



His Curvy Temptation

Author: Jenna Cook

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: She's off limits. But for her, I'm ready to break all the rules.

Reckless. Rough. Ruled by my impulses. That's the man I used to be. I've spent the last ten years rebuilding myself. Becoming a man who follows the law. Obeys the rules. Respects the limits.

But then she walks into my office. Soaking wet, wide-eyed, and afraid. Temptation on a silver platter. Putty in my hands.

I want her more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. There are certain lines I don't cross anymore. But for her? I just might.

Jenna Cook writes steamy, short, standalone romances! No cheating, no cliffhangers, and a HEA guaranteed! His Curvy Temptation is a standalone novella featuring a possessive alpha hero and the curvy woman he loves.

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Andy

“Bad news. Deepti quit. We are screwed.”

“Good morning to you, too!” I say to Tricia, walking to the back room of The Angel Spa.

I find my locker and unload my heavy backpack into it along with my well-worn flannel hoodie. Wednesdays are hard; I’m juggling a full time job as a massage therapist along with grad school, and on Wednesdays I have four hours of classes before I even begin my shift at the spa.

By the end of the day, I’m usually exhausted, with sore feet and tired eyes.

“No two weeks notice,” Tricia continues, having followed me to the back room to continue her venting session. “No warning. Not even a phone call. She texted me. Can you believe that?”

“I sure can,” I say as I change into my uniform: a pair of crisp white scrubs and plain black shoes.

“Did she tell you she was going to quit?” Tricia presses, narrowing her eyes.

I think for a moment. Did Deepti, my flighty friend of nearly five years, tell me that she was going to quit her job without notice?

No.

But did I see it coming?

Absolutely, yes.

How did I see it coming? Because a few weeks ago, Deepti met a man. And when Deepti meets a new man, she becomes impulsive and unpredictable. She dyes her hair, quits her jobs, moves into their apartments, takes up new hobbies that she was never interested in before...

It's unhealthy, and it always makes me worried for her. And after five years of watching this cycle, I've learned Deepti's patterns and habits.

Still, I'm irritated that Deepti quit The Angel Spa in this way. I was her internal referral, and she was only here for a few months. This is not going to look good for me.

"She didn't tell me anything," I say to Tricia. "I'm as surprised as you are."

Tricia scrunches her nose, the thing that she always does when she's annoyed. I know that she, who is technically my boss at the spa, means to look intimidating when she does this. But no matter how angry she is, the nose scrunch always reminds me of one of those fluffy bunnies at the petting zoo.

I look away from her quickly, hoping that she can't tell that I'm nearly laughing right now.

"Well, like I said," she continues. "We're fucked. With Leah on her honeymoon, Deepti and you were our only massage therapists. And Deepti has a travel appointment today with a client we can't afford to lose. So I guess this means..."

I groan.

“Tricia please no,” I say. “I just came from classes. And if you haven’t noticed, it’s about to rain like hell!”

I glance outside at the cloudy sky, which seems to be growing darker right before my eyes, in sharp contrast to the bright and sterile white interior of the spa.

“It’s the only way to make it work,” Tricia sighs. “I’m not happy about it either, obviously.”

I open the scheduling binder on the desk nearby and flip through it.

“I’m booked solid today anyway,” I announce with satisfaction. “We have to cancel.”

“We can’t cancel.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I told you, we cannot afford to lose this client. He brings in new business regularly and aside from that, he’s high profile. We don’t piss off our high profile clients.”

“If he can’t understand that we’re short-staffed and it’s outside of our control then that’s not my problem,” I snap.

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I turn back to Tricia, expecting to still see that frustrated nose scrunch on her face. Instead she's sitting on the bench by the lockers, looking totally deflated.

"Trish, I'm sorry," I say. "I'm just...I'm really tired. Midterms are coming and I've been burning the candle at both ends a lot lately. I didn't mean to take it out on you."

"I know," she nods. "And I get it. I don't want to go to travel clients either, there's a reason we no longer accept travel appointments anymore. But this guy is a legacy client, he's been with us for a long time, and if we lose him we're in trouble with management."

"I thought youweremanagement," I point out.

"You know what I mean," Tricia says, rolling her eyes and pointing a finger upwards towards the ceiling. "Managementmanagement. The big dogs."

