands while he loomed over me.

“You touch when I tell you, you can.”

Before I could say anything—protest, beg him to let me touch him because I desperately needed to feel him under me too—he sank the two fingers of his free hand inside of me. I gasped, writhing against Eric's hand as he stroked the pads of his

fingers against a swollen, sensitive mass of nerves just inside me.

He held me pinned there. One hand gathered my wrists above my head, and the other wreaking havoc inside me. Strumming that bundle of nerves. Driving me wild. I couldn't think straight, only beg in my mind and with the babble that spilled from my lips that he wouldn't stop. That he would do more. That he would let me do more—

“That’s it,” he cooed at me, a rich satisfaction in his tone. “It’s intense, isn’t it? I can see it on your face. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you, Jasmine—at my pace. When I’m ready, not when you demand it. I think it’s a lesson you’ll learn and learn well by the time I’m done with you.”

Nothing could prepare me for how Eric went at me and it was just his goddamn fingers. They reached deep where no one, not even my own self who knew my body in every way, had ever done. The sensation he created was a deep, constant onslaught of pleasure that made my legs quiver. He had me laid out, thighs spread wide, back bowed as I panted and writhed, while he found new ways to drive me wild.

I was a mess. Slick between the thighs and sweaty. It was filthy in the best of ways, and he kept driving me closer to orgasm, so goddamn close. The precipice was right there—

And then he fucking stopped and pulled his fingers out of me. I made a soft, mewling sound of protest, anguished that he’d leave me hanging like that.

“Do you want to come, Jasmine?” His voice was smooth like silk, and edged with too much satisfaction.

My answer was a soft whine, and I didn’t even care.

He chuckled, the sound more than a little wicked, as if my desperate need was

amusing to him. “Use your words, Jasmine. You were so good at saying what you wanted earlier.”

He still held my wrists to the bed, still had my thighs spread with him standing in between, and I gasped when I felt the head of his cock brush along my slick, sensitive flesh. He was still completely clothed, but had unfastened his pants and now he teased at my entrance, fooling me into thinking he’d push inside me if I raised my hips up against him.

He laughed darkly, forcing my hips back down with the insistent grip of his free hand. Back and forth, he slid his cock between my swollen pussy lips, a deliberate torture when I wanted that hard, thick shaft filling me up.

“I said, use your words, Jasmine,” he said, more firmly this time. “Don’t make me say it a third time.”

How the fuck was I supposed to use my words? I could barely use my thoughts to string words together internally, now he wanted me to make my throat and mouth work in unison? Couldn’t he see what I wanted, plain as day? That what I needed was release?

Of course he could. Just looking at his face, that controlled, yet lustful look in his eyes, told me all I needed to know about what was going on in Eric’s mind. He was fine with me like this, laid out beneath him as his plaything. Completely content to wait as long as it took for me to do what he demanded, keeping me in a state of overwhelming need until I complied.

My entire body trembled. “P-Please, Eric. Please. I want to come for you.”

“Good girl.” A devious smile tipped the corners of his mouth as he slowly drew the head of his cock along my clit once more. “You’ll get it—but only when I’m ready

for you to have it.”

Only when he was ready—even when I was ready now. Even though I whimpered and begged for it. But that didn’t matter when he finally released my wrists then gripped my hips in his hands, holding them steady as he thrust between my legs, anointing the length of his shaft along my drenched slit but not pushing inside.

“You feel so good, Jasmine,” he rasped as he stared down at where he was sliding through the mess between my legs. “So fucking hot and wet for me. You’re soaking your own sheets, all because you want me to let you come. All that hellcat and fire from earlier, and it’s all out the window. Do I need to put my foot down with you more often, Jasmine? Do I need to teach you, hands on, my expectations? Answer me.”

“I...I—” I cried out as the unexpected slap of his cockhead against my clit sent a jolt of pleasure through me—but not enough to ease the ache there.

“I wanted to talk,” I managed to choke out.

He raised a brow. “Hmm, I’m sure you did, arriving at my venue the way you did.”

Still dressed, he lowered his upper body over mine. He ground his hips against mine, a deep, guttural groan rumbling in his chest as he buried his face in my neck. “You’ll learn your lesson though, won’t you?” he asked, with another harder grind of his cock along my pussy that left me in despair when I didn’t answer him immediately.

“Fuck! Yes.Yes,” I yelled. “I promise I’ll be good next time.” Anything just to have him drive inside me and give me the release I craved so badly.

“Good girl,” he murmured, and sank his teeth into my neck as I clawed at the back of his jacket, wishing it was bare skin instead.

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He continued rutting against me, and I writhed beneath him, thrusting up against his cock, too, the friction finally giving me what I needed to scale my way right back up to the precipice of my orgasm.

“That’s it, baby. Come for me,” he ordered, lifting his head to stare down at me. “However many times you want. Just know I’m not stopping until I get my fill of you.”

Permission finally granted, the flood gates opened. My back arched and sparks ignited as I came apart, the drag of his cock all along every inch of my sex, against my clit, ignited deep waves of pleasure that made my entire body shudder beneath his.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, brushing the hair away from my flushed face with his fingers as he watched me fly apart, even as he continued thrusting faster, driving his dick back and forth through my now soaked pussy. “Absolutely fucking beautiful.”

Even as I came down from the high, he increased the rocking motion of his hips. His breathing grew harsh, his jaw clenching as he growled deep in his throat.

“Fuck,” he snarled, bracing himself on his forearms beside me as he lifted up, his hips jerking more erratically, then spurts of thick fluid streaking across my stomach as he came with a low, guttural groan.

His eyes closed, just for a moment as his orgasm ebbed and he caught his breath before they opened again, capturing mine. He kept me in that hold, smirking now as he moved his hips again, sliding his cock through the cum stained mess on my

stomach, then shifting lower, positioning his shaft right back between my legs again. Still shockingly hard, he slammed into me, stretching me in the most delicious, decadent way.

God, despite everything, I'd missed this. I'd missed him.

We groaned in unison at the sweet, sweet sensation of being together again like this. I grabbed onto his dress shirt, fisting the fabric in my hands as I locked my legs around his waist and rolled my lower body against his, still needing more.

"Harder," I begged shamelessly. "Deeper."

Heat and hunger and lust blazed in his eyes as he gave me what I wanted, fucking into me like a jackhammer. Relentlessly. Mercilessly. Nearly splitting me in two with the force of his driving, punishing thrusts that doled out equal pain, along with exquisite pleasure. Nothing else existed but Eric's body, his cock, his whole presence, burrowing deep inside of me, possessing and claiming all of me like I was his and his alone.

My head fell back as another round of bliss ignited deep inside of me and I spasmed around his cock, milking him, giving him every reason to follow me right over the edge. He wasn't far behind, cursing and groaning, his body shuddering through his own intense release, until he was finally spent and collapsed on top of me.

We lay in silence as our breathing returned to normal, and I closed my eyes and threaded my fingers through his hair, relishing this moment between us. After a while, he moved off me and went into the adjoining bathroom, returning with a warm washcloth. I let him tend to my sore flesh and clean me up, allowed him to pick up my boneless body, then set me back down at the top of the mattress so that my head was on the pillows.

I honestly expected him to leave after that, and wouldn't have been surprised if he had since nothing was really resolved between us. But instead, he quietly stripped off all his clothes, pulled back the covers so I could get beneath them, then joined me.

Without a word, he pulled me against his chest, and because I was so damn weak when it came to Eric, I nestled right in, like we hadn't spent a month apart. As if he hadn't shaken up my emotions in ways I wasn't sure how to put them back together again when it came to him.

I knew we'd have to have a proper conversation instead of the bickering arguments we'd engaged in this evening, but I felt too sated and relaxed and didn't have the energy to have that kind of serious discussion right then.

For now, I was happy having Eric beside me, and as he gently stroked my back and my eyes fluttered shut, it didn't take me long to drift away into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 16

Eric

It wasn't often that I found myself losing control of any kind, which I'd always seen as a weakness. But Jasmine had a way of stripping away my normal ability to remain cool under pressure and shook up my resolve in a way that no one ever had.

Then again, I'd learned in New York just how easy it was to unravel around her, to let all of the messy emotional issues that I'd always kept compartmentalized and under a tightly sealed lid, out into the open when those were things I did not discuss. With anyone.

There was something about Jasmine that was easy to open up to and trust, an undefinable something that stripped away my defenses and revealed vulnerabilities I

didn't like to think about or address—which I'd had in spades during our trip to visit my parents. It had been those irrepressible emotions she'd so effortlessly unlocked that had kept me in a chokehold for the past month, in turn making me keep my distance so I didn't grow even more fond of her than I already had.

There was no denying that night with Jasmine had left me feeling raw and exposed and shook me up in ways I hadn't been able to sort through. There had been a sense of panic afterward for laying myself so bare in front of her, and I was not a man prone to uncontrollable fear or anxiety.

I'd struggled with that "fight or flight" instinct, and the latter had won. Withdrawing from the situation, from Jasmine, had been the course of action I'd chosen to take. For me, it had been all about self-preservation, because I'd had no idea how to deal with the upheaval I'd felt after that very intimate night with her in New York. But in doing so, my selfish actions had hurt her, and that had been the last thing I'd wanted to do.

Looking down at her now, in the early morning light and curled so trustingly against my side, I knew I wanted to have more of a conversation today than the angry fucking that had transpired last night. Admittedly, that rough, unbridled sex had been a catharsis of sorts. A way of releasing tension and frustration and the confusion that had held me in its grip for weeks. Being with her again had felt so good, but I knew that sex was not going to resolve our underlying issues. And as difficult as it might be, mostly for me, she deserved an explanation for my distant behavior the past month.

I softly brushed her dishevelled hair out of her face, smirking at the slight, complaintive snort that left her. Gently, not wanting to wake her just yet, I eased away from her, keeping her on her side so she snuggled into her pillows and blankets, and headed out of her room.

This was the first time I'd ever been in her apartment. It was always my place, or a hotel near a venue. There was a warm, homey difference between my penthouse and this space that Jasmine had all to herself. There were pieces of art along her bedroom walls that, upon closer inspection, I saw were signed by her and dated seven or more years back.

She favored paint on canvas, it seemed. I smiled, fingers brushing over a piece that had splashes of neon against a pitch-black background. I remembered an idle comment she'd made during one of our earlier gallery dates that she no longer painted, and I wondered why when she was clearly very talented.

After perusing a few more images, I headed into the adjoining bathroom. I had no change of clothes, but washing off the remnants of last night's activities wasn't off the table. I showered, quick but methodical. Finished, I found a clean towel in her cabinet, dried, and made my way back to her room. She was still sleeping. I grabbed my boxers and slid them on, not bothering for now with the rest of my clothes before heading out again—toward the kitchen.

There wasn't a full-service kitchen in Jasmine's apartment, but there were plenty of ingredients to be found. Brown eggs, fresh vegetables, cheeses, spices when I dug through the spice rack, and bread on the counter that would toast well with some butter in a pan on the stove. Knowing how much Jasmine loved a hearty breakfast after an intense, passionate night, I set to work, enjoying the process. I think Jasmine had yet to get used to the fact that I liked to cook for her, and I realized that was in part the satisfaction that I got from doing it.

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Thirty minutes in, two fat, hot omelettes were ready and bursting with vegetables and melted cheese, along with a side of some salsa and ketchup, depending on what Jasmine would want to smother her eggs in when she woke.

Having things plated, I trekked back to her room. She'd rolled over, was still snuggled to the pillows, but seemed, at least, to be a little closer to consciousness as she stirred. I smiled and walked over to her bed, sitting at the edge and touched her shoulder.

"Morning," I murmured.

Her response? A grumpy grumble. I chuckled.

"Come on," I coaxed gently. "I made you breakfast. Full omelette, toast, coffee too."

"Mm...food?" That thought seemed to perk her up and she glanced over her shoulder at me. Her sleepy eyes peeked up at me through a curtain of charming bed head.

Somehow, I managed to hold in the urge to laugh. "Yes. Food. Come eat."

The notion seemed to appeal to her, and she nodded, rolling over as I grabbed a long t-shirt from her closet and returned just as she stood up, completely naked, an unstable wobble in her legs from last night's exertions.

"Fuck, I hate having muscles," she grumbled, and I laughed.

"I'm sorry about that," I replied, not sounding contrite at all for her weakened

condition as I pulled the shirt over her head and she punched her arms through the sleeves. “I’ll draw you a nice, hot bath after you eat, so that should help.”

She gave me a guarded, almost skeptical look, which I probably deserved after how I’d treated her the past month. “You don’t have to do that,” she said.

I touched her soft cheek and smiled. “I want to take care of you,” I replied, meaning it.

Something in her eyes softened, and I was struck with the realization of just how little she’d probably had of anyone tending to her needs since her parents’ deaths. How she’d been forced to become strong and self-sufficient at such an early age.

I set her up comfortably at the table, coffee poured and made the way she liked, food in front of her. The first few minutes were filled with the easy silence of eating—silverware tapped against dishes, the clink of ceramic mugs against the table when picked up and put down for a drink. Jasmine’s pleased hums at the taste of the food in front of her, and my own satisfied responses at getting fed, too.

About halfway through her omelette, Jasmine cleared her throat and looked over to me. “So, about last night...”

I didn’t dodge the topic, as she clearly expected me to do. “Yes...first off, I owe you an apology,” I stated, setting my fork down on my plate. “For not speaking to you. For leaving you hanging for a month and then not clarifying anything before asking you to last night’s venue. I should have explained my actions, and I didn’t. It won’t happen again,” I vowed.

Surprise flickered in her eyes, that I didn’t hedge or try to make excuses. “Oh. Uhm. Thank you.”

I nodded, and continued, because I was far from done. “What I did was wrong. All I can tell you is that after visiting my parents, after showing you a side of me I don’t just let people see...I needed to gain some of that control back. I felt out of sorts. I couldn’t decide if confiding in you was right, or if I had pushed a boundary that I shouldn’t have with you.”

She sat back in her chair, listening and not speaking, which made it easy for me to forge ahead. “It was so easy to let you in, Jasmine, and let you stay there once you were. There’s a difference in the way I have clinically handled my parents’ ailments and the way that you...comforted me. The way that you understood and allowed them to be human that I don’t usually get with this type of arrangement.”

The space between us grew quiet, still no words from her, not that I expected any when the blame for what I’d put her through laid squarely on my shoulders. “This thing between the two of us is something I’ve not done before,” I continued, digging deeper for the right words to explain things I’ve never had to acknowledge before. “I don’t have relationships; I invest in working women. I keep boundaries, because boundaries can be controlled, and I prefer my control.”

I reached out and set my hand over the one she’d rested on the table, needing that connection with her. “But you...you make boundaries malleable. You make them less tangible. Workable. And I did not know how to react to that, other than to brick it all up, cement it down, and hope there wasn’t a crack in the foundation.”

She stared at me, wide-eyed and mute as she digested my raw and honest confession.

“So, when I invited you out to last night’s event, I had made an assumption about how the evening would go. And it clearly did not go the way I imagined.” A faint smile flickered across my lips. “I felt confused, at the way you showed up. I didn’t know how to respond to the way you behaved. But then a part of me knew that I’d earned that treatment, and I didn’t know how to fix things without giving up more of

that control.”

I shook my head and exhaled a deep breath. “Last night, following you up to your apartment and what happened in the bedroom...that was me trying to maintain that control with you, but in a way that wasn’t building another wall between us. Rather, creating something where we were on the same page, if that makes sense?”

So many words, so much talking. Like the weekend visiting my parents, this was a lot. But I had not effectively communicated my feelings to Jasmine when I should have. When it was more than imperative that I let her know that I wasn’t angry, I was confused. I was trying to process the fluctuation of our dynamic. Admittedly, I was much better at action as I’d proved last night, though perhaps I still had some learning to do.

She smirked. “I like that dominate part of you, in the bedroom. But outside of it, I don’t like that tension between us.” Her gaze turned serious. “I don’t think either of us are great with words, but I should have just been upfront with you that I was upset that you’d stopped speaking to me instead of being so defiant last night in a public outing. I’m sorry about that.”

She looked genuinely contrite, and that was more than enough for me. “Do you think we can start over?” I asked.

Smiling, she turned her hand over beneath mine, and laced our fingers together. “I’d like that,” she said. “Very much.”