I nod. She means the owner of The Angel Spa, who thankfully doesn't drop in very often. But when he does, he's a complete asshole to all of the staff and nitpicks over the tiniest imperfections. The most stressful days ever are ones where Nick decides to pop in for an unannounced visit — "just to check in."

"I just got this promotion, too," Tricia continues. "You know how hard I had to work for this promotion. And now, my first month, we're going to lose a high profile client that Nick personally knowsby name."

"It wouldn't be your fault, though!" I exclaim.

“You think Nick would care about that?”

“No,” I sigh. “He wouldn’t care. He never cares about the details.”

“Exactly.”

I feel a pang of guilt in my stomach. It’s my fault that Deepti was even hired here. And in hindsight, it was incredibly dumb of me to recommend my unreliable friend for a job at The Angel.

I guess I thought that Deepti would be more respectful here, seeing as I pulled strings for her to get her the job.

This is my problem, though. I’m always giving people more chances than they deserve. And I have a hard time saying no to people, especially to my friends.

“I’ll do the travel appointment,” I sigh. “Cancel my appointments.”

“Thank you,” Tricia says, looking up at me. “Really. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I owe you a drink.”

“Since it’s my fault we’re in this mess, maybe I’m the one who owes you the drink,” I reply, sitting on the bench beside her and draping my arm around her. “And we’ll get through this. Hell, every massage therapist in Manhattan would like to work for The Angel. We’ll have Deepti’s replacement soon enough.”

Tricia nods.

“You’re doing a great job, you know,” I continue, because I know she needs to hear those words. “You earned this promotion and you’re doing great.”

She smiles weakly at me but I can tell she doesn't believe what I'm saying.

"Besides," I continue with a shrug. "And if Nick has a problem with you, he has a problem with me and the rest of the staff too. He knows that if he ever fired you, we'd all go on strike. And then he really would be screwed."

She slumps forward, leaning her forehead on my shoulder.

"You're the best, Andy."

By the time I get off the subway, it's pouring rain. The office building where the appointment takes place is still a couple of blocks away from my stop, and I jog between awnings for shelter along the sidewalk, lugging Angel Spa's folding massage table along with me.

The heavy weight of it bangs against my leg as I walk fast, promising that tomorrow I'll probably have a large bruise on my thigh.

This is why we don't do travel appointments anymore. Last year, we finally phased them out entirely...except for a very small number of "high profile" clients who agreed to pay a premium fee for the convenience.

A premium fee that does not make its way into the massage therapist's paycheck due to the way that The Angel Spa pays us. So even though this appointment is much more work for me, and even though we charge the client much more than we would charge them for a standard in-spa appointment, I will get paid the same lousy hourly rate as always.

By the time I get in the door of the office building, I'm soaking wet from head to toe

and my arm feels numb from awkwardly carrying the heavy table. My hair sticks to the sides of my face in stringy dark brown pieces and I am almost positive that my mascara is running.

I know that I look terrible.

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The horrified look on the receptionist's face confirms this.

"Oh my goodness," she says, standing to her feet. "Let me get you a towel!"

"Thank you," I gasp, leaning the folding table against the wall.

Her heels click against the floor as she crosses the room, handing me a fluffy warm towel that she produced from seemingly nowhere. I pat my face dry first, swiping it beneath my eyes to clean up my makeup, and then wring my dripping wet hair out as best as I can.

"It's really coming down out there," the receptionist murmurs. "Unbelievable, after the drought we had."

I grunt in reply, now patting my clothes to try to mop up some of the water on my scrubs. It's useless at some point though, because I am thoroughly saturated. The top half of my shirt in particular is so wet that the white fabric clings to my skin, slightly transparent and revealing my white bra underneath.

My humiliation complete, I hand the towel back to the receptionist with a thank you.

"Elevator's over there, and you'll need a code to be able to take it to the seventeenth floor," she says, writing a code down on a sticky note and handing it to me.

"Thanks," I say, picking up the travel table. "And thanks again for the towel. You're a lifesaver."

She smiles.

With my hair out of my face, I can finally look around and take in my surroundings. The lobby is luxurious, outfitted with sleek black marble tile and deep green wallpaper. The elevator doors are bronze and they open with a ding to welcome me inside, the interior mirrored and just as opulent as the reception area behind me.

I find the keypad to the elevator and enter the code with shaky fingers, still shivering slightly from the cold rain. The elevator doors close with another ding and I ascend, going directly to the seventeenth floor without any stops in between.

When the elevator doors open again, I'm let out into an equally luxurious room. Same matching black tile from the reception area below, but now with charcoal gray walls that give the space a foreboding aura — more like a villain's lair or the Bat-cave than the office of a stuffy businessman.

Great floor to ceiling windows line the wall opposite of the elevator, and in front of the windows sits a massive wooden desk with a black leather chair behind it.

There is no name tag on the desk, no label anywhere announcing my location. But the sheer opulence and grand scale of the room say it all; there's no doubt that I'm in the right place, the office of the one and only Elijah Stone, a man who I was told is very important and very wealthy.

But..where the hell is he?

"Hello?" I call out as I step into the vast, unoccupied office.

My shoes are still wet, squeaking loudly as I take clumsy, lopsided steps. I'm so tired from the trip over here that I have no idea where I'm going to find the strength to give a ninety minute deep tissue massage. All I want to do is change into some clean dry

clothes and curl up in bed.

“Hello?” I say again.

Annoyance pricks at the back of my neck. After going to all of this trouble just to make his precious traveling massage appointment happen, he’s not even here. We could have canceled, and I’d be back at the spa right now instead of in this deserted office, tending to my loyal regulars who were disappointed that I had to move their appointments to another day.

On the wall to the left there’s a brown tufted sofa. I wobble over to it and sit down, letting the traveling massage table rest against my knees.

How long do I stay and wait before leaving?

I text Tricia, but she doesn’t respond. The only other person I could call is Nick...and I’ll be damned if I’m calling my boss to talk about this. I’d probably get yelled at just for bothering him.

I glance at my watch. It’s nearly a quarter past four. At this rate, I’ll probably have to go directly home after this appointment since The Angel Spa locks its doors at six on Wednesdays.

Sighing loudly, I pass the time on my phone for a while, answering an email from my professor and then scrolling mindlessly through social media.

As if I needed any help with my bad mood, a post from Deepti slides into view on my screen. She’s got her arms wrapped around a sullen-looking man with a heavy brow, and she’s grinning from ear to ear. A pair of bedazzled mouse ears is atop her head and she’s tagged her location: Disney World, Orlando, Florida.

Of course.

She's somewhere warm and sunny taking photos with Mickey Mouse and eating ice cream with her man-of-the-month while I'm here covering her appointment, rain-soaked and freezing to the bone.

Beneath the photo she's written a caption.

Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away. I love you, Aiden! Thank you for being my partner in crime. #yolo

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I begin to type a public comment beneath the photo, but think better of it. Instead I send Deepti a text.

“You seriously quit the spa without giving notice? And then you post about your getaway trip to Disney World knowing I’ll see it? What the fuck?”

Within a minute, my phone shows that Deepti has read my text. The typing bubble appears and I wait for her reply, growing angrier by the second. But then the typing bubble disappears.

No response from Deepti.

And now, because I can’t help myself, I fire off another text message.

“Hope you’re having a blast. I know I’m not. At Elijah Stone’s office right now filling in for you. Took the subway and walked in the rain, and he’s not even here. Not my fault, but Nick will probably grill me about it anyway. Maybe you won’t be the only one of us who is jobless soon. Thanks again!”

I lock my phone before I really lose my temper and say worse things that I’ll regret later. That’s when I look at the time again. It’s nearly half past four. The rain has slowed down and I think I can see a tiny ray of sun peeking through the gunmetal clouds.

This might be my shot at getting home without having to duck through the raindrops all over again.

I stand wearily, picking the table up by the handle. Frustration is burning within my chest. I look around the large room, taking in the luxurious furnishings. This man, whoever he is, must have everything he wants in life.

Every convenience that money can buy is at his fingertips. And that's what I am to people like him; a convenience to be bought.

"Thanks a ton, Elijah Stone!" I call out, my loud voice echoing off the empty walls and marble floor. "Really appreciate your wasting my time. Have a great day! And by have a great day, I mean that I hope you step on a lego...or six."

I taper off weakly, feeling foolish for talking to myself. I walk back to the elevator, fighting the temptation to kick over the nearby standing lamp that looks expensive and fragile.