CHAPTER 17

Eric

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Fall was starting to settle in, and it was in that slightly cooler weather that I found myself more inclined to walk places. Granted, Florida seasons were nearly non-existent, but there was something that shifted in the air from the oppressive humid heat, mingling with the few fallen leaves from the trees that made café runs on foot far more enjoyable a task than they were in mid-summer.

Grabbing a coffee, I headed toward my office with earphones in my ears to block out the hustle and bustle of the early morning commuters who had the same idea that I did about getting out and about. I had a meeting later, but a few hours to myself that weren't beholden to business.

It was that lack of commitment to a task that had me strolling along at a slower pace than normal and noticing a familiar face in the window of an art café. Jasmine. It was surprising to see her on this side of Coral Gables, though in the venue itself, less surprising.

I came to a stop, contemplating whether or not to stop in and say hello. We had no engagements on the books until that weekend, and even though we'd worked through that first roadblock between us and things had returned to normal, I was still very careful not to contact her outside of contractual business dates that yes, most of the time led to pleasure.

This situation was different. She was here in her free time, in a casual setting, and that was something I didn't want to encroach upon. Certain boundaries with Jasmine were still important to me and helped keep my emotions in check when it came to her because I'd realized just how much this woman affected me. And those kinds of messy emotions were something I couldn't afford to indulge in. For my own sake, as much

as hers, because the reality of our situation was not conducive to romantic entanglements.

But despite knowing I ought to keep walking by and let her be, I entered the café before I could change my mind or question my motives—which were more than a little selfish because I genuinely enjoyed being around her. And really, what was the harm in saying hello?

Rather than typical café tables, there were individual or small group placements that had an easel, small container for supplies, and a mat for drinks and food bought from the adjoining café. All around, there were people painting, drawing, creating. Lo-fi music played on overhead speakers and the soft hum of conversation between the people sitting together made for a cozy, inspiring atmosphere.

I approached Jasmine where she sat, leaned over a medium-sized canvas propped up with an easel, with a thin paintbrush in her hand. She was wearing a soft pink t-shirt and faded jeans, and her hair was piled on the top of her head and held therewith a clip. She looked young, every bit of her twenty-four years—another obstacle between us that wasn't lost on me when I considered that we were both at such different stages in our lives. Hers was just starting out, really, and mine...well, I was set in my ways and wasn't in the position of offering someone like her the things she'd eventually want. Like marriage. And a family.

Eventually our arrangement would end, and eventually she'd find someone far more suited to making her happy.

That realization tightened my chest with what felt like regret, and I valiantly pushed that unwanted thought from my mind as I continued toward her table. For now, she was mine—even if only on occasion—and that was all that mattered to me.

Her tongue stuck out between her teeth, a cute expression on her face that told me she

was lost in thought, but enjoying what she was concentrating on. It put a smile on my face as I lightly drummed my fingers against the surface of her table.

“Room for another?” I asked, chuckling at the slight jump that she gave as I broke her out of her reprieve.

“Eric!” She pressed a hand to her chest, her eyes wide with surprise. “You scared the shit out of me! You’re lucky I don’t put paint on your face.” She wagged the paintbrush up at me.

Considering the lack of malice in her voice, I highly doubted that she would.

I smirked, taking a chair and sitting down across from her at her little table. She moved supplies out of the way, a hodgepodge collection of brushes, inking pens, pencils, and an extra notebook. There was a pleased flush on her face, the kind of coloring that begged to be reached out to and touched with tender fingers.

I managed to keep my hands to myself.

“So, this is where you’re finding yourself on your days off?” I asked in a wry tone, before taking a sip of my coffee.

“First time I’ve come here, actually,” she said, somewhat sheepishly. “I’ve passed by a few times, but never came in. I’ve been inspired lately, and I figured, might as well give it a shot at some point.” She shifted self-consciously in her seat. “I’ve uh...I’ve started painting again, and I’m glad I found some place outside of the apartment to do things. You know. Getting fresh air. Mingling with the public without having to actually mingle with the public.”

I chuckled. “An introvert tendency for someone who actually likes socializing.”

She made a face at me. “I like socializing, but when it comes to art, I like being totally in the zone without distractions,” she explained.

I inclined my head. “I hope I’m not distracting you by stopping in to say hello?”

A slight flush swept across her cheeks. “No, not at all. I don’t know what you have going on for the day, but you’re welcome to stay.”

I knew I ought to leave, but I found myself saying, “I can stay, for a while.”

Her smile was effervescent, hidden in seconds with the way she ducked her head, as though I wasn’t supposed to see the excitement on her face. I chuckled again and pulled out my phone. While I was here, I could do a little bit of work and answer some emails.

She returned to her canvas, and I found myself casting surreptitious glances at her, enjoying how she immersed herself in whatever she was creating on the easel in front of her. The expressions on her face were adorable, ranging from serious, to animated, to joyful as she tipped her head to one side, then another, as she studied the paint strokes she’d made. I decided, as we sat there together quietly, that I didn’t really need to answer emails. Not when my mind drifted in a different direction.

Pulling up the internet on my phone, I eyed her space, taking in her supplies while doing some searches on art sites. Hand-crafted brushes, custom mixed paints, canvases and papers and mixed media supplies...I may have, in the course of the hour that I sat there with her, gone overboard, but there was no such thing when it came to helping someone pursue the things that made them happy.

And right now, there was nothing but pure happiness on Jasmine’s face. I wanted to give her more of that.

When it was time to leave, Jasmine was still deep in her painting. She would likely be there for a while. I was tempted to rearrange my schedule and stay as long as she did, just for the sheer pleasure of it, but I had already taken as much time as I could spare out of my day.

I gathered my things, standing. She looked up at me, a flicker of disappointment in her eyes before it was whisked away. The expression settled a strange, regretful pang in the back of my mind, and before she could say or do anything else, I leaned down and pressed my mouth to hers, uncaring that anyone in the café might see.

The kiss was soft, ephemeral, but it was sweet in a way that made me groan quietly before pulling away. The soft yearning in her eyes reflected the sudden, rapid beat of my heart, and I knew that despite all my good intentions to maintain a professional relationship with her, I was starting to fail spectacularly.

Not that it changed anything between us.

“I’ll see you soon, Jasmine,” I said, stepping away while I still could. “Enjoy your painting.”

CHAPTER 18

Eric

My office was more a formality than something that I actually needed to have. A penthouse space in a business tower in Coral Gables, a receptionist that was polite and tended not to bother me. Meetings were conducted here, and it gave me a place that was quiet, where I could spread out papers and contracts and sometimes gallery blueprints I needed to peruse. I loathed taking work to my home, so it was a good option to have.

The downside was, as I did not own the building, I could not control who came and went, or who necessarily decided to call on me in person at this office.

It was the only reason James Dupont was standing just outside of my door, hassling my receptionist about seeing me. My jaw clenched at his arrogance, along with the fact that he’d arrived without a warning, which I did not appreciate.

It had been one thing to learn that he and Jasmine had been acquainted with each other. As Jasmine had told me, given her work, I couldn’t be too upset about the development, but there was something grating about the fact that James had been with her. That he knew her. That he, too, had indulged in her company. And it was

not jealousy that I wasn't Jasmine's first in this regard; it was that I found James utterly unworthy to even be in her presence.

I didn't bother to get up as my receptionist led him in, looking completely exasperated for having to deal with such a pretentious man. I looked across my desk at him, brow up, making sure my annoyance was evident.

"What are you doing here, James?" I asked, my voice as impolite as possible.

He smirked, a smarmy expression on his face as he strolled further into my office. "Eric. You don't have to sound so put out. Being peers, it's not a good look. But I'll just chalk it up to it being a Monday. You know how those go."

My jaw clenched so hard I was surprised my teeth didn't crack. "If I sound put out, it's because I've told you before that I want you to stay the fuck out of my personal spaces, but we're both aware of the fact that you have no respect for boundaries of any sort."

"I'm a go-getter, what can I say." He shrugged casually. "Being assertive in our line of business is, after all, imperative."

"I am in the business of art. You're in the business of being a jackass," I said in an irritated tone. "I'll say it only one more time. What do you want?"

Reaching the opposite side of my desk, he leaned over it, his fingers tracing the wood grain as he looked at me. "There's a beautiful piece of property I've had my eyes on for a while, that I had a deal lined up for. Not too far from the coast, a spectacular view of the ocean, five floor building, an abundance of glasswindows to let the sunlight in. Personally designed by the best architects this side of Orlando." He tapped his fingers against the surface of my desk, his eyes turning cold and calculating. "I had so many plans for the place and yet, when I go to finalize

everything, I come to find that the property has been bought outright already. The fact that you convinced them to break a contract with me was fucking disrespectful—”

“Your contract was barely a contract that needed to be ‘broken,’” I said, cutting him off. “If you had such an airtight contract, it wouldn’t have been so easy to put a better offer on the table and purchase the Shoreside property. That’s the one you’re talking about, right? The one you were going to charge outrageous prices for people to showcase their galleries there?”

James rolled his eyes. “Jesus Christ, Eric, you can’t be indignant about the way that I spend my money when we’re just as rich as each other. You have such a morality issue surrounding the way others spend their money—”

“I’d have less of an issue with the way you spent your money if it wasn’t monopolizing something that shouldn’t be monopolized.”

James and I ran in the same social circles because of our wealth, but he was nothing if not motivated by consumption. More, more, more. Women, cars, clothes, properties, money. As far as I was concerned, it was a heinous practice when it encroached into the art world, where his idea of propagating art was gatekeeping it from people who often created the best, most interesting, creative works that were out there.

So, I frankly didn’t give a fuck about James’ supposed lost contract.

I leaned back in my chair, my expression hard and uncompromising. “If all you stopped by to do was to complain about a contract that you clearly poorly constructed and executed, you can leave. I’ve done nothing illegal and since I haven’t been contacted by our lawyers, you’re well aware of that fact.”

I waited for him to exit my office, but James remained standing there. Despite me putting him in his place, he hadn’t lost the smug, self-aggrandizing smirk on his face.

“I didn’t just come over here for business, Eric. And contrary to what you might believe, I didn’t stop by to convince you to turn over that property you yanked out from under me,” he said, which sounded like a load of bullshit. “I came to congratulate you on that purchase, as well as another acquisition you’ve made.”

He waited, as if I was supposed to know what he was referring to, but the Shoreside property was the only thing that I had ‘acquired’ in any sort of meaningful capacity.

“Speak clearly, James,” I snapped impatiently. “I don’t feel like deciphering your petty comments like they’re Morse code.”

“Jasmine,” he said simply.

My eyes narrowed on him, furious that he’d even bring her into this conversation. “What about Jasmine?”

James rolled his eyes and found the nerve to sit himself sideways on the edge of my desk. “You were with her the other night. I know how you tend to operate when it comes to pretty women whose time you have to pay for. You only take the best. Invest in the best. Only make them a regular part of your routine if they prove themselves capable of handling your routine. I think it’s rather admirable. I wanted to know if she’s still seeking out clients. Never a good business move to put all your eggs in a single basket, am I right?”

James’ interest in Jasmine made my stomach churn. It was also enough of a red flag to make my hackles rise, which I knew he’d been anticipating. Remaining outwardly calm took effort as I asked, “What do you want with Jasmine?”

“Well, we go way back,” he said with a shrug. “I was one of her first clients when she started as an escort. We got to know each other well, and I taught her the ropes of this world and how it operated. A mutual exchange, really. You could say that it’s me you

should thank for how well she's servicing you." He smirked. "And I imagine that she's servicing you very, very well, isn't she?"

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My blood began to boil at the crass way he referred to Jasmine. “Fuck off, James.”

He snorted. “Ouch. So harsh, Eric. I’m just stating the truth to the question that you asked that night. The simple fact of the matter is, Jasmine and I have a history. Do you need to know the details? All the sweet nothings she’s told me between the sheets? All the fun little things that she didn’t know she liked until I was the one that taught them to her? The more intimate things? Her personal life? I wonder what the price for that sort of information would be to you.”

My eyes narrowed when I realized what James was doing. Using his previous relationship with Jasmine to exact his own petty fucking revenge for me buying the Shoreside property out from under him, despite him saying it didn’t matter. Stabbing the knife into my back and giving it a hard twist to make me bleed.

I gave him an impassive look, giving nothing of my feelings for Jasmine away, which would only give him more ammunition against me. “There’s nothing I want from you when it comes to Jasmine, James.”

“Really?” His brows rose in surprise. “You seemed so frazzled when I ran into the two of you that night. I assumed that you were having a little rough patch. Especially since she came dressed like, well, a whore. We all know your preferences for propriety in public. Though, when it comes to Jasmine, personally I feel the more skin showing, the better.” Another disingenuous smile curved his thin lips. “Was she being a brat? She has the talent for it, really. It was always so fun to put her in her place—”

I stood abruptly, refraining, just barely, from launching myself across the desk at him

and bashing his face in with my fist. “Get the fuck out of my office, James.”

“So rude for a man who’s known for his people skills.” He clicked his tongue and moved off my desk. “Say, when you’re done playing around with Jasmine, send her my way? It’s been a while and I want to catch up with her.”

“You’re an adult. Contact her yourself.”

A bright little glint flickered in his eyes, making me realize the grave mistake I’d just made with my callous reply. “I think I’ll do just that.”

I’d spewed the words without thinking them through, and there was no taking them back now that they were out in the air. There was no doubt in my mind that James would take the opportunity to do so, a blunder on my part, for sure. Fuck.

Looking too pleased with himself that he’d managed to get under my skin, James finally turned around and walked out of my office, leaving a sense of dread to settle in the pit of my stomach.

Knowing I had to do some kind of damage control, I pulled out my phone to send a text to Jasmine, which I never did unless it was work related. But this was too important not to discuss with her in person, and to warn her about James’ intentions. All I knew was that I had to protect her, because James’ vindictive personality knew no bounds.

I typed out the message, Are you free tonight?, and hit send.

CHAPTER 19

Jasmine

Holy shit. I stared at the three huge boxes that had been delivered to my apartment, all addressed to me. I hadn't ordered anything, and as far as I knew, Dominique hadn't sent me anything, either. It was nowhere near my birthday. There wasn't anything on the outside of the boxes to tell me who the secret gift giver might have been.

Opening them all up, though, now had my living room scattered with art supplies. Fine quality. Large quantities. Exquisite, expensive brushes from places I couldn't even pronounce. Gorgeous, hand-carved easels. Oils in nearly every color, acrylics, watercolors, premium papers, even multi-sized canvases.

It didn't take long to put two and two together to realize who was responsible for this delivery. Butterflies in the pit of my stomach fluttered. Eric must have placed the considerable order, but when would he have had the time to put together something like this? When we were at the art café? Is that what he'd been doing on his phone when I thought that he was focused on work?

I couldn't hold back the happy smile that made its way to my face. The excitement that coursed through me as I moved the boxes from my living room into my spare room—now an art studio—was one I couldn't contain. There were so many projects I could do. So many experimentations these supplies would allow me to try.

Clients had given me presents before, but there was something far more intimate and special in this gift from Eric. Usually, what I received was sexy lingerie. Extra “fun money” to do with what I wanted. Lavish dinners. Pieces of jewellery I really had no interest in. There was one point where I had gotten an all-expenses paid trip to Hawaii that I ended up giving to Dominique for her birthday because that long travel across the country hadn't appealed to me. Nothing that was quite so personal as art supplies that spoke directly to my heart, but then again, I had never let clients know about that side of me. I could appreciate art, understand it, but I never let them know that I too, created it, because for so many painful years it had been something that had been tied to the past. Quite honestly, the death of my parents had been the death of

my inspiration and creativity.

Yet...Eric had seen that side of me as I let it finally reemerge, out of the darkness and back into the light. And now, he was whole-heartedly indulging that passion of mine. Seeing below the surface of just being the woman who accompanied him on dates and occasionally warmed his bed.

Trying not to think too deeply about the whys of the gift, I lost myself in putting my new things away until my phone pinged with a text.

Are you free tonight?

It was from Eric. Simple and to the point, surprising me because he never requested to see me during the week, unless it was a scheduled event. Before I could stop the smile of anticipation from spreading over my face, it broke through. My answer was, admittedly, fast. A quick flurry of fingers over the phone's keyboard.

Yes, I'm free. What time?

His reply was swift. Two hours. My place? Dress comfortably. I'll have Jeff come by and pick you up.