Pressing the elevator button, I switch the hefty weight of the massage table from one hand to the other to give my right arm a break.

"If people as wealthy as you even have legos," I mutter under my breath. "You probably don't even know what legos are. Playing with bars of gold as a child instead...or...whatever."

The bronze doors to the elevator open with a ding and I'm about to step inside when I hear a deep masculine voice speak from right behind me.

"As a matter of fact, I do know what legos are."

When I hear Andy's voice coming from my office, I walk out of my relaxation room prepared to fire her on the spot. Being late is bad enough, but showing up and bad mouthing me on top of this is more than I'm prepared to tolerate.

But when I come out and get a look at her, my annoyance quickly fades.

I get a massage every week for relaxation, to decompress from the stress of my job, but a hot woman in a soaking wet white shirt might be even better.

She's full figured and curvy, the kind of hourglass body that drives men insane. Her hair is deep brown and falls around her face in wet ribbons, the ends still dripping water onto the nearly transparent fabric stretching over her chest. Big brown eyes, pink cheeks, and rosy plump lips that look like an invitation.

I make a mental note to send a thank you to Nick. When he said he was sending over a substitute massage therapist, I was disappointed. But this woman looks heaven sent, earning every bit of the name The Angel Spa.

Her wide eyes are staring at me in shock.

"I'm so sorry," she stammers. "I didn't know...I didn't know you were..."

"Within earshot?" I ask, raising a brow.

I can tell that she's intimidated and flustered and strangely, I find it fucking adorable, especially knowing how fierce and angry she sounded just moments ago when she thought that I couldn't hear her.

"Please," she groans. "Don't tell Nick about this. I'm begging you. I'll give you a voucher for a free massage and..."

Her voice fades as she looks around the office behind us.

“Well, I guess a voucher for a free massage isn’t impressive to a guy like you,” she sighs. “So it probably doesn’t make up for much. But...I’m sorry, I’mreallysorry. Please don’t tell my boss.”

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I hold up a hand.

“It’s fine,” I say. “My receptionist should have given you better directions. She probably didn’t realize you wouldn’t know where the relaxation room is.”

“The relaxation room?” she asks.

I lean forward and take the heavy folding table from her grip. She smells like vanilla and cinnamon, literally mouth watering, like the way a bakery might smell. Between this and the way her eyelashes seem to flutter when I come close to take the table, I can’t help it; my cock stirs awake like it’s been summoned.

“I’ll show you,” I say, glancing at the name tag above her breast. “Follow me...Andy.”

I lead her across my office to a door to the right. Inside the relaxation room, I lean the travel table against the wall.

“They should have told you,” I say, gesturing to the full sized massage table in the middle of the room. “I had my own table set up here for these appointments. So you didn’t need to drag that thing across town.”

“Of course,” she groans.

“Didn’t Deepti leave you some notes?” I ask with a frown.

“No. That’s...Deepti didn’t have a lot of time to prepare us before she left,” she says,

looking around the room. “It’s a long story. She’s no longer with Angel Spa, though, so I’m your substitute for now.”

“Just a substitute?” I ask before I can stop myself. “Just for today?”

“Or until we find a replacement,” she says with a professional smile. “It shouldn’t take very long. But don’t worry; we will make sure you don’t experience any interruption to your routine. We can still honor your standing weekly appointments.”

I push back the disappointment in my stomach over this news. It’s stupid; a woman like this undoubtedly has a boyfriend who would like to kick my ass if he knew what was racing through my mind right now. And aside from that, it’s probably a huge breach of policy for the therapists to accept dates from their clients.

Not that this would normally stop me. But Nick, the owner of the place, is an old business partner and I’d rather not mix business with pleasure when possible.

Still, he’s making it pretty fucking hard for me to do that when he sends over a goddess like this. It’s practically a taunt.

“So,” Andy says with a shy smile. “Go ahead and undress to your comfort level and lay down beneath the sheet. I’ll be back in a couple of minutes.”

Undress to my comfort level. Shit, I’ll undress all the way down to nude. And I don’t need to cover up with a sheet, either.

I tell myself to behave, though. Again - no mixing business with pleasure, right? Still, as I remove my clothes and settle onto the table, I’m already mentally planning what I’d like to do to her. If she were anyone else, showed up to my office soaking wet with those curves barely concealed behind see through clothes, I’d have her bent over my desk by now, taking her from behind while her screams of pleasure echoed

through my office.