Oh. His place and no dress code. That gave me pause. So, it wasn't an impromptu function. Or a date, because Eric and I did not date. We had a working relationship, but that had been the extent of our time together. The gears in my mind turned, because this wasn't normal behavior when it came to Eric and our arrangement. Seeking my company for something more casual was something he seemed to avoid. Or maybe this meeting wasn't casual at all and he wanted to discuss the terms of our contract, maybe even end it?

The thought of parting ways with Eric made my chest hurt, even though I knew it

would happen eventually. Still, I answered, unable to refuse this man anything. I'll be ready when Jeff gets here.

Trying not to overthink things, I jumped in the shower, then dressed in black jeans and a nice blouse with a pair of black leather boots. When Jeff arrived, I headed downstairs, slipped into the car, and rode in silence to Eric's building.

I took the elevator up to his penthouse, and when the doors slid open I stepped into the foyer, where Eric was waiting—thanks to Jeff alerting him to my arrival. He looked as though he'd just gotten home from the office, still wearing navy blue slacks and a crisp white dress shirt, though the sleeves were rolled up to his forearms.

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The first thing I noticed was that my excitement at seeing him was not met in kind. Eric had a pensive look on his face, a slight frown tugging at the corners of his mouth. I knew Eric well enough now to read his body language, and he told me that something important was troubling him.

The cheerful greeting that I had on my tongue dissipated as I prepared myself for whatever was about to happen. Trying to navigate his mood, I said nothing initially, though I wanted to thank him for the gifts and ask him what this meeting was about, but something gave me pause. Was it his parents? Had something happened to them? Was there something more? Was it me and something I did or didn't do?

Fuck it. The anxiety now swirling inside of me prompted me to speak. "Are you alright, Eric?" I asked as I followed him into the living room. The answer was obvious, he wasn't okay—but it was a far easier conversation starter than "what happened".

He sighed, turning around to face me as he shoved his fingers through his salt and pepper hair, mussing the already dishevelled strands, as if that wasn't the first time today that he'd tugged at his hair. "I wanted to talk to you in person about something," he said, his gaze searching mine—for what, I had no idea. "I know we don't have anything scheduled until next weekend, and I apologize for this being so out of the blue, but I assume you had time to spare today."

I nodded. "Yes, coming here wasn't a problem," I said, reassuring him.

"Good." Then, he tipped his head to the side, a faint smile making an appearance on his lips, chasing away the intense look in his eyes for a moment. "I received

notification that your paints and supplies arrived today. I imagine this is going to be eating into your art time.”

“Ahh, I thought those deliveries might have been from you.” I ducked my head, feeling my face flush. “Thank you—and no, I really wasn’t busy when you texted. I was just putting everything away when you messaged me. Nothing interrupted. But, I really love everything. I already have an idea for a few pieces I want to do.”

The haggard lines on his face managed to soften. “I’m glad to hear that. I wanted to make sure you had the best supplies and had enough to do whatever your creativity ended up guiding you toward.” He cleared his throat, suddenly looking uncertain, which wasn’t something he displayed often. “It wasn’t too out of place, was it? I didn’t want it to be an awkward gift, but I also didn’t want to ruin the surprise by telling you what I was planning to do.”

I shook my head, finding his concern endearing. “No, no, it was perfectly fine. Just unexpected, though I’m assuming that isn’t the reason you brought me to your place, to discuss art supplies.”

He rubbed at the back of his neck with his hand, his expression once again shifting back to being serious. “No, it’s not. As I said, there’s something important I need to discuss with you. It’s just...not an easy conversation to have.”

His hesitancy reignited my insecurities, and my mind raced back to our last few interactions. Nothing had been too out of the ordinary, yet that didn’t mean anything, either. Clients were fickle, and I’d learned that it didn’t take much of anything to prompt them to terminate an arrangement, which admittedly was my greatest fear with Eric—which had nothing to do with the monetary aspect of the situation, but the dread of not being a part of his life anymore. Which said far too much about my emotional connection to him than I even wanted to admit.

“Are you ending our contract?” I asked, preparing myself for the worst.

I watched his face carefully and saw the surprise that lit his eyes at my question. “Nothing of the sort. I just wanted to have this discussion more privately, where we could be comfortable.”

My brows rose. “My apartment isn’t comfortable?”

He let out a humorless laugh. “Well, when it’s put that way. It isn’t that. I suppose since this, to a degree, has to do with business, it feels like it makes the most sense to be at my apartment. Have a seat,” he said, waving a hand toward the couch while he settled into the chair adjacent to the sofa.

When I was situated, he exhaled a deep breath and looked me directly in the eyes. “How well do you know James DuPont, Jasmine?”

His question jolted through me. It was the last thing I’d expected, and just hearing the other man’s name made something akin to disgust crawl across my skin. “This is about James?”

He nodded. “Yes,” was all he said, and waited for me to answer.

“I mean...” I scoffed a little. “He was a client. That’s all.”

Eric’s gaze never wavered from mine. “And how would you categorize the way that your time with him went?”

I didn’t like the direction of this conversation, or his bold questions. I found myself bristling because really, was who I might have entertained in my past really any of his business? Especially when I remembered the judgemental way Eric had looked at me that night at the venue, when James interrupted our argument.

My back straightened, even though I didn't know what I was bracing myself for. "Why do you need to know, Eric?"

He stared at me, ambivalence etching his features before he spoke. "Because he came to my office today, making it very clear that he intends to extend an invitation to work with you again. I understand that he was a client of yours before, but I need you to understand that James is a cunning, disingenuous man whose intentions are, frankly, bullshit. He and I don't see eye to eye and it leads to a lot of conflict that I don't want you put in the middle of, or used as a pawn of some sort, because he likes having dick measuring contests."

I paled. I know I did—my body went cold with shock. James had gone to Eric's office? I dreaded what he may have told this man sitting in front of me. The kind of impression of me he would have tried to paint for Eric.

My belly churned, and I swallowed hard, my hatred for James growing. "He was one of my first clients, and I regret the fact that I ever took him on," I said, as evenly as I could manage, the words seemingly tumbling out of me. "Dominique told me I should be cautious with him, but since I was early on in my work with her, I was trying to build a client base. James was someone that came along when I thought I really needed him."

I gave a bitter laugh. "I should have listened to Dominique. James was normal enough, at first. Just what I would expect from a client, though we were never exclusive. He took me places. Bought me things. Lots of...sex. But then he started getting possessive. Keeping tabs on who my other clients were, following me when I wasn't with him, popping up at places he wasn't supposed to be, and generally exhibiting stalkerish type behavior. He even had inappropriate conversations with my other clients about what we did privately, like he was bragging."

"Fucking asshole," Eric said, the words escaping him on a furious growl.

Not wanting to see anything that might resemble pity in his eyes for my stupidity, I glanced down at my clasped hands in my lap and finished the story which, unfortunately, only got worse. “He was one of my highest paying clients, and I was new, and naïve—or rather, dumb—and put up with his shit because I thought it was part of the gig. But at one party, he managed to get me alone in a bedroom, and things got...intense. I wasn’t there with him as his date, and I could tell he was pissed and jealous that I was with someone else. I told him to leave me the fuck alone, and instead of letting me go he threw me down on the bed and... assaulted me, all the while calling me his whore and telling me that he makes the rules, not me, and I’d do well to remember that. It...it was not a consensual situation.”

The look on Eric’s face, I could only describe it as unbridled rage. In fact, his whole body seemed to vibrate with the intensity of his outrage. He said nothing, but his hands balled into fists, clenching and unclenching against his thighs, and a part of me knew that if he was in the same room with James right now, the other man wouldn’t have stood a chance.

“Dominique was at that party and she saw me return with James...afterward,” I said, trying not to remember the awful details of that night. “She immediately knew something was wrong, and once she got the truth out of me, she didn’t hesitate to take me to get a restraining order against him. But the cops of course were no use. Because I’m a sex worker, an escort, a call girl, whatever they wanted to call me, anything ‘sexual’ that transpired between myself and James was under the parameters of my work. And, of course, what happened in that bedroom...it would be my word against his.”

“Jasmine—”

I shook my head and cut him off, because if I didn’t, I wasn’t sure I could finish the story. “I might not have gotten a restraining order against him, but Dominique threatened to ruin him if he so much as came near me again. She has a lot of shit on bad people, and whatever she said to James finally made him back off. I know he wasn’t happy with the ultimatum, so yeah, there’s still bad blood between us, as well. That night with you was the first time I’d actually talked to him since Dominique put him in his place.”

Eric frowned. “He probably thought it was fine to approach you, under the guise of speaking to me.”

I nodded, because that made sense. “When I saw him at the gallery again, I had hoped that it was just a fluke. A coincidence, but if he’s going to you and making suggestions about me...”

“I can guarantee it was no coincidence,” Eric said with conviction, his jaw clenched tight. “James is calculating and devious. He doesn’t do anything without a purpose. He has no ethics or morals and right now my concern is that he’s going to try to use you somehow to retaliate against me over the fact that I bought a lucrative piece of property right out from under him. So, after the conversation I had with him, I’m concerned. About you. I’d like for you to stay as far away from him as possible because I don’t fucking trust him, not after what you told me he did to you, and honestly, you’re not the only woman that he has a reputation like that with.”

He hesitated, and something softened in his gaze as it met mine. “I want to make sure

you're safe, Jasmine. I care about you, and I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I didn't do everything in my power to make sure he never hurt you again, all because he just wants to retaliate for a business deal he lost out on."

Much to my chagrin, my throat grew tight, tears stung my eyes, and when one escaped, I swiped it away from the corner of my eye. I hated my emotional response, but I didn't think telling any other client I'd ever had about James would have led to this type of care and protectiveness Eric had just displayed, and I wasn't sure what to do with that. What had happened with James was collateral damage for an escort, something that came with the territory and most people just didn't give a shit what happened, consensual or not.

"Hey," Eric moved over to the couch I was on, sitting beside me. He reached out, gently cupping my cheek, his thumb brushing away the moisture along my lash line. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry."

"It isn't that," I said, shaking my head. "I'm used to a very particular response when it comes to shit like this. I'm used to people thinking that as an escort, it's all par for the course and something that I deserved because of what I do. I appreciate so much that you're not like that, Eric."

He smiled, leaning in. It wasn't a kiss, but a gentle nuzzle of his nose against mine. A soft, intimate caress. My heart fluttered in my chest as I looked into the clarity of his eyes.

"No matter what anyone else thinks, you're worth caring about, Jasmine," he said. "Remember that, always."

CHAPTER 20

Eric

Jesus fucking Christ. The guy had brass balls, that was for damn sure.

“Why are you in my office again, James?” I asked, my voice cold and hostile, not that I gave a fuck after learning what he’d done to Jasmine. It was all I could do not to pummel the shit out of him.

A little over a week after his first visit, the bastard had the nerve to stand across the room from me once again, a sly grin on his face as he leaned against my office door frame, oh-so-casually. Unfortunately, my receptionist had called in sick with the flu, which left the front end unmanned, and this asshole had waltzed right in as if he owned the place.

Pretentious, obnoxious fucker.

“I know it’s early, but I just wanted to come by and talk a little business with you,” he said with a shrug. “We are colleagues, after all, in the same circles. Is that so odd?”

My gaze narrowed on him. “After our last conversation, I wasn’t under any sort of impression that we needed to speak with each other further, honestly.”

James chuckled and finally moved into my office, clearly unfazed by my unwelcoming tone and comment. I exhaled a harsh, frustrated stream of breath, closing the file that I had out on my desk detailing a new art house project I wanted to fund.

“What do you want?” I asked again. “I’m busy.”

Stopping on the other side of my desk, he pushed his hands into the front pockets of his slacks. “I just stopped by to see if you received an email from my office about that Shoreside property we spoke about the last time that I was here.”

The fucking nerve of the guy. During his last visit, James had insisted he wasn't bothered that I'd acquired the property over him, that he was fine without Shoreside, but I'd known better. A man like James didn't like to lose, and he certainly didn't like being made a fool of while I'd snatched the prime piece of real estate right out from under him.

"As a matter of fact, I deleted the email without reading it because I don't give a shit what it might have said."

Indignation flashed in James' eyes, before he quickly concealed it. "I should have known. You could have just sent a polite decline, Eric. No need to be so rude."

"I think deleting the email was more politeness than you deserve," I said, leaning back in my leather chair, wanting him to feel small and insignificant after what he'd put Jasmine through. "My acquisition of the property is not negotiable. I've already secured it. I've already lined up a suitable selection of vendors for the venue. I have already scheduled an opening and several showings. I have nothing to gain from reneging on my contract, and quite frankly, I have nothing to gain by giving you the thing that you want the most because I don't fucking like you, James. So why the fuck are you here? Because surely you don't think that speaking to me in person is going to make me change my mind."

By the time I was done, a faint flush of anger suffused his face. He leaned over my desk, his hands resting flat on the top of it, a sneer on his lips. "We both know you have enough money that giving up the Shoreside property wouldn't hurt you. You're just entertained by scalping other people's business ventures, namely, mine. But it's bad for the economy, even worse for the flow of money in Coral Gables, and ultimately that's what I care about—"

My harsh laughter cut him off. "The irony here is that you're implying that I seed enough money into the flow of Coral Gables' economy when it thrives because of the

investments I make into its culture is monumental.”

James gave me a tight lipped smile. “There would be more money and profit being made if you weren’t practically giving it away hosting these fucking poor people you’re always entertaining in the galleries. You don’t make them rent spaces, people spend so much on their pieces that the artist’s profit is one hundred percent, and you have them ‘pay it forward’ as something optional—”

“Almost all of the artists pay it forward because they see the value in helping the artistic community overall,” I countered. “Stop embarrassing yourself, James. You’ve got enough money that this tantrum of yours is frankly, making you look desperate. There are plenty of properties all up and down the Florida coast, and especially in Coral Gables. You don’t need the Shoreside property.”

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James' nostrils flared as he took a measured breath in. It gave me pause—not because his frustration threatened me, but that he had the frustration at all. James was not a man to unravel in the manner in which he currently seemed to be. He was far too cocky and arrogant to show that kind of weakness—so what was going on?

I carded my hands over my desk, head tilting as the realization hit me. The reason why James wanted Shoreside so desperately. “You need the property because you’ve fucked up somewhere along the way and that property is the key to getting you out of a mess of your own making, isn’t it?”

That theory seemed to touch a nerve with James, giving me my answer. A vein popped at his temple, and his jaw clenched. “I don’t fuck up.” He pushed away from my desk, straightening his back. “I’m sure you’ll be seeing me around. You have your hands on things that I want and we just can’t have that now, can we?”

Not just the Shoreside property, now he was intimating Jasmine. I all but bared my teeth at him. “We’re done here, James. Get the fuck out of my office.”

James stormed out, clearly pissed off, not that I cared—unless he dared to approach Jasmine in any way, then all bets were off.

Once he was gone, I immediately sent an email to a security firm I did business with, one that had an investigative division that conducted deep dives into all sorts of people and ventures. I told my contact exactly what kind of details on James I was looking for, then all I had to do was sit back and wait for the report.

It didn’t take long, which was the beauty of having them on retainer. Before noon, I

received files that provided in-depth information on the business ventures connected to James' name. The properties and buildings he'd acquired over the past few months riveted my attention the most, all prime locations, fronted with huge amounts of cash. The amounts weren't necessarily the problem, not for someone like James. It was the fact that the real estate had been paid with cash, but that money couldn't be accounted for or traced.

More digging into James' records revealed something equally interesting, that he seemed to be in a massive amount of debt. There were numerous lines of credit, refinanced mortgages, and the like, upwards of five million dollars. I couldn't help but wonder, was he in debt because he was randomly buying up properties, or was he buying up properties because he was in debt? If he planned to do something with those buildings and use the revenue to pay off his debts...

Whatever the case, James was in a distinctive money bind, and the Shoreside property I had purchased for the new art space was worth the most—it would have turned over the most profit if he had decided to turn it into a cash making machine. It would have been the smart thing to do if someone was angling for a steady cash flow, that was for fucking certain.

Satisfied with what I'd discovered, I saved a copy of the files to peruse in more detail later. I might have found the leverage I needed to get rid of James, at the very least ammunition to show him who held the ultimate control so that he'd think twice about crossing paths with Jasmine, or even myself, again.

He'd started this war, and I planned to win it.

CHAPTER 21

Jasmine

Much to my relief, I didn't see James after talking with Eric. A few days of looking over my shoulder just in case I was being followed when I left my apartment, then a week passed and...nothing. Eric never said explicitly that he would keep James away from me, but he hadn't had to for the fact that James hadn't come by my place or cornered me in any of the other businesses that I frequented, either.