Fuck.

Andy opens the door slowly.

“Ready?” she asks.

I mumble an affirmative reply, my face in the little hole of the headrest. All I can see is her shadow and then her feet as she walks around, getting things ready. She turns off the light, using the little warm lamp in the corner for light.

“Is there anything specific you’d like for me to work on today?” she asks.

Yeah. My cock.

“Shoulders,” I mutter through clenched teeth. I nearly flinch when her hand makes contact with my right shoulder, kneading the spot between my shoulder blade and my neck.

“Wow. You’re pretty tense,” she says.

“You have no idea,” I mutter.

“Sorry?”

“I said yeah, you’re right,” I say.

“Computer work?”

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“Yeah.”

I begin to say more but I have to stop myself, because she begins spreading warm oil down my back, her small hands surprisingly strong as they knead away the tension.

“Let me know if you want it harder.”

She’s got to be fucking with me now, right? Surely she’s making innuendo on purpose.

No. She’s not. She’s just doing her job, and despite my best intentions I’m still managing to be a huge perv inside of my own head. Can you blame me though? I’m naked and a hot woman is rubbing my body down with oil.

Normally I drift off to sleep during a massage but with Andy, I’m wide awake. Her hands on my skin feel like hot coals, intense and impossible to ignore, impossible to drift to sleep while they’re on me. But even though I’m not falling asleep like I usually would, I still manage to forget about work, about the spreadsheets and proposals that wait for me on my desk, about the deals I’m trying to close and the people I need to meet for dinner tonight.

Everything goes away except for Andy and her touch.

I’ve never been able to do this before, not with anyone else. Is it lust? Sure, I’m drawn to Andy in a sexual way that I can’t deny, but lust doesn’t normally make me forget about everything else.

There's something about her that must be different.

Or maybe you just need to get laid really badly.

The time slips away from me. Except to occasionally ask me about the pressure ("Do you want it harder?") or to reposition my arms, she doesn't speak to me. It's all quiet, and I focus on her smell, the light, barely there scent of vanilla and rose.

When the massage is over, I can't seem to squash the disappointed feeling still lingering in the pit of my stomach.

Angel Spa would hire a replacement for Deepti, and then what?

I wouldn't see her again.

Would I even see her next week?

I nearly ask her the question as we walk to the elevator. I notice with deepening disappointment that Andy's shirt has completely dried, no longer acting as a see-through veil between my eyes and her bra.

When the elevator opens, she glances back at me nervously.

"You won't tell my boss...?" she asks. "About, you know. Before."

I want to laugh. Her eyes are wide and she looks like she's ready to jump back and away from me. Does she really find me that intimidating? Or maybe she's just afraid of losing her job. I frown. Is Nick a scary guy? Maybe the idea of being chewed out by the owner is what has her looking so concerned.

"Your secret is safe with me," I say, bowing my head a little.

She nods, hovers for a moment as though she's waiting for something...then rushes into the elevator.

The doors close behind her and I wonder if I'm ever going to see her again. And then I realize that Andy had me so distracted that I forgot to give her the customary cash tip.

She must think I'm the cheapest rich guy in the world.

3

Andy

"What. The. Fuck."

"Why are you so angry?"

"Shall I count the reasons? You quit the Angel Spa without giving notice, first of all-"

"I did give my notice, Nick said I had to-"

"And then!" I continue, talking over Deepti. "I have to cover your travel client who is...who is..."

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“Dreamy?” Deepti completes my sentence with a sigh. “Built like one of those Greek God statues I saw when I went on vacation with my parents last summer? Ridiculously wealthy? Smells like heaven? With a voice that makes you wet as soon as you-”

“Okay that’s enough!” I groan. “No, I wasn’t going to say anything like that! Shit. I was going to say, he’s a friend of Nick’s and he has this whole entire room set up in his office specifically for massages that I didn’t even know about.”

Deepti sighs.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I should have told you about that! I was just so pissed off at Nick and then Aiden offered to take me away for the week to get my mind off of things and I had no signal on the plane and –”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I say. “Who the hell is Aiden?”

“Hello? My boyfriend, Aiden? I told you about him.”

“Right,” I say, pacing my kitchen and pinching the bridge of my nose. “Of course. How could I forget Aiden? I mean, you’ve known him for so long. How insensitive of me to forget his name.”

“Save the lecture,” Deepti replies dryly. “Aiden is great, okay? He’s different. And I needed that trip to Disney World after the stress I’ve been dealing with. Nick is such an asshole, I have no idea how you’ve worked for him for so long!”

“I hardly see the guy so that helps,” I say. “What happened between you two? Did he fire you?”

“No,” Deepti says. “I quit. After he screamed at me in the towel room and called me a b-word, that is.”

“He did not,” I gasp.

“Yep. A stupid, empty-headed b-word,” she says. “Well, obviously I’m not going to take that kind of disrespect from him or from anyone else, so I quit on the spot. But Andy, I did give notice and I had every intention of working for two more weeks. Nick is the one who told me to turn in my badge and leave immediately. So I did. I thought he would have told you.”

“Nope,” I reply.

“I can’t believe he let everyone think I just randomly walked out,” Deepti groans. “I mean, how could you even believe something like that about me?”

“I don’t know,” I reply carefully. “I guess you’re always like this when you meet a new guy so it didn’t seem that surprising. You could have texted me, you know.”

“It happened so fast. That morning I was quitting my job, and I was packed and on a plane to Florida within an hour. Aiden insisted. It was so spur of the moment and romantic!”

The kettle on the counter begins to whistle, and I pause my pacing to pour the steaming water into my favorite polka dotted mug.

“Well,” I say eventually, not wanting to encourage a long gushing session from Deepti about Aiden. “I wish someone would have warned me about this guy. Elijah

Stone? I googled him and he's kind of a big deal."

"Kind of?" Deepti asks. "Yeah, he's only the hottest single guy in the city, Andy. Trust you not to know that, though."

"I don't keep a running catalog of single men," I laugh. "I barely have time to study for my finals."

"You and your sensible priorities," Deepti replies. "Well, yeah. What else is there to say about Elijah? He's got the hardest body I've ever laid hands on, and the way he speaks in that low growl-y voice makes me want to do bad things to him."

"Yeah..." I say. "Um, I noticed he's very attractive. Especially without his clothes on. But I feel bad for even saying that, I'm supposed to be a professional. It's wrong that I'm even thinking of him in that way."

"You're a professional but you're also a human being," Deepti reminds me. "It's not like you drooled on him or something. You didn't drool on him, right?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, then what's the harm in looking? We have eyes and hormones, we see a man like Elijah Stone, we're going to notice."

"I guess so," I reply.

"So once you found the relaxation room, how did it go?"

I think back to the appointment. I was so distracted by my attraction to Elijah that I don't think I can remember any details of the massage, just performing the motions automatically while my mind wandered and my eyes roamed.

Guiltily, of course.

“It was fine,” I say.

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“Yeah he’s pretty easy going for a rich client,” Deepti says knowingly. “Never makes a peep. Well, one time he complained about the lavender oil blend that I used, which is ridiculous because if anybody needs extra help relaxing it’s that guy.”

“Uh huh,” I reply, not knowing what else to say. To be honest, my mind is still back in Elijah Stone’s office, though I left hours ago.

“Well, I know it must have sucked to drag that horrible traveling table across town in the rain, but you have to admit, the giant tip makes it worthwhile right?”

“Tip?” I ask, my mind snapping back to the present.

“Yeah,” Deepti says slowly. “He tipped you right?”

“No,” I groan. “I didn’t even think about that. I never forget to count my tip after an appointment but he didn’t even tip at all and I was too awestruck to even notice! Damn, he must have been really disappointed in my service, huh?”

“That’s not like him,” Deepti says. “I mean, even if you did an awful job, a man like him doesn’t seem like the type to cheap out on the tip.”

“He never complained,” I groan. “Never said a word, just like you said. And he acted as though he’d like me to be back for an appointment again, he asked whether we’d have a replacement soon...Unless he wanted to know this to find out whether he’d have to suffer from my bad massages again. Fuck! That’s probably it.”

“I’m sure that’s not it,” Deepti replies quickly. “Come on, you’re, like, way better at

this than I am! You probably seemed like a free upgrade compared to me!”