I hoped that maybe the whole entire thing with James had been a false alarm. A misunderstanding between two men—one a narcissist, and the other incredibly protective of me who clearly wanted to make sure I was aware of my surroundings at all times. Just in case.

I sat in the spare room I'd tuned into my art studio, happily inspired as I immersed myself in my newest painting, set up with everything Eric had bought me. I had several easels outwith paintings drying from the last few days, and a dozen more propped against the walls. It seemed my creativity knew no bounds and I was delighted that my return to art was so effortless.

Eric had said he was busy with office work for the week but wanted me to relax and enjoy myself between our next meetings. So I did just that, content to be surrounded by color, by texture, by the things in my imagination made real by the pigments, brushes, and tools that transferred them to canvas.

This was the first time in years—since before my parents' death, actually—that I felt this kind of peace. My ease came so naturally, and I chose to revel in it, really let it sink in and settle in my bones. Music played in the background and I absently hummed along with the songs. There was a pep to my metaphorical step and I knew, for the most part, Eric was responsible for that.

So caught up in what I was doing, I almost didn't catch the fact that my cell was ringing. I heard it, a faint sound under the music. I cursed softly, setting my brush absently into the mason jar of paint water and jumped up to get the phone before I

totally missed the call.

I smiled when I saw Eric's name on the display. I was also surprised because he didn't normally call during the day and I had that moment of wondering if everything was okay. A part of me hated that ours wasn't a normal relationship, one where I could pick up the phone and call Eric just because I wanted to hear his voice, or I had a funny story to tell him, or anything else.

Despite the fact that I'd been with Eric for over four months now still didn't give me those privileges that I wanted more and more with each passing day. It didn't help matters that the previous weekend, after attending an event together, we'd headed back to his place and after a round of hot sex when I'd teased him about his age and stamina—which the man truly had no issues with—the topic had somehow turned to the age gap between us. Twenty-two years to be exact.

It had been a playful conversation at first, then more serious. I never really considered Eric's age as any kind of deterrent, but he clearly considered mine one. The fact that I was so young, and he was...seasoned clearly bothered him. A man in his forties who was used to living a certain way, did not see marriage or children in his future, and had even had the nerve to say to me, if you ever want to end our contract to pursue someone younger, I understand.

Yeah, that stung. He wasn't letting me go, but it was clear that he had no intention of keeping me forever, either. There was still an expiration date to our arrangement, while I kept falling deeper in love with him. And even though I knew that someday I was going to end up with a broken heart, I couldn't bring myself to end things before he did. I wanted to cherish every single moment I could get with Eric, even while a foolish part of me hoped that maybe, somehow, he'd realize that despite our age differences, we really were perfectly matched.

The phone rang again, jarring me back to the present. Swallowing the knot in my

throat, I connected the call. “Hey, Eric,” I said in a neutral tone. “What’s up?”

His answer was a heavy sigh. “A lot. I know that this is last minute and unplanned, but may I come over?”

There was a weight to his tone that I didn’t expect. Granted, things seemed a little more tense these days after the run in with James—or maybe just more tiring with the amount of work Eric had on his plate.

I checked the time. He’d be going to lunch by now. “Uh, sure. Will you have time to get back to the office if you do? I can come to you—”

“No. I’m taking the rest of the day off,” he interrupted. “I just—I would like to see you.”

The slight desperation was another surprise, and I didn’t hesitate to agree. There was nothing in my universe more important than any time I could spend with Eric. “Of course.”

Seeing that I had enough time to clean up around my projects and get a shower in before Eric came over, I did both. About forty minutes later, I was out of the bathroom, drying off, when a knock sounded at my door.

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I knew that it was Eric by the way that he knocked. The cadence was the same every time, and I opened the door in just my towel wrapped around my body. He pushed inside, closing my door behind him. Before I could say a thing, he had his mouth on mine.

There was no stopping my moan, or the way I responded to this man, but I was very aware that something was off. He seemed frazzled even in the way that he kissed and held me. His hands tightened on my body like he expected me to slip through his fingers like sand. I breathed hard, taken off guard by the combination of lust and concern.

Before he completely distracted me, I put my hands on the sides of his face, pulling him away and looking into his eyes. “Eric, is something wrong?”

He shook his head, denying whatever had put that furrow between his brows. “Just let me have nothing to think about for a little bit, alright?”

When Eric kissed me again, I didn’t stop him. Instead, I let my towel fall to the floor as he grasped my ass in his hands and picked me up. I wrapped my legs around his waist and kept our lips joined as he carted me to my room and set me on the bed while he quickly stripped out of his own clothes.

Naked, his cock fully erect, he climbed on top of me, and I eagerly spread my legs to make room for him in between. Without preamble, he lined himself up and drove into me with a long, hard, deep thrust that fused us together completely.

I gasped in pleasure, and he groaned in relief—as if just being inside of me was

enough to calm whatever chaos he was currently dealing with.

Sex with Eric had always been intense. He had this way of completely eclipsing every feeling, thought, the very experience, with himself. This time was no different, but there was a crucial need in him that underpinned those sensations. He stretched my arms above my head, holding my wrists to the mattress, shuttling his cock in and out of me in a hurried, almost frantic rhythm.

I let him have all the control, which he seemed to need. I let him wreck my body with his deep, rough thrusts I knew would leave me sore and raw later. I cried out when he dragged his teeth along the side of my neck, and bit down in that delightful way that I loved, knowing it would leave his mark of ownership.

His body ravaged mine, eliciting a torrent of pleasure as he slammed into me, again and again, like his life depended on my moans, my walls tightening around his cock, and eventually, the orgasm that completely and utterly consumed every part of me before he finally allowed himself the same release.

A guttural growl ripped from his chest as he shuddered long and hard against me, lodging himself so deep I couldn't do anything but accept the way that the length of his cock pulsed and filled me up with his cum. When there was nothing left for me to take, he collapsed on top of me.

We laid in silence as our breathing returned to normal and he eventually moved off me and settled against the pillows, tucking me close to his side as he looked up at the ceiling, his finger absently massaging my scalp—which, admittedly, felt amazing. Now, at least, he seemed calmer, more relaxed and less agitated—I was certainly exhausted after that vigorous fuck.

I rested my hand on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath my palm. I didn't know if I should ask him again now—what was wrong? Because as good as the

sex was, I knew for a fact that something had happened to ignite this man's need to get all his aggression out of his system.

But what?

Finally, he exhaled a long breath, seemingly releasing the last of his stress. "Sorry for barging in like this."

I laughed as I drew lazy circles around his nipple with my finger. "It's hardly barging in when you called and asked if you could come over and I said yes. But I have to say, you seemed a bit tense when you arrived."

"I was, and I'm sorry that I took it out on you, so to speak." He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose with the fingers of his free hand. "It was a rough morning at the office, and I just feel foolish, letting some petty nonsense get me so riled up."

"Well, you didn't hear me complain about the way you fucked me," I assured him, then pushed a little more. "Care to tell me what happened?" It wasn't my place to pry but asking left it up to him if he wanted to share. Though I hoped he would.

Eric hesitated, seemingly reluctant to say what it was that had driven him here. I wished that it was easier for him to let me in and share those burdens. Men could be so stoic sometimes—especially this man—to their detriment.

"It's work," he said, very broad and vague. "Got a lot going on. Shit getting in the way."

"Hey." I lifted my head and reached up, turning his face toward mine so that he would look at me. So he could see how sincere I was. "You can tell me anything, Eric. You know that, right?"

Eric's gaze held mine. It was an intense stare, like he was boring into my soul. After a moment he exhaled a deep breath and turned his gaze toward the ceiling again, contemplating. "I don't want to worry you."

"Unfortunately for you, I already am." That wasn't a lie.

For the first time since arriving, he gave a soft chuckle. "Fair point," he relented, and shook his head. "It's James. Again. He's been more of a thorn in my side than I would like to admit."

My hackles immediately rose. I could only imagine what James has been doing or saying. I didn't like the anxiety that tightened in my chest, threatening to burst out like some kind of grotesque Hollywood blockbuster monster.

"Oh," I said quietly.

My wobbly response prompted Eric to glance back at me, a reassuring look in his eyes. "Hey, it's nothing for you to worry about. It's all business related and directed at me."

I wasn't sure if that was the entire truth, but I had no choice but to believe him. "What is he doing?"

He paused, as if considering how much to share. "Suffice to say he's a little closer to my business than I would like him, and I'm doing my best to deal with it."

Yeah, that didn't tell me much at all. Eric was edging me out—at least when it came to this, and I had no choice but to let him handle whatever the issue was, in his own way.

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Instead of pushing any further, I let it go, trusting him. “Okay. I can respect that.”

The corner of Eric’s mouth turned upward, into a charming if not teasing smirk.

“What?” I said, having no idea what had prompted that playful look on his face.

“I just remember a time where you’d probably flare up and fight me on this,” he said, reminding me of that night at the gallery and my contentious, push-him-to-his-limits attitude. “It’s quite adorable. I almost miss the argumentative fire.”

I rolled my eyes, nudging at him. “I could give that to you if that’s what you’re really wanting,” I griped.

An easy laugh erupted from his chest. “No,” he said, and abruptly rolled on top of me, pinning me beneath his strong, solid body with his knees wedging between my legs to spread my thighs wide for his stiffening cock. “No, I think what I really want is a round two.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

CHAPTER 22

Jasmine

Three Weeks Later

“I’m really sorry,” I told Eric over the phone, feeling like shit, literally and

figuratively that Friday morning. “I was really looking forward to seeing your parents again.”

“I already told you not to worry about it,” he said, his understanding and compassionate tone drifting through the phone line. “I’d rather you get your rest so you’re feeling better when I come home.”

Instead of being able to answer, a coughing fit shattered my lungs. Out of nowhere I’d caught some kind of virus. It had taken root in my chest, made my nose runny and my throat feel like I was in a constant state of swallowing razor blades. I was supposed to accompany Eric to visit his parents again for a long weekend, Friday through Monday, but there was no way I was going to survive the flight, let alone be safe enough to be around his parents.

“See?” he pointed out. “Please, rest. I’ll have Jeff bring by some soups and meds for you in a bit.”

A part of me warmed at his thoughtful, caring gesture. “You don’t—”cue massive coughing fit“—have to do that, Eric.”

“I know that I don’t, but I want to,” he insisted, and I knew he meant it. “Please, Jasmine. Rest. I’ll be in touch when I get back.”

When we disconnected the call, I did exactly what I was told. I bundled myself up in my bed covers, put on trashy reality TV, and let the first round of medication work its magic to put me to sleep...until I got a knock on my door that startled me awake.

Head stuffy, my mind groggy, I forced myself out of the bed to retrieve whatever Eric had Jeff pick up for me. It was probably a good thing that I hadn’t gone with Eric, if my wobbly, freshly birthed baby deer walk was any indication. I clearly had no business being upright, let alone conscious.

When I answered my door, Jeff was there, standing a respectful distance away as he handed me a brown bag. “All the items that Mr. Maxim requested. Soup for three days, as well as medication for your flu. If you need anything else, just let me know.”

“Thank you,” I managed in a hoarse voice.

I didn’t have the state of mind to even care whether or not I was going to like the soup. I just cared that I wouldn’t have to cook for myself.

The next few days were a blur of microwaved soup, rounds of medication, and enough reality TV to rot my brain irreparably. Every once in a while, I’d receive a message from Eric checking in on me, which helped to boost my spirits. The man was not chatty when it came to texts, which made me appreciate the effort all the more.

On the fourth day, Monday, I was beginning to feel better. When I got another knock on my door, I assumed that it was Jeff again, coming to deliver the next round of goodies. My stomach actually grumbled hungrily, a good sign that I was definitely on the mend. I wrapped myself in a robe and headed for the entry.

I was so certain it was Jeff that I didn’t even bother to look in the peephole. A careless mistake on my part when I opened the door and found James standing on the other side instead.

I stiffened, and my entire body flashed cold. My first instinct was to slam the door in his face, but I decided in that moment that I refused to cower or show fear where this man was concerned. I reminded myself that he held no power over me any longer, emotionally or physically.

I folded my arms over my chest and glared at him. “What are you doing here?”

He had the gall to smile, as though we were friends and hadn't shared a tumultuous past. "I have something I think you'd be interested to see."

I snorted. "There is absolutely nothing that you might have that I'd even be remotely interested in."

"I suppose I deserve that," he said, and hung his head almost...sheepishly. "But I thought you'd want to know that I found out who killed your parents."

I gasped, those words filling me up with instantaneous shock, following quickly by disbelief. During one too many glasses of wine one night on one of our first few dates, I'd confided in James about what happened to my parents, the hit and run and the fact that nobody had ever been held accountable.

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My mind raced, and while I was trying to process what James had just told me, he took that opportunity to stroll right past me and into my apartment. Leaving the door open because I didn't trust him and his motives, I followed him a few feet inside.

"I...I don't believe you," I stammered, hating that slip of emotion. "You need to leave, now, before I call the police." Unfortunately, I'd left my cell phone in the bedroom, and that was not a place I was comfortable leading this man in order to retrieve the device.

"It's all right here," he said, showing me the manilla envelope he had in his hand. "The reports, who actually killed your parents, the cover up..."

God, this felt like a cruel joke, which was right up James' alley. Yet my heart pounded in my chest, the smallest glimmer of hope warring with my better judgement. "That's impossible."

"No, not really," he said, meeting my gaze. "Not when you have enough money to cover things up and make them disappear. I promise, it's all right here for you to read."

Still not trusting anything he said, I narrowed my gaze on him. "Why would you do this for me?"

"Let's consider it a truce." He flashed a gregarious smile.

James had the ability to be charming when he wanted to be, and he did so now, but I was still wary of his motives. "Are you even capable of a truce, James?"

He shrugged. "When I'm motivated, yes."

Before I could ask what he meant by that, I jumped at the unexpected sound of someone clearing their throat behind me.

"Everything okay here, ma'am?" Jeff asked.

I turned around, seeing the frown on Jeff's face as he glanced from James, then back to me, a paper bag from a nearby market in his hand. I'd been so engrossed in the possibility of finally discovering who'd killed my parents that I hadn't heard him arrive.

I was unsure how much of the conversation he'd overheard, not that it mattered, and sought to reassure him. "I'm fine, Jeff. Thank you." Then I faced the other man still standing in my apartment and said more firmly, "You need to leave, James."

"Okay," he said agreeably, and set the envelope on my kitchen table, giving it a little tap with his finger. "I'll leave this here for you. It's yours to do with as you please."

James strolled past Jeff, nodding amicably at the younger man as he headed out the door. Jeff quietly set the bag of groceries on the table next to the envelope.

The last thing I wanted was this encounter with James to get back to Eric before I could tell him myself. Before I even knew what was inside that envelope. "Can we please keep that other visitor between us, for now?" I asked Jeff.

He gave a nod, a bit of conflict in his eyes. "If you need anything else, just let me know," he said, and then he was gone, too, leaving me alone with the desperate longing to know who was responsible for my parent's death.

My stomach was in knots, but my heart was filled with hope. I wanted to believe

James, even though I didn't trust him. There was only one way to find out if the truth was inside the manilla envelope.

I reached for the packet and opened it.

CHAPTER 23

Eric

My mother and father missed Jasmine while I visited them. They'd had so many questions about my wife's absence, and Mom started that emotional spiral until I'd explained that Jasmine was sick with the flu. That confession had gotten me sent home with ten different soup and bread recipes that I didn't even realize my mother still remembered to give to Jasmine.

Admittedly, I'd missed Jasmine's company, too, even though we'd texted briefly over the weekend. Since making sure she rested was a priority, I didn't disturb her often, just a few times to make sure that she was doing okay. She was the first person I messaged when I touched down in Coral Gables late Monday afternoon, since we hadn't texted since the night before.

Can't wait to see you. I hope you're feeling better.

I didn't get an immediate response, but that had been par for the course the past few days and I figured she was still resting and recouping.

I checked my phone almost ritualistically over the next few hours as I reacclimated back home. Unpacking, checking and replying to work emails, making myself something to eat for dinner. Ignoring and deleting correspondence from James, then finally blocking him and his rants. He'd been furious with me when I'd shared what I'd discovered about his dire financial straits, and I'd made it clear that I had no

qualms exposing what a financial risk he was to the community if he didn't leave me, and Jasmine, the fuck alone.

That ultimatum hadn't been received well, not that I gave a shit. I now held all the cards in this game James had been playing, and the other man knew it, too.

After eating and cleaning up the kitchen, there was still no response from Jasmine and the earlier message I'd sent showed as "unread". Since I'd asked Jeff to make another food delivery to Jasmine today, I called his cell.

He answered on the second ring. "Yes, sir?"

"Hey, Jeff," I said, sitting down on the couch in the living room. "Did you deliver the groceries to Jasmine today?"

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There was the slightest pause before he replied, “Yes, sir.”

“Alright. Thank you. Did she seem like she was feeling any better?” I asked, concerned that she might have relapsed.

“She...umm, did seem a bit off,” he said.

I heard the reluctance in his voice, which wasn’t something he normally displayed. After our years together, and knowing how much I valued truth and honesty, he was forthcoming with everything.

“Off, how?” I asked.

Another brief hesitation before I heard him release a sigh. “When I stopped by to deliver the groceries there was a man named James in the apartment with her.”

Fuck. I abruptly stood up, my stomach twisting with unease. What the hell? Did James have a goddamn death wish? Why the hell was he pushing my hand by approaching Jasmine when I had the ability to fucking destroy him?

Jeff spoke again, just as hesitant. “The man who was there, he left before I did, but she...uh...asked that I not saying anything to you.”

I blinked at that. I was having a hard time wrapping my mind around that request from Jasmine, and could only surmise that she hadn’t wanted to worry me. Clearly, I’d been short-sighted in not thinking James would still have the balls to defy me when he had such a huge threat hanging over his head.

“We’re good, Jeff,” I said, still reeling with the bomb he’d dropped on me. “Have a good evening.”

I disconnected the call, just as a “ping” came through. My crazy heart leapt, expecting a response from my earlier text from Jasmine, but surprisingly it was a message from Dominique.

Darling, please tell me you’ve already seen this. I’m so sorry.

I frowned in confusion, having no idea what she was referring to. Attached to her message was a link, which I clicked on. It took me to The Affluent Collective—a Coral Gables society page that reported on society news and events. The link dropped me right onto a page with a headline that read: Philanthropist Eric Maxim secretly sequesters ailing parents with dementia out of public eye

My blood ran cold. What. The. Fuck. Normally I didn’t give a shit what the gossip site had to say about me, most of which was fairly tame and revolved around my philanthropy ventures, and sometimes, speculation about the women on my arm at various events. They were also known for exposing what they deemed salacious details about the rich, famous, and powerful in the community, but as of this moment, my private life had never been fodder for gossip.

I forced myself to read the article, my anger building with every word I consumed.

A source close to the well-known billionaire and self-proclaimed art patron of Florida has recently disclosed that Eric Maxim, who has always been close-lipped with his personal affairs, has been keeping his parents hidden away in a senior living facility. That’s right, the man who has made his brand all about giving back, abandoned his parents to the care of a notoriously abusive, problematic, and often underfunded care facility.

The source also revealed that the care facility in question isn't even in state. Talk about trying to hide a dirty little secret...

The article went on, spewing nauseatingly specific details about my parents that only one person in my life had intimate knowledge of.

Jasmine. She was the only one privy to the depth of knowledge covered in this article.

The realization, the betrayal and deceit, nearly brought me to my knees. I had done everything in my power to protect my parents, and she'd betrayed the deepest pain of mine to a public that would twist the truth, not caring about my parents and their afflictions, nor how much guilt I carried with it.

The anguish I felt in that moment was brutal. Like someone had reached into my chest and ripped out my heart. A heart that had grown soft for a woman I'd confided in. Trusted. Fallen in love with...

I was such a fucking fool, but the pieces seemed to fall into place when I thought about James being at Jasmine's apartment. Were the two in cahoots to ruin me? Had I been set up and so fucking blinded by Jasmine's charms and alluring smiles that I'd completely let down my guard, which in turn James had somehow taken advantage of?

The thought made me livid. Beyond furious. Blinded by rage.

I needed answers, even though I was certain I'd be met with lies and platitudes. But there was only one explanation for how this article could have published such accurate information, and it all pointed to Jasmine.

I went to my office and printed up the article, then grabbed my car keys and sped toward her apartment.

CHAPTER 24

Jasmine

The file had been sitting on my coffee table in front of me for the past few hours since James walked out of my apartment. I'd gone through it, every page, every word. Not just once in case I'd read things incorrectly, but twice.

Knowing the truth, I felt so damn fragile, like I was going to shatter and break if I so much as moved. Yet, I'd finally gotten the answers I'd wanted about my parents' deaths. Who'd been responsible. The person who'd gone on to live their life without a care while my parents were dead and gone, forever.

I never would have believed it would be James of all people who'd swoop in, providing me with the knife that would reopen up a wound that I had thought that, while scarred over all these years, had at least healed.

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The pain in my chest was just as fresh now as the day that I'd lost them, and I didn't know how to process my new reality of knowing exactly what had happened that day. The fact that James had accomplished what police and investigations hadn't been able to—I should have been grateful but it was James. And despite his claims of wanting a truce, I knew his motivations weren't altruistic. I knew that he would want something from me, or that this information would come with some kind of price. Men like James didn't do benevolent acts out of the goodness of their hearts. Not when they had no heart to speak of.

He'd discovered the person accountable for the hit and run on my parents. Found out how it was covered up, all neat and tidy. It was true. Anything hideous and ugly and terrible could be swept under the rug as though it never happened with the right amount of money. The realization had a deeply negative feeling swirling in my stomach.

I'd yet to answer the last text Eric had sent—not yet. I was still trying to wrap my head around how to tell him that James had brought all this information to me, let alone process the information itself.

Then, there was the other issue to consider. What did I do with this information? I needed guidance, and unfortunately, I had no idea where to start.

My entire body jolted when someone knocked on the door, jarring me out of my trance. The sound was hard. Firm. Almost angry. Still feeling numb inside, I stood up and walked to the door, surprised to see Eric standing on the other side of the peephole.

I hadn't planned on seeing him so soon, but a sense of relief washed over me. He'd be able to help me figure out what to do, how to handle the information that I was now faced with.

I opened the door. "Eric—"

The glacial look on his face stopped me cold. His eyes frigid and narrowed in a way that was chilling because I'd never been on the receiving end of such animosity from him. He stepped into my apartment wordlessly. He glanced around thoroughly, as if trying to see if someone was here.

"Eric?" I asked tentatively.

He turned around, his mouth set in a grim line. "Your friend James isn't here this time?"

Ice dropped into my veins. "Why would you think James was here?" Okay, that came out wrong and sounded guilty as hell, which I hadn't meant at all.

He all but sneered. "Are you telling me he hasn't been here at all, Miss Greene?"

His voice was steady, but that hard edge told me that he already knew the answer to his own question, and I wasn't going to lie. "Yes, he did stop by, but—"

"That's interesting," he said, cutting me off before I could say anything more about why James had been there. "Because I believe you and he had a very long, very interesting conversation."

What was he talking about? If he knew James had come here, and he knew we had talked, why did he seem so angry about it? Would James have gone to him and bragged?

No. James would have lied. Twisted the truth. Was this the price I was going to pay for the information James had given me? Losing Eric because James had somehow set me up as a patsy?

I shook my head, feeling a bit frantic. “I don’t know what he said to you—”

“Oh, James said nothing to me,” he said, then gave a harsh laugh. “But clearly you said a hell of a lot to him.”

I was overwhelmed by confusion, even as I tried to search my memory for something incriminating I might have said to James, but came up with nothing. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He pointed an angry finger at me, his eyes narrowed into slits. “Do not play dumb with me.” Then, from inside his jacket, he yanked out a folded piece of paper.

He handed it to me, and as I read what had been written, my eyes widened in shock. It was an entire article detailing very specific information from some ‘anonymous source’ about Eric’s parents, along with some very disturbing untruths about their care. There had been nothing abusive, problematic, or underfunded about the Wellington Later Life Care Facility as stated here, and I could only imagine how gut-wrenching it was for Eric, knowing these lies were now up for public consumption.

I glanced back at Eric, dumbfounded. “I have no idea where this came from, how they got this information—”

“Stop with the fucking lies,” he said, his anger now so palpable that I took a step back. “That article details down to the letter how I’ve been taking women to the facility to see my ailing parents, how they put on a ring and pretend to be my wife to dupe my parents and paints the situation in the worst possible way. You knew all those things, and you want me to believe that James comes to your apartment and coincidentally,

hours later, this filth prints?”

The underlying anguish I heard in his voice cut me to the core. I was at a loss for words, unable to argue when I had no other evidence to offer, or an explanation of how a gossip site had learned the truth.

“I trusted you, Jasmine. Implicitly.”

His voice wavered, and he squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, as if the turmoil inside of him was too much for him to bear, and maybe it was. Because I was beginning to feel that same crushing feeling in my chest, making it difficult to breathe.

“I cared about you, Jasmine,” he said, the raw emotion in his eyes giving me every indication that he’d fallen for me as hard as I had for him and now that was about to be ripped right out from under me. “Was it worth whatever James paid you?”

I flinched at his accusation. On one hand, I understood his pain. On the other, I was devastated that he believed I would have anything to do with this article. But he was right. All signs pointed to me and I couldn’t explain it away. Couldn’t ease his grief or make him understand that I would never, ever hurt him this way. There was no convincing him otherwise.

My throat was so tight that I couldn’t say anything at all.

Very quietly, very succinctly, he said, “We’re done.”

I gasped softly as the finality of those words shattered my heart, as did watching Eric, the man I loved, walk out of my life.

CHAPTER 25

Jasmine

By the end of that day, Eric had sent over my severance of contract papers. At the least, I wasn't getting smacked with a breach of contract. He was just cutting me off and cutting me out of his life, believing I'd betrayed him.

I was left alone and desolate. Absolutely gutted. I still didn't know how James had discovered the information about my parents but whatever resources he had, I was certain he'd found out about Eric's parents the same way. There was no other explanation for how those details could have come to light. James was the only common denominator, and I knew he was vindictive enough to do something so despicable to Eric and make it look like I was involved and betrayed Eric in the process.

In essence, James had set me up for his own sick, twisted revenge. Provide me with the details about my parents' deaths, then leak Eric's most sacred secret. Make it look like I gave up Eric's private life just to have a slice of my own back.

It was all so fucked up. Especially when there wasn't a damn thing I could do to make Eric believe I had nothing to do with the article. No amount of begging or pleading or trying to explain what I imagined happened would make him change his mind. Not without proof of James' involvement, of which I had none.

I hadn't stopped crying since Eric left my apartment, and right now there was only one person I trusted that could help me make sense of my upside-down world. Dominique.

I picked up my cell, hoping and praying that if she was aware of that damned article, she knew I had nothing to do with being the anonymous source. I dialed her number and waited, feeling my anxiety increase as the ringer went on and on until she eventually picked up the call.

"Jasmine, finally. I was wondering when you were going to call me."

Her voice was calm and steady. Non-judgemental. That was a relief. Judging by her greeting, I had the feeling that she already knew about me and Eric, but I had no idea if she'd seen what had been printed in *The Affluent Collective*. Or what she knew in general.

Regardless, it all came pouring out of me. "Dominique, something terrible happened." My voice sounded choked, like the words were fighting against leaving my already scratchy, dry throat from crying. "Someone exposed details about Eric's parents in the worst possible way, and he thinks I'm the one who provided the information. I don't know what to do—"

"Taking a nice, deep, calm breath to start would be the first best thing to do, darling."

As always, Dominique was cool, calm, and collected. It was a trait that I had thought I'd mastered, but obviously I still had a lot to learn. This whole situation had thrown me off kilter and out of sorts.

I did as she said, though. One breath in, one out.

"Good girl," she said, once I wasn't quite as frazzled. "Now, I've already read the

nasty article about Eric's parents. Unfortunately, it's a big buzz around the prominent circles in Coral Gables. I haven't been able to reach him directly by phone. I get the impression he's not taking any calls at the moment, all things considered, but he did send me a text telling me not to worry about him."

That wasn't as reassuring as I wanted it to be. "Did he say anything about me?"

Dominique hesitated for a moment before replying. "Well, he rather politely told me that due to irreconcilable differences, he would be terminating your contract and, through no fault of mine, has decided to cease escort services for the foreseeable future."

It was so brusque and impersonal that it hurt. To be talked about like I was just a failed business transaction made my heart twist in my chest. But then again, that's exactly what I had been at the start, hadn't I? Who knew I'd fall in love Eric over the course of our time together.

"Dominique, I would never do such a thing—"

"Child, I'm not stupid," she said, cutting me off, and I could easily imagine her stern look aimed directly at me for even implying such a thing. "I've known you long enough to know that you weren't this 'anonymous source' that popped up out of nowhere. Now, why does Eric think you are?"

"From what I understand, James and Eric have been going back and forth with each other on some business issues. Whatever happened, I know it's been stressful and tense for Eric." I stood from my sofa and walked over to the window in my living room, staring out over the nearby park I lived next to. "So, this last trip to Eric's parents' I was sick and didn't go with him. James came to my apartment, then he...he..."

“Jasmine, what did he do?” Dominique’s voice was direct and alarmed.

I know what she feared and quickly reassured her. “It wasn’t that. He had some private investigator look into my parents’ hit and run. He found the person responsible, and he came by to give me the information, which now, in hindsight, feels like a set up. Eric’s driver saw him in my apartment when he brought me some groceries, and well, a few hours later The Affluent Collective publishes this ‘breaking news’.”

“Oh, I have no doubt that James is behind this,” Dominique said angrily. “Word has it that Eric bought a very lucrative piece of property right out from under James to make it into a co-op for artists, and we both know that James is not a man to be slighted like that without finding a way to be vindictive.”

“I walked right into his trap,” I said, shaking my head at my naiveté. “I know James gave me the information on my parents, which has just left me confused and unsure of what to do when all this feels like petty revenge for what happened between us, and a way to hurt Eric, too, for losing out on the property he wanted.”

“Jasmine, you know as well as I do that James would have found a way to get to you, or Eric, if that was his goal,” she assured me in that motherly, soothing voice of hers. “And for now, there’s nothing that can be done to change what has already happened. Eric will be fielding the fallout from this obnoxious invasion of privacy and while I believe that he will survive publicly over time, it will be the fact that it happened at all that will be the hardest for him to handle and compartmentalize.”

“With him believing I was the source.” Throat tight with emotion, I pressed a hand to my chest, hating that Eric was alone and in an agony of his own. That I could do nothing to soothe or ease his pain. “I have no proof that James is the person who leaked the information. Just a gut feeling because everything was too planned out. But I do know that if Eric suspects him, and confronts him, James will tell him that I took the

information about my parents in exchange for giving him those details, and awful lies, about his parents. I don't know what to do."

"Unfortunately, there's nothing you can do, Jasmine," Dominique said, her tone gentle but blunt. "Eric isn't going to be in the headspace to think rationally for a while, not until things die down and he has some kind of control over the situation. Just remember, that the truth always prevails."

A humorless laugh escaped me, because the possibility of the truth being exposed seemed highly unlikely. Someone with deep pockets like James would have undoubtedly covered his tracks. In fact, wasn't he the one that told me that money could cover things up and make them disappear, like the truth behind who had killed my parents?

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“In the meantime, what are you going to do with the information James gave you?” Dominique asked, interrupting my thoughts. “About your parents?”

That was the million-dollar question, wasn't it? “I honestly don't know if I should take this to the police, or burn it or...” I couldn't say the last part, though, because I knew confronting the person who'd killed my parents could have so many repercussions I wasn't equipped to handle. But I desperately wanted to.

“Or?” she prompted.

I paused, then decided to confide in Dominique. “The information, the reports that James gave, came with an address of where the person is living right now.”

Dominique was silent for a moment. It was rare that she could be rendered speechless. “That's a dangerous bit of information, Jasmine.”

“I know,” I agreed, feeling so torn. “It's just...it's there as an option. Maybe I can get answers that will give me the closure I've always wanted. I could learn why my parents had to die but this person, whoever they are, was able to go on with their life without any consequences. I want them to know that they irrevocably changed my entire life, while they've been enjoying theirs.”

“I'm not one to tell you what to do. You know that,” Dominique said, compassion in her tone. “But I also realize how important something like this would be for you. Just know if you choose to go down this route, you should be careful. You've done a lot of healing over the years and I would hate to see you end up reopening old wounds only to let them fester all over again, just because James handed you the knife to do

it.”

There was so much wisdom and truth in that statement. But what I did know is that I wanted this closure. I needed it to move forward and not have those loose ends hanging over me for the rest my life.

Dominique’s warning was always in the back of my mind as I planned my trip over the next four weeks, but mostly it had taken that amount of time to gather the courage I needed to actually do it. And those days in between were filled with me painting, pouring out my grief on canvas with dark, depressing images. Not just for the loss of my parents, but mourning Eric, too, who I missed unbearably and hadn’t heard a word from.

Not that I expected to. The gossip surrounding the article might have died down—and James had conveniently taken a trip abroad to London right after handing me the information on my parents—but I wasn’t under any illusions that Eric was any closer to finding out, or believing, that I had nothing to do with the leak. I’d heard through Dominique that he’d gone to New York and was still there, probably to make sure none of the slanderous gossip touched his parents in any way, which is all he ever cared about. Protecting his mother and father from something exactly like this.

His lack of faith in me hurt the most, that he would ever believe I’d betray him so completely. That everything we’d shared, that allowing him to see the most vulnerable parts of me and my life weren’t enough to convince him that I didn’t have the ability to be so cold and cruel.

But eventually my paintings turned a corner. They lightened, became images of hope and peace and possibilities. And that’s when I knew I was ready. The sorrow wasn’t gone, nor would it probably ever be. But just as I’d come to terms with living my life without my mother and father in it, I had to do the same when it came to Eric. I had to move on, and heal, and I believed closing this chapter in my life with my parents’

death would at least allow me to truly focus on what was important to me. What they would have wanted for me, and my future.

I hadn't returned to work since Eric ended our contract, and I had no intention of going back to escorting, not when I was still so in love with Eric. I had enough money saved that I could afford to take off the next year and figure out what I truly wanted to do with my future. Right now, I wanted to create art, because that had always been my passion and I'd lost sight of those aspirations after losing my parents. My greatest desire was to share my work with like-minded people, and feel joy again.

I loved that Dominique was my biggest supporter. Urging me to follow my dreams and I planned to, whole-heartedly. She'd even set me up with my first showing at a gallery that showcased up and coming artists, but first, I needed to put the past to rest, and that meant facing the person who'd killed my parents.

So, after a three-hour drive, and a stop at a Starbucks for comfort food, I found myself at the address listed as the last known residence of Henry P. Smith. The seventeen-year-old who'd run my parents into a ravine and fled the scene. Whose own parents, who had money and connections, made the whole thing disappear before it could actually come to light.

The thing was, though, is that the address didn't bring me to a residence. It brought me to a funeral home with a cemetery adjacent to the building.

Confused, I double checked the address, only to find it was correct.

Frowning, I parked off to the side, not sure what to do. I'd never been to a cemetery before. My parents had been cremated because it'd been cheaper than buying them two plots. Even then, it felt oddly uncomfortable being here.

Why was I here? I figured there were two possible options. One, this was James'

morbid way of getting the last laugh by giving me the address of a graveyard. Or two, since this was Henry's last known address, maybe he now worked at the funeral home or cemetery as a caretaker and James thought it safer to confront him at his place of work rather than his own home. Not that I really thought that James would be that concerned, but I had no other explanation.

So, exhaling a deep breath, I stepped out of my car. I had the file of information with me and what I hoped was courage stirring in my chest and not fear as I walked into the building just before the gated entrance to the cemetery. It was eerily silent, and smelled of roses inside, though I couldn't see any in sight. To say it was as quiet as the dead would be an understatement.

"Can I help you, dear?"

An older woman approached me. She wore a green skirt suit combo, and comfortable short-heeled shoes. She looked friendly, and warm. Like I would imagine a grandmother to be.

"Oh, uhm. Maybe?" I stumbled over my words, my face taking on an embarrassed heat. "I'm actually looking for a Henry Smith. I was told I would find him here?"

She looked at me quizzically. "Are you a friend of the family?" she asked. "I've never seen you here before."

Now, I was confused. Again. "Oh, no, I assumed he, uhm...worked here?"

The woman blinked at me one more time, and then shook her head. "I'm sure there must be some confusion, dear. Henry has been dead for quite some time. His mother recently passed; her plot is near his."

I stood there, shell-shocked for a moment, trying to process what she'd just told me.

That someone as young as Henry—close to the same age as me going by the investigative report—was dead. “I, uhm...I’m so sorry, I must have been mistaken.”

Before the woman could say another word, I rushed out of the building, furious that James would play on my emotions so cruelly. His investigator had to have known that Henry was no longer alive, yet James had given me this address as his last known place of residence. It was such a spiteful thing for James to do, but I shouldn’t have been surprised considering what a prick he was.

I should have gone to my car and hightailed it out of there. Instead, I went through the gated archway in search of Henry’s plot, just to confirm for myself what the other woman said was true. Headstones upon headstones were everywhere. And unlike a library, with everything filed in neat, alphabetical rows, the cemetery was unalphabetized chaos, no rhyme or reason to where a person was buried.

I kept looking, reading every single headstone. And then I found it. A large, elaborate memorial made of marble, the grassy area around it kept clean with a small bundle of sunflowers set right in front of it, as if someone had recently visited.

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The engraved words were simple. Henry's full name, the date of his birth, the date of his death—just two years after the deaths of my parents—and the following line of script: Loving son. Rest in peace. You are forgiven.

My chest grew tight as I stood there. I'd expected to meet Henry with the anger I'd carried with me for years, so the unexpected sadness and sorrow that coursed through me took me off guard because that was the last thing I wanted to feel for the person who'd killed my parents.

You are forgiven. The words were so distinct. Had he felt guilty then? Had Henry also spent his waking moments thinking about my parents and the lives he'd stolen because of his actions? And beside him, there was his mother's plot, the date of her death just barely a year ago.

"I figured you'd find your way here, eventually."

A clear male voice startled me out of my angst and I turned around, seeing a middle-aged man in a fitted, tailored suit, standing not too far from me. The expression on his face was pensive, but calm. He looked at me like he knew me.

And I recognized his face, because it was an older version of the one attached to the reports in my file. The father.

When I set out on this journey, I had pictured every possible scenario. Yelling. Demanding answers. Demanding that they take themselves to the police. Demanding that they let me take my pound of flesh in whatever way I saw fit.

But now that I was there, faced with this man and his dead wife and son, I was rooted to the spot. I couldn't think. I couldn't move. I had tunnel vision leading right to the man who was, in part, responsible for the death of my parents going unpunished.

"It must be very hard," the man continued. "I just...had a feeling today so I came here, and here you are." He paused a moment, the look in his eyes somber. "I wonder if this is my punishment."

I swallowed, finally finding my voice, even though it was raspy when I spoke. "You know me?" It was the first thing that came to my mind. Had this man hired someone to watch me all this time? Just to make sure I didn't find out who was responsible?

"Not in the way you're probably thinking," he said. "But there's a look in your eyes that tells me you have very specific feelings about the people that are here, in front of you. Feelings that run very deep."

I scoffed. "Deep feelings...right." That rage finally made an appearance, and I unleashed it on the man in front of me. "What are you going to say to me, huh? Are you going to ask me to forgive him? To forgive you and your wife?" I held up the file in my hand, even as hot, angry tears filled my eyes. "Everything's in here. The payoffs. The deals. Making the whole thing disappear so that it was just a forever unsolved hit and run. Just so he could go off and live the rest of his life in peace!"

The man tilted his head, a pained look in his eyes as he watched me dash away my tears. "Do you really think my son would be dead right now if he was allowed to peacefully live his life after that incident? Moreover, that I would expect you of all people to forgive him? Forgive us?"

The man slowly came closer, until he was standing in front of the headstones with me. He kept his hands in his pockets, staring at the graves of his son and his wife.

“What we did was to protect him,” he said, and there was no arrogance in his tone, just regrets. “He was just a kid. He’d made a mistake. At least, that’s what we told ourselves. We didn’t want him to end up in prison for a good portion of his life.”

He finally looked to me, the anguish on his face genuine. “But we were wrong. Henry wanted to confess. He came to us after what he did, tears down his face, panicked, afraid even, but ready to own up to what he did. But...when you’re a parent, you don’t think of anything other than saving your child. We wanted to save him from those consequences.”

My mind was only focused on one thing. “He...he wanted to confess?”

The father nodded. “Yes. Gilda and I wouldn’t let him. So, we did what people with money often do. We made the ugliness disappear. It was the greatest mistake we ever made. Henry fell into a deep depression. He turned to hard drugs because the emotional impact of what he’d done became too great for him to bear. We didn’t know if it was intentional or an accident but the heroin in his system was enough to kill him, and it did. I just don’t think he could handle the shame and guilt any longer.”

“He died of an overdose?”

“Yes. In our family home,” he replied, glancing back down at the marbled stone. “He’d dropped out of college and we were trying to give him some space, but living with what he did was...too much, I suppose. Losing him devastated us, and my wife ended up going down that same path. Sometimes I think she started doing heroin just to try and understand why he did what he did. Or maybe she felt like she needed an out, too. So, here I am. The only one left.”

I didn’t know what to say to any of that. Henry had wanted to go to the police and confess, and this man and his wife had stopped him, ultimately leading to Henry’s death. And then his wife’s.

“Ironical,” I finally said softly, sadly.

“Hm?” he questioned.

I glanced at him, truly meeting his gaze for the first time. “The two lives I lost, and two lives you lost,” I elaborated. “It’s ironical. In a morbid way.”

He stared down at me. “Yet I imagine it doesn’t bring you much comfort.”

I shook my head and answered truthfully. “No. It doesn’t.”

We stood there in silence together. This man had explained things, yet I had no idea what to do with the information. Was this closure? How could it be when I didn’t even get the chance to...to...to what?

What would yelling do? Or issuing ultimatums? If his wife and his son were still alive, it wouldn’t change the fact that my parents weren’t. Nothing would, and I would never have them back.

“I see why you put that on his headstone,” I said after a moment. “Hoping that he forgives himself, wherever he is. He never did when he was alive, did he?”

Slowly, the man shook his head. “No, he didn’t.” He was quiet for a moment, before speaking again. “And you? Do you forgive him?”

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I couldn't lie to placate this man's conscience. "No. I don't think I can forgive any of you. But I can move on. There's no point in holding on to this anymore. I should have let it go a long time ago." There was a lot that I needed to let go of now, but at least I felt as though I could release myself from this anguish before I truly dealt with the misery of losing Eric.

"For what it's worth...I am sorry," he said. "And whatever you do from here, with your information, I respect your choice. Even if it damns me."

I knew right then that there wasn't anything more I needed from this visit, because there wasn't any greater pain I could inflict upon this man. "I can't damn you anymore than you've already damned yourself."

CHAPTER 26

Eric

I'd never felt so exhausted and miserable as I did now. I stared out the window of the posh New York hotel suite I'd been living in the past six weeks, finishing my morning cup of coffee before I headed to the Wellington Later Life Care Facility to see my parents and spend some time with them—which had been my routine since arriving in the city weeks ago, right after my life had imploded in Florida, right along with my carefully constructed control.

As soon as the article in *The Affluent Collective* had spread across Coral Gables and had people gossiping about my once sterling reputation, the first thing I did was issue the society page a defamation of character lawsuit, which promptly made the article

disappear, even though all damage had already been done.

The second thing I did was pack a bag and leave for New York. As much to put distance between myself and the scrutiny, but to also make sure that none of the scandal touched my parents in any way. And, at the time, I wanted as much space as possible between myself and Jasmine, who'd I'd been furious with. Her betrayal had cut so deep, shattering pieces of my heart and leaving me numb after the fallout.

Initially, I was adamant that I never wanted to see her again. Didn't want to talk to her. Didn't even want to chance running into her because that initial anger I'd felt after being blind-sided by the article had been all-consuming. To the point that it had clouded my judgement and good sense when I was normally a man who took a step back from chaos so I could look at the situation logically and rationally.

I didn't give Jasmine that same consideration. I'd just taken my rage to New York with me and let it simmer.

At least seeing my parents truly healthy and happy in their environment assuaged the guilt I'd carried with me since putting them in the facility to begin with. I found it bittersweet, how some days they had the ability to remember me and wanted to know where my wife was and reminisced about the past, and other days they saw me as a nice stranger who brought them lunch or sweet treats and did puzzles with them to pass the time. Sometimes, it was a heart-breaking mixture of both.

They wove in and out of the present and the past, but spending time with them on almost a daily basis made me realize, and accept, that they were exactly where they needed to be. They were well cared for, and so far, nothing of the scandal that had broken in Florida had reached New York, and for that I was grateful.

But it was the evenings when I was alone in the hotel room that were the most difficult. At first, because I couldn't stop thinking of Jasmine's betrayal, and then,

eventually, as my anger ebbed and my rational mind gradually returned, I realized...how much I missed her. That despite how things looked for her—and admittedly they looked bad—I couldn't believe that Jasmine was responsible for doing something so heinous. I couldn't believe, didn't want to believe, that she'd ever manipulate my emotions in that way, when she'd been the only woman who'd ever given me the safe space to be open and vulnerable with her, while she did the same with me.

As time went by, I wanted to pick up the phone and reach out, but I didn't know what to say. What to do. I felt a complete loss of control over everything. My life, but especially my emotions where Jasmine was concerned, which were so tangled up I didn't know how to unravel all the threads. All because I'd fallen in love with her...and I had no clue how to process those feelings.

A few days after arriving in New York, I contacted the same security firm that had given me the information about James' debt that I was still holding on to, after issuing him an ultimatum to stay away from myself, and Jasmine. Considering he'd violated that order, I had every reason to expose him when there was no doubt in my mind that he'd provided The Affluent Collective with the information on my parents, most likely as a form of revenge after my threat toward him.

But other than my extreme reaction with Jasmine—which had been a purely emotional one—I wasn't a man who acted in haste and I wanted all the pieces of the puzzle together before making that move. Because I still didn't know what James had been doing at Jasmine's apartment that day. I had originally assumed that it had been an exchange of money for information, but I knew in my heart, in the depths of my soul, that Jasmine was not the kind of woman to sell me out.

But I still needed to know how James had found out about the facility, and the fact that I had used women to pretend to be my wife to placate my parents. I wanted, needed, proof of his involvement so I could utterly destroy his standing in the community and

make him persona non grata in Coral Gables, which was no less than he deserved.

Unfortunately, according to the security firm, The Affluent Collective remained tight-lipped about who their source was. I told the security firm to keep digging, because even if James was responsible for the leak, where had he gotten those details if not from Jasmine? I needed that connection, that evidence, to confront James with irrefutable proof he couldn't deny.

Those were some of the questions that plagued my nights, but this morning I had a moment of clarity. It was time to return to Coral Gables. It was time to give Jasmine the opportunity to explain the situation with James and why he was at her apartment that day...if she would even talk to me at this point, considering how I probably devastated her with my disbelief. My gut feeling told me that James had used her as a pawn in this game between the two of us, because that was his MO, and I was determined to figure all this out, somehow, someday.

Regardless, I needed to speak with Jasmine, all the while hoping and praying I hadn't annihilated the one woman who meant everything to me.

I booked the two-hour flight home for noon that day, which gave me the time to swing by and see my parents before I left New York. After a brief visit, as I was walking out to the car I'd rented, I received an email from Chuck, my main contact at the security firm.

We received an anonymous phone call today after our initial contact with Wellington Later Life Care Facility, inquiring on your behalf if James Duponte had either been to the facility, or had called to talk to anyone there about your parents. During that initial call with Wellington, we had been assured that there was no record of James doing either. However, this source gave us the name of Paula Reynolds, who is no longer working at the facility. We were told that Ms. Reynolds had revealed to this anonymous source how much she'd been paid for 'easy information'. We contacted

Ms. Reynolds, and after some...strong arming, she admitted that she talked to someone named James, in exchange for money.

Also, you asked us to inform you when James returned to Florida from London and have confirmed that a flight from London Heathrow with his name on the manifest arrived at Miami International Airport last night.

My blood went cold in my veins as I read their recent update. Paula, the receptionist who normally checked me in when I arrived at the facility, who'd been there when Jasmine had come with me. Interestingly, Paula hadn't been there since my arrival back in New York six weeks ago, and I just assumed she'd quit and moved on to a different job, as many people did.

Now, it seemed James had greased her palm for information, and she either now had enough money to do something different or had quit before anyone discovered she'd been the one to leak confidential patient information.

That rage sparked inside of me again, all directed at one single person:James.

I typed out a quick email to Chuck.I'm heading back to Florida from New York immediately. I will be there by three this afternoon. Turn every stone in the fucking vicinity until you locate exactly where James is, then keep tabs on him until I arrive in Coral Gables.

That done, I headed to the airport to catch my plane, which seemed to be the longest flight of my life.

By the timeI touched down in Miami, Chuck had provided me with James' current and exact location, and other pertinentinformation, like who he was with. The fact that James had spent the day playing a leisurely round of golf at the Coral Gables Golf and Country Club, and was now lounging in the bar with some investors—as if

he could just return to the community and resume his life after shattering mine—only spurred my anger into full fledged fury as Jeff, who'd picked me up from the airport, drove me straight to the country club.

I strode in and found James exactly where Chuck said he'd be. He was sitting at a table with three other men, enjoying a drink and laughing at something one of them said. But his expression quickly sobered when he saw me walk in, a flash of uncertainty passing across his features that was quickly hidden behind a mask of cocky bravado.

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I stopped beside their table, ignoring the other men for now. “James, a word,” I said, and it wasn’t a polite request, but a direct command. “Outside. Now.”

He had the stupidity to sneer up at me. “I really don’t think you and I have anything to discuss.”

“You’d be very wrong about that.” Clearly, James had no idea I’d discovered the truth, and he was arrogant enough to believe he’d never get caught.

Since James seemed to need more of an incentive to have a conversation with me, I turned to the men sitting around him, who I recognized as investors from Spaniel Global Management. “Gentlemen, I’d think twice before handing off any of your money to James Duponte, since he currently has a personal financial debt of over five million and has been a part of some shady business practices you should look into before partnering up with him on anything.”

James jumped up from his seat, panic and anger flashing across his features. “What the fuck are you doing?”

I gave him a cold, chilled-to-the-bone smile. “Exactly what I said I would do the last time we spoke, so don’t fuck with me, James, because there is plenty more I can share with your investor friends that would pique their interest. Now, would you like me to continue our discussion here, or would you like a word with me privately?”

His jaw clenched, but instead of defying me again, he glanced back at the men at the table, who now were watching our exchange with extreme interest after that bomb I’d just drop on them.

“This man is certifiably insane,” James said in a shockingly calm voice, even though I knew I’d shaken him up inside—with my sudden appearance and for sharing his dirty laundry. The slight quiver in his lip gave him away. “Excuse me while I take care of this issue so you don’t have to hear his vitriol and lies.”

I turned around and walked out of the bar. James followed me until we were outside and I faced him again. By then, his complexion was bright red, indignation rippling off him in waves. “I don’t know what the hell you think you’re doing—”

I immediately cut him off. “I warned you that if you fuck with me or Jasmine, that I would expose you for the fraud you are,” I said, grateful to have my calm and control back in this situation. “And I intend to do exactly that since you didn’t keep your end of the bargain. The fact that you brought my parents into this turf war between us changes the playing field completely, in that I plan to fucking destroy you.”

He scoffed, trying to maintain his haughty demeanor. “Oh, please. It was your precious Jasmine who sold you out. I know your driver saw me at her apartment and undoubtedly told you. But what you don’t know is that Jasmine asked me to find out who killed her parents, which admittedly wasn’t easy information to dig up, and in exchange she offered me some very salacious information about you and the appalling conditions of the facility where you’ve sequestered your parents. I just thought the patrons of Coral Gables ought to know that the revered Eric Maxim is not nearly as credible as you want everyone to believe.”

Hearing James’ version of events straight from his mouth, and me finally processing it with a clear head...it all sounded implausible and ridiculous because Jasmine never would have approached James for anything. Except, his comment about finding out who killed Jasmine’s parents caught my attention.

“Is that what you were doing that day in her apartment?” I asked, putting the pieces together in my mind, certain that it was James who’d instigated the plan to make

Jasmine look culpable. “Giving her whatever you discovered about her parents’ deaths and who was responsible?”

“Yes, and she wasverygrateful.” He smirked. “I have to say, your little slut is all about a little quid pro quo,” he said in a very lewd tone, his words meant to get under my skin and make me believe the worst of her.

The only thing it did was bring out the protective beast in me when it came to Jasmine, considering what this man had already taken from her. Done with the conversation, and done with James, I shoved him against the brick wall and braced my forearm at his throat with enough pressure to make his eyes bulge and a wheeze eek past his lips.

I bared my teeth at him, feeling feral. “This is your only warning, you fucker. If I ever hear Jasmine’s name, or any other slander about her, coming from your mouth, you will regret every goddamn word.”

James choked and clawed at the arm I still pressed to his windpipe, restricting his airflow. “She’s the one who betrayed you,” he rasped, still trying to twist things around.

“No, Paula, the receptionist at the facility, betrayed me because of your filthy money.” Shock flashed in his eyes when he realized I knew the truth. “Now I’m going to systematically destroy your life, James. Make you a fucking pariah in CoralGables that no one will do business with or socialize with. You fuck with me and what’s mine—both my parents and Jasmine—and you will pay the price, ten-fold.”

Certain I’d made my point, I released him. He grabbed his throat and choked, even glared at me, but with nothing more to say, I turned around and headed back to the car waiting for me at the curb.

Now, I desperately needed to see the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. If I hadn't already fucked up my chance with her.

“Jeff, take me directly to Jasmine’s apartment, please.”

CHAPTER 27

Eric

Jasmine wasn't home. I'd knocked, firmly, numerous times, but there were no approaching footsteps, no noise from inside, and no answering the door.

Frustration gripped me, and I headed back out of the building. Feeling emotionally and mentally exhausted after the day I'd had so far, I sat down on the concrete stairs leading up to Jasmine's apartment, not quite ready to get back into the car with Jeff until I figured out what to do next.

The only other person who would know where Jasmine was, was Dominique. It had been six weeks since I'd ended things with Jasmine, and the thought of her with another man ripped me to shreds inside. But given her line of work, I knew it was a possibility.

With my stomach in knots, I called Dominique, who I hadn't talked to since leaving for New York to be with my parents.

She answered fairly quickly and didn't mince words, as was her way. “Please tell me you’ve finally come to your senses.”

Wherever Dominique was, I heard voices and noise in the background. “I'm back in Coral Gables and I'm trying to find Jasmine. Is she...” I forced myself to say the words. “Out on a date?”

“I’m not sure I should tell you Jasmine’s business, all things considered.”

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I winced. It wasn't the answer I wanted to hear, but I definitely deserved Dominique's response. "I know I fucked up," I admitted. "I believed something that obviously wasn't even close to being the truth."

Diamonique scoffed. "You're right about that. And I suppose now you want me to clean up the mess you made?"

I sighed, pushing my hands through my dishevelled hair. "I would like your help, so I can clean it up myself."

"Apologies go a long way."

"That goes without saying, but she deserves more than just a regret filled apology from an old man with more pride than he has sense."

Dominique chuckled. "My, my. You really are feeling down. I don't think I've ever seen you in the self-depreciation zone."

I smiled weakly, even though she couldn't see it. "It's the only thing I have going for me right now."

"Well, not the only thing," Dominique countered, almost gleefully. "You're in luck. I have it on good authority that Jasmine has feelings for you—"

"Even now?" I asked incredulously. I didn't expect to hear that. I'd fully anticipated Dominique telling me that Jasmine didn't want anything to do with me. Why would she after the way I'd dismissed and treated her?

“Did your feelings for her stop when you thought she’d talked to The Affluent Collective about your parents? And don’t even try and convince me you aren’t in love with her.”

The fact that Dominique would say such a thing startled me. “What makes you say that?”

“Eric, I’ve never seen you stay with a woman as long as Jasmine, and there’s only one reason why you kept her around so long. Love, darling. Am I right?”

I swallowed hard. I’d already come to terms with my feelings for Jasmine. That yes, I did fall in love with her, despite all the reasons why I shouldn’t have, all the reasons I swore I wouldn’t. I no longer cared about our age difference. I wanted Jasmine in my life, forever, and I’d do whatever it took to keep her there. I would give her anything and everything her heart desired, including the children I knew she wanted. That I wanted with her.

It was a startling realization to have found the one woman I wanted to marry and spend the rest of my life with, but I still didn’t know where I stood with her.

“Yes, you’re right,” I said to Dominique, verifying my feelings for Jasmine.

Dominique gave a little huff over the phone line. “Then don’t undersell Jasmine’s feelings for you, either. When they’re that strong between two people, they don’t just disappear over a little tiff.”

Ours had been far more than a little tiff, but I didn’t correct the other woman. “I… I just need to make this right.”

“Damn right you do. Our girl deserves the grandest gesture you can pull out of your hat,” she replied. “And luckily for you, I also have it on good authority what

Jasmine's been up to lately and where you might find her, and it's not with another man because she's quit the business altogether."

I exhaled a breath, the relief whooshing out of me leaving me light-headed at that news. "Where?" I asked anxiously.

Dominique told me where Jasmine would be that evening, and even before we hung up, I was already thinking and planning and praying that my one shot at redemption worked.

I slid back into the car waiting at the curb and gave Jeff distinct instructions on where to head next, to a jewelry store that only sold custom made, one-of-a-kind pieces. Grand gestures were not my forte, mainly because I'd never wanted to impress another woman the way I desperately needed to convince Jasmine of just how sincere my feelings for her were.

From there, I headed home and showered, shaved, and dressed in a charcoal gray suit. Then I was off again, with Jeff driving me to The Marquee, a quaint little gallery located near the beach that liked to showcase up and coming artisans. Tonight's featured artist was Jasmine Greene, along with half a dozen other new creators showing off their artwork.

All Dominique's doing, I'd discovered during our earlier phone conversation. Wanting to get Jasmine's mind off of me, Dominique had contacted Ceilia Davenport, her good friend and owner of the Marquee—and someone I, too, supported—and once the other woman saw Jasmine's work, she'd made Jasmine's paintings the main draw of the evening.

I arrived at The Marquee a short while after the venue opened to guests. I stepped inside, where dozens of people were milling around the three-story art gallery with wine in hand, their spirits high as they discussed various pieces of artwork.

In a way, I envied their casual conversation and easy laughter, considering the nervous sensation swirling in my stomach, when I was not a man prone to anxiety. No one was here tonight hoping to repair a relationship with the woman they loved. For all these guests, this was a leisurely outing. They were going to drop more money than most made in a year just for something unique to put on their walls or in the halls of their illustrious homes.

These showings were all so incredibly indulgent, yet more than worth it considering the line-up of artists included my Jasmine.

Glass of wine in hand, it was her works that I moved along now. All around me in a large area of the gallery that had been dedicated to her use exclusively, were the fruits of her labor and I eagerly drank it all in, both overwhelmed and so impressed to see this creative side of Jasmine now that she'd allowed it free rein. Bleeding roses and rococo-esque women in shredded ribbons of lace and silk. Voids of dark black ink and wisps of white dancing across them. Her work held an emotional, ethereal quality in all mediums from acrylic to oil to watercolor.

She was wildly, painfully talented. I needed her to know that I appreciated that about her. That I appreciated her. That she was more to me than just a contract, more than just a moment in my life.

She was my entire life. My future.

Hindsight was always twenty-twenty. And right now, I knew more than anything that the window to fix my fuck up was closing in on me, fast.

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“Don’t look so serious, Love. You’ll end up scaring her away before you even get the chance to talk to her properly.”

I sucked in a startled breath. I’d been so in my head, so wrapped up in my worrisome thoughts I hadn’t seen or heard Dominique appear beside me, as if out of thin air. She looked stunning in an emerald-green dress, and I leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Don’t make fun of an old man,” I said playfully. “He’s trying to muster up courage he should have had weeks ago.”

“Eh, weeks ago you’d have probably fumbled your chance at forgiveness, too.” She laughed at the narrow-eyed expression I gave her. “Oh, come on. We’ve known each other long enough that I know you probably would have made an ass of yourself trying to be overly suave, because you don’t know how to let go of that rigid control of yours and express your emotions. But I digress.”

I gave her a mock frown. “You’re so cruel to me.”

“And yet I’m still one of your best friends.” Smiling, she reached out to straighten my tie and the lapels of my suit.

At my age, it was strange to have someone do that for me. It made me feel like a young man all over again, getting straightened out, primmed and preened before prom. Only, the stakes were a little higher now than just the hope that I could get lucky with the pretty girl I was taking as my date.

“Jasmine is going to be walking the floor in about five minutes,” Dominique

continued on. “I did tell her you were back in Coral Gables and planned to attend the showing. But this is her night, so let her mingle with the patrons and then I’ll send her your way in a bit. How does that sound?”

“Sounds like a plan.” I breathed in, then groaned in frustration. “Jesus Christ. I’m forty-six years old. I shouldn’t be so nervous. I should be more confident.”

Dominique chuckled, then she took my face in both her hands, making me look her in the eyes. “What if I told you that women actually like men who are honest about their feelings rather than always trying to hide them by putting on their silly little macho facades?” She smiled and shook her head. “All these years and you still don’t understand that. It’s okay. Jasmine’s an artist, Eric. Sensitive and intuitive. She’s not going to begrudge you your feelings. Just tell her how it is and what you feel. That’s the best way to any woman’s heart. Oh, and a good grovelling never hurts, either.”

With that, Dominique left me. I took a sip of my wine, willing the alcohol to work its magic and calm some of the more fly away edges of my nerves and ground me. As the minutes ticked on, it worked, for the most part. I began to pull back from the gallery hall, knowing it was almost time for Jasmine to make her entrance.

I first noticed the slight parting of the large crowd that was admiring her work. Sure enough, it was Jasmine, walking through the gallery with Dominique at her side, introducing her to guests like a proud mother figure. My heart started pounding hard and fast in my chest at seeing her after so long.

She was radiant. Her champagne-colored dress complimented her flawless ivory skin, hugging every inch of her like a glove with draping around her curves that accentuated her perfect shape. She’d had her hair styled, and her make up done. Simple, elegant. Just enough to highlight the natural beauty she was.

But it was her demeanor that arrested me.

She was so relaxed. So utterly vibrant and confident. This was her element—this place, these people. Her art. As I watched Dominique introduce her to various potential patrons, her elegance wasn't only in her appearance, but the self-assured way she carried herself.

Jasmine was made for this.

Had I had any doubts of that before, they'd have been squashed in that moment. Between her alluring paintings and the woman herself, no one could question that Jasmine belonged here. The only question that remained was: would she belong at my side by the end of the night?

I didn't want my presence to interfere with Jasmine's work here. I wanted her to enjoy all the attention she deserved as potential buyers perused her paintings, without me being a distraction.

I finished my drink, passed it off to a waiter that came by, and withdrew to the balcony just adjacent to the area showcasing her artwork. Outside, I was met with a quiet calm. The buzz of people within was muffled out here. I heard the ocean in the near distance, and I momentarily closed my eyes, letting those sounds give me the solace I needed for what was still to come...and that's when I heard her.

"I didn't expect you to be here."

The sound of her voice washed over me, making my heart ache and beat erratically in turn. I took in a breath before I faced her, overwhelmed with the need to take her in my arms and bury my face in the fragrant curve of her neck. To kiss those soft, pink lips until she moaned my name.

I did none of those things. Just restrained every single one of those urges and remained where I was and smiled at her. “Your pieces are stunning, Jasmine,” I said in a soft tone, meaning it. “I walked around the gallery earlier. They’re exquisite.” And so are you.

She looked at me a moment, as though she was unsure of how to interact with me. Then, that hesitance masked over quickly, and she held her shoulders high. “Well, I’ve had a lot of emotions to channel into my work the last few months—hell, the last few weeks. They say emotion is the best fuel for creativity.”

I nodded in agreement, even though I suspected I’d been the impetus for most of those paintings inside, one way or another. “Indeed.”

There was a beat of silence as we stood apart, more distance between us than I would have liked. It was clear that neither of us knew how to proceed and it was in that moment I realized that for as much as I thought I had prepared for this, I was ill-equipped in the art of how to go about apologizing and groveling.

“Jasmine—”

“Eric—”

We spoke at the same time and gave nervous laughs at the predicament.

“Me first,” she said, taking the lead, her hands clasped together in front of her. “Eric, I’m not sure why you’re here. After what happened between us the last time we saw each other, I didn’t think you’d actively seek me out. Dominique just told me a short while ago that you wanted to see my paintings and speak to me, but I’m not sure there’s anything else that needs to be said.” She swallowed hard, but her gaze remained steady on mine. “You made your feelings very clear that day at my apartment, and I’m...I’m at peace with that.”

Jasmine's voice was stable, but there was no denying the strain of hurt beneath the surface. Hurt that I had caused with my callous words and actions. So much regret washed over me, but I couldn't let that get in the way of what I had to do. What I needed to say in response.

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“I came here to apologize to you, Jasmine,” I said, my tone filled with contrition. “Everything that happened that day...was a disaster. Top to bottom, from the way I handled the information about my parents leaking, to assuming that it was you that did it. I know you would never do anything like that. You’re too kind, with such a caring, compassionate heart. You’re too...everything that I am not, and I lashed out at you because of all the complicated feelings that I have about my parents and where they are. All my insecurities not knowing if what I’ve done as a son is enough or even the right decision. I am so, so sorry for everything that I said to you that day. For believing the worst. I knew James had been at your place, and I just assumed you told him about my parents because that’s how it all looked. How he wanted it to look. I should have known it was James that was the cause of everything.”

I told her about what Chuck at the security firm had discovered, how James had paid Paula for the information about my parents that he then took to The Affluent Collective, but elaborated the details with exaggerations and lies about the care they received.

Jasmine looked stunned. She just stared at me, as if my words had come out in some kind of foreign language.

Finally, she gained her composure and spoke. “He came to my apartment that day to give me information on the person that killed my parents. I didn’t ask for it, and my gut told me that it would cost me...something. I never knew that it would be you.”

I held back that impulse to fold her in my arms, to kiss her, to make her forget this entire conversation in order to prove that she hadn’t lost me—as long as I hadn’t lost her.

But there was more I needed to hear from her. More I wanted to know. “Tell me what happened,” I asked softly.

To my surprise, she relented. “Out of the blue, James came to my apartment with this file in his hands, and he was so goddamn smug. I don’t think I remember a time where he was never smug. And this file contained information about a wealthy family, and how they covered up the fact that their son was the one who was responsible for the hit and run on my parents.”

Jasmine kept her head lowered and her eyes on her hands. Her voice wavered just so, the tremble going all the way down to her fingers. I stepped toward her and took them in my hands, hoping to ground her, and her feelings. I expected her to pull away, but she squeezed my hands, looked up at me, and continued.

“So, after everything that happened between the two of us, I decided that I needed to take a trip. I needed clarity or closure on everything. James had provided me with an address, so my plan was to confront them. Show them all the evidence that painted them to be the terrible people that they were for covering up the accident...but the address James gave me was for a cemetery.”

I frowned in confusion. “A cemetery?”

She nodded, her voice wavering as she continued. “Another one of James’ sick and twisted ways of punishing me, I’m sure. Because the guy that killed my parents was a seventeen-year-old kid at the time and his parents were the ones that covered everything up. And he died. Overdosed a few years later, and then his mom did too of the same thing. Guilt. Guilt over my parents killed them both. Now only the father is left.”

She shook her head, her expression sad. “I met him, you know. He was at the cemetery that day. He said he’d had a strange feeling that he needed to be there. He

said his son wanted to turn himself in. That he'd felt terrible about leaving my parents to die because he'd panicked. But instead of doing the right thing, he and his wife protected their son only to have him die of a drug overdose because he couldn't cope with the guilt."

I took everything in, her pain a palpable thing. Without hesitation, I instinctively wrapped my arms around her and drew her close, needing her to know how much I cared. She stiffened at first, then gradually relaxed against my chest, accepting my show of comfort.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered into her hair, even as I absorbed her warmth and the familiar scent on her skin. "So, now that you know the truth, what are you going to do?"

She glanced up at me, and much to my relief she didn't try to move away. "Honestly? I'm ready to move on. I know my parents wouldn't want me to dwell on what happened. I think they'd be proud of how far I've come from then."

"I know they would." I smiled down at her, and gently caressed my fingers along her cheek. "They would love that you've made a good life for yourself. That you're doing all this, too," I said, gesturing to the gallery just beyond the doors. "You've shown how resilient you are, and you have so much ahead of you in life."

Her eyes misted over, but I didn't miss the vulnerable look in the depths. "Does that include you?" she asked softly.

Hope tightened across my chest. "Do you want it to?"

She nodded, her flattened hands so warm against my chest. "I do...desperately," she whispered, an ache in her voice. "But you believing I could hurt and betray you so easily was excruciating and devastating. I need you to promise me that you'll always

trust me, and believe me, because that's something I can't compromise on."

I nodded solemnly. "Are you giving me a chance to prove that to you?"

"Yeah, I am." She nodded, and her soft smile was everything that had been missing in my life the past few weeks. "I'm really happy that you showed up tonight and apologized. That you let me tell you what really happened. That maybe, possibly, we're going to be okay."

"I promise, we're going to be more than okay," I assured her.

I brushed my fingers through Jasmine's hair. I did not deserve this woman. Not her affections, her trust, nor her willingness to allow me back in her life after I'd been the one to tell her to get out of mine. But here she was, proving to me that even at this place in my life, something new and wonderful could happen.

"May I kiss you?" I asked gently.

She tipped her head up toward mine. "I thought you'd never ask."

Chuckling, I leaned forward, pressing my mouth to hers. Too much time had gone by, and I had missed her, craved her. There was nothing about Jasmine that I didn't want, whether it was her conversations, or her body, her passion for art, the way she accepted me so completely, and how she went about living her life to the fullest.

I deepened the kiss, and she let out a soft moan, pressing her whole body close to mine. Desire instantaneously sparked between us. Her heat was so tempting, her softness causing an ache in my chest and much lower as she chased away the last of my worries and gave me a sense of everything in my world being whole and right.

How could I have ever thought that she would hurt me? How could I have hurt her

instead? Never again, I vowed.

I pulled back slightly, my lips still brushing against hers. “Marry me,” I whispered.

I heard her inhale, and she looked up at me with a startled expression. “What?”

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In a louder voice she couldn't misinterpret, I repeated those words. "I said, marry me. I love you, Jasmine Greene. Nothing will ever change that. I want you—no, I need you—in my life, every single day. And the only way I know how to keep you there for the rest of our lives is to marry you and make you mine."

Her eyes were wide with shock, her lips parted but she seemed unable to speak.

I grinned. "Do you love me?"

"Yes," she breathed.

My heart soared with her answer. "Do you trust me?"

She nodded quickly and whispered, "Yes."

"Then the next answer should come very easily."

I withdrew the black velvet box from my suit pocket and got down on one knee, giving her the traditional proposal because she deserved that, and so much more. She gasped, covering her mouth with her hand as I flipped open the lid, presenting her with the sparkling diamond engagement ring I'd picked out just for her.

"Will you marry me, Jasmine Greene?"

A delighted squeak escaped her, and pure excitement shone in her eyes—a look I was determined to see there every single day. "Yes!" she finally exclaimed. "Yes, I'll marry you!"

Everything in my world aligned in that moment, as if I'd been waiting my whole life to find this woman who made me want to be a better man for her, and I slipped the ring on her finger, a perfect fit. As soon as I was standing again, she wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me enthusiastically. I cupped the back of her head in my hand, holding her close as I slipped my tongue into her mouth, as the moment turned hot and heated and my free hand roamed over the curve of her ass, hauling her closer...

A throat cleared behind us, and Jasmine jumped back, ending the kiss abruptly, much to my disappointment.

"Congratulations, you two," Dominique said, quite happily. "But I'm going to have to interrupt before you create a scandal. Jasmine, you have guests who are interested in purchasing your artwork and have questions for you. Shall I tell them you're otherwise occupied?"

She laughed, the sound joyous as she looked up at me with eyes filled with so much happiness. "No. This celebration can wait a little longer."

Reluctantly, I let her go, because this was her night, after all. I kissed the back of her hand, and she slowly, just as reluctantly stepped back, then drifted away into the other room, practically floating as she walked.

I watched her go, grinning like a fool and not caring who witnessed just how smitten I was with my fiancée.

"I saw that rock on her finger," Dominique said as we headed back into the gallery at a more leisurely pace. "Well done, you."

"Yes, I would absolutely agree," I said, feeling smug.

Jasmine was mine. The other half of my heart and soul and I planned to cherish her every single day.

EPILOGUE

Jasmine

Four months later...Our wedding day

I insisted we get married in a way that Eric's parents could attend the wedding. Which meant planning a small, intimate ceremony that would take place in the beautiful little garden area at the Wellington Later Life Care Facility.

There were only about a dozen people in attendance, and everyone other than Dominique was from the facility—a few of the residents/friends Eric's parents insisted they wanted there, and two aides to watch over the patients to make sure no one lapsed into a disoriented or confused state.

Eric's mother and father were under the impression that we were renewing our vows, and his mother, Emilie, was giddy with excitement as she walked down the aisle before I did and tossed rose petals, at the moment believing that she was the flower girl at a stranger's wedding.

I didn't care. This was exactly what I wanted. Emilie's exuberance was sweet and infectious and Eric watched his mother not with sadness, but with a fond smile on his face as she giggled and finally emptied her basket of rose petals. He'd come to terms with these more difficult moments as they grew more frequent, so patient and loving despite their confusion. He only cared about their well-being, and knowing they had the best of care, which they did.

And right now, they were both very happy being out in the sunshine on a beautiful

day, attending a wedding.

Once the wedding march sounded from a Bluetooth speaker, I started down the white runner toward Eric, only seeing him as I approached where he stood with a minister beneath an archway woven with flowers. His gorgeous blue eyes all but devoured me, taking in my simple but elegantly flared wedding dress, constructed of silk and Chantilly lace. The design was strapless, with a sweetheart neckline and small train.

He looked breathtakingly handsome and distinguished in his black tailored suit, and as I neared there was no mistaking the unconditional love that shone in his eyes. He was my everything. My security and stability and my future. The one person who truly knew every facet of my personality, my hopes and dreams, and spent every day making sure I knew how much he adored me.

I was truly the luckiest woman in the world.

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When I reached him, we glanced out at our small little congregation, and that's when we both saw the recognition on his mother's face, her expression wreathed in pure joy as she watched her son "renew" his wedding vows to his wife. We had no idea how long it would last, but it didn't matter because that little glimpse was enough for Eric to know that he'd given his mother the priceless gift of watching her son get married.

The vows were short and sweet, the kiss Eric gave me once the minister pronounced us husband and wife one of utter possession.

There was no reception, just a huge cake we'd ordered to make sure everyone in the place could enjoy a slice. We stayed just long enough to cut the cake and enjoy a few bites of our own, then someone played an old Sinatra song and Eric danced with his mother—a poignant moment for him, I could tell—while I did the same with his dad, laughing while trying to avoid his clunky feet.

A few minutes after the song ended, the disorientation set in with his mother, and instead of Eric panicking, he let the aide step in and soothe his parents and usher them back to their rooms.

We took that as our cue to leave, because it did his parents no good to be surrounded by "strangers" when they were in that state of confusion.

"That was beautiful," Dominique said, as we walked out together toward the cars waiting to take us to separate places. Dominique to the airport to catch a flight home to Coral Gables, and us to our hotel here in New York.

“Thank you for coming,” I said, kissing her cheek as we reached her vehicle. “It meant everything to us.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. It was a pleasure watching Eric finally marry the one woman who brought this bachelor to his knees. Enjoy your honeymoon in Fiji.”

We planned to. That was the new thing about my husband. He’d learned to relax. To take time for himself. To let that control not rule his life like it used to...well, except in the bedroom, where I definitely liked him on the dominant side.

I cuddled up to Eric as our driver navigated the streets back to the hotel, thinking about the past four months and how much had already changed, in a good way. After Eric told me about the confrontation he had with James, much to my relief James had moved permanently to London since his reputation was ruined in Coral Gables. My art was flourishing, and there was just an overall sense of contentment in my heart that had been missing since before my parents’ deaths.

And I knew that Eric was the reason.

“Thank you for today, for letting my parents be there for the wedding,” he said, bringing me out of my thoughts and my attention back to my husband.

I smiled up at him. “Of course. I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. I think they had a good time.”

Eric chuckled and shook his head. “I saw my father stepping all over your feet when you danced with him. He used to be a great dancer, but I think he’s forgotten how.”

There was no pain in his voice, just a statement of fact. “Maybe, but it doesn’t matter.”

“No, it doesn’t,” he agreed as a wicked grin touched his lips. “What does matter is getting you up to the room and stripping you out of this dress so I can do unspeakable things to you.”

I bit my bottom lip, my body already on board with the idea. “Oh, yes, please.”

His eyes softened as he brushed his fingers along my jaw, staring deeply into my eyes. “In case you didn’t know, or needed to hear it a millionth time, I fucking adore you, Mrs. Maxim.”

I nuzzled my cheek into his warm palm, loving how my new married name sounded. “You’re not half bad yourself, Mr. Maxim,” I teased.

“Half bad?” he mocked and arched a brow. “You’ll be changing your tune when you’re exhausted from all the orgasms I plan to make you endure.”

I groaned, because there was no doubt in my mind that he’d keep that promise. This man was very generous with my pleasure, before taking his.

We arrived at the posh hotel and tried to behave on our way to the penthouse suite, but Eric was an impatient man. Halfway up in the elevator, he was already kissing me senseless, his hands roaming over my hips and his lower body keeping mine pinned to the wall.

The elevator opened directly onto our floor, and he swept me up in his arms and carried me straight to the bedroom. Once there, he set me on my feet and didn’t waste time, immediately trying to figure out the complicated buttons securing the back of my wedding dress.

He growled in frustration when those satin buttons kept slipping through his big fingers and not the eyelet. “I’m going to fucking rip this dress off your body.”

I gasped, secretly loving his dominant voice. “Don’t you dare!”

“It’s either that, or fuck you with the dress on,” he replied, sounding completely serious.

“Neither,” I said, glancing over my shoulder at him, his eyes already dark and hot with desire for me. “I want us both naked.”

He released another low, deep sound of annoyance for the uncooperative buttons and his fumbling fingers. “You’re going to pay for this,” he teased.

“I hope so,” I said cheekily, and giggled as he cursed a few more times until the dress finally dropped to the floor.

I striped out of my bra and panties while watching him quickly shed all his clothes. I licked my lips at the jut of his cock, more than willing to get down on my knees and pleasure him with my mouth.

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He shook his head and pushed me back onto the bed. “Don’t worry, wife, I’m going to defile that mouth later,” he said, pushing my legs apart and laying between my spread thighs, his breath hot on my sex. “But I’m still thinking about that ‘half bad’ comment and I’ve got something to prove.”

No, he really didn’t. He was a generous lover, always, but tonight he was exceptional. He made good on his promise, tormenting me with hands and fingers and tongue, and it didn’t take long before I had his hair in my grip and I was crying out his name, writhing from all the exquisite, blissful pleasure he forced me to endure.

Three earth-shattering orgasms later, while I was still catching my breath, he moved up and over my body and entered me in one long, hard, deliberate thrust—lodging himself so deep I gasped and clutched onto his shoulders for what I knew would be a wild ride.

I expected him to move, to fuck me relentlessly, but he remained still. His forearms were braced on the bed beside me, and he stared down into my eyes, so serious. So tender. So filled with the kind of love I’d dreamed of and hoped for and was now mine.

“I want a baby with you,” he said, brushing away a few strands of hair from my cheek, even as I felt his cock pulse deep inside of me as he held back his own need to finish. “A family.”

I swallowed hard, my heart soaring and so much emotion gathering in my chest. We’d discussed kids before getting married, but our decision hadn’t been a definitive thing, mostly because it hadn’t been a make-or-break deal for me—and I knew that

Eric took his age into consideration, now at forty-seven. Truly, all that mattered to me was that I had Eric in my life, and he'd given me that promise.

But I couldn't deny that the thought of children filling up our home made me undeniably ecstatic. "Eric, are you sure?"

"No," he said with a shake of his head before a smile curved his lips, while one of his hands trailed down the side of my body in a heated caress. "Make that babies. I want more than one. As soon as possible because as you know, I'm not getting any younger."

I rolled my eyes, even as joy rushed through me. "Yes, you're absolutely decrepit."

He pinched my ass, making me yelp in surprise. "I wouldn't go that far." His playful manner shifted into something more serious again. "What do you think?"

"Yes," I said, nodding and beyond delighted. "I want everything with you."

He smiled, looking incredibly happy as he finally started moving inside of me, a new purpose to his thrusts. "Okay, then everything it is."

And for the rest of our lives together, that's exactly what he gave me...everything.