“You’re just being nice,” I sigh. “I mean, if he thought I did a good job, he would have tipped me like he normally tipped you. But he didn’t. He just walked me to the elevator.”

“He walked you to the elevator?” Deepti asks. “That’s...interesting.”

“What? Why? He never walked you to the elevator?”

“Nope.”

I lean against the kitchen counter and watch the steam swirling off the surface of my cup of tea. Learning that Elijah Stone hated my service is just the icing on the cake when it comes to this crappy day. All of that effort to get to the travel appointment, and for what?

“Let’s just hope he doesn’t call in a complaint to Nick,” I mutter.

“Andy, you’re overthinking this,” Deepti says. “Elijah is a nice client! I’m sure it was just some kind of misunderstanding. Maybe he plans to send you a digital tip through the app, or something.”

“Maybe,” I say.

I can tell Deepti is in damage control mode, trying her best to comfort me even though the situation seems pretty obvious to me.

“I’m sorry that I assumed you quit the spa on the spot,” I say, my voice softening. “I should have given you more credit than that. I should have reached out to you for the full story first.”

“Maybe,” Deepti says lightly. “I don’t know. Maybe I deserved it – I mean, I am a huge flake. But come on girl, you know I wouldn’t try to sabotage the opportunity you gave me like that!”

“Thanks,” I say. “You’re a great friend. Next time you decide to quit your job and go to Disney World though, maybe shoot me a text message and tell me what’s going on?”

“Better yet, I’ll just take you with me!”

* * *

The next week rolls around and I groan on Wednesday morning when I realize what day it is. Even with the new massage therapist we hired, the workload at Angel Spa has been tough. And once again it’s Wednesday, the busiest day of the week where I must leave my last class of the morning not to go back to my apartment and retreat to my comfortable bed, but instead work on my feet until seven or eight o’clock.

I know my busy days are my own fault. It’s my final year in business school and I wanted to get everything over with by taking all of the classes I could in the same semester. When I was registering for classes, signing up for so many seemed appealing — sure it would be a tough semester. But then I would be done.

Free.

With my degree completed soon, there will be no more homework. No more exams and study sessions in the library. Just me versus the real world, where the true adventure can finally begin.

That adventure being owning my own business; owning my own spa.

I don't dare tell Nick about this dream of mine. I keep it quiet, my own little secret, because I know that if Nick ever caught wind of my ambition he'd rip it to shreds. And honestly, I'm not sure that my confidence can handle that kind of thing. I think I'm smart...I think I can do this, can run my own business. But a small part of me is scared to death of failure.

So whenever Nick asks me about school, I pretend that I'm studying History instead.

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History, he would snort. What a useless thing to study. What can you even do with a degree like that?

Angel Spa is lonely without Deepti. She was my closest friend at work, and without her, there are only the new trainees and Tricia.

Tricia is great and all, but she's so dang serious all the time. Since Nick finally promoted her, she's nervous all the time and humorless, constantly overworked and exhausted.

Even though she can be pretty uptight and never misses the chance to lecture me about the proper way to roll our spa towels, I love Tricia.

I know that one day, if I ever open a spa of my own, she'll be the first person I hire. And she won't have to work her way up to a management job either; she'll be given it automatically, because she deserves it.

"Hey Trish," I say breezily as I enter the back room of the spa. She's hunched over the appointment book, a deep furrow between her brows.

"That posture is awful for you, you know," I say to her.

She straightens and sets the appointment book aside, yawning as she stretches her arms to the ceiling.

"I'm so tired," she says through another giant yawn. "Nick had me here until three in the morning polishing the floors."

“Are you serious?” I ask, dumbfounded. “Why? We have a building maintenance crew for that!”

“He says the maintenance crew always misses the corners and the nook by the cabinets,” she shrugs.

“That’s such BS!” I exclaim. “Seriously, floor polishing? Why did you have to be the one to do it? Didn’t you work all day yesterday, as well?”

She nods and wipes the inner corner of her eye with her knuckles.

“Yeah,” she says. “But it’s fine. He paid me for it.”

“Pay for work is customary, yes,” I say dryly. “But that doesn’t make it right. And now you’re here this morning, too. When’s the last day you took a day off, Trish?”

“A few weeks ago,” she says. “For my son’s doctor appointment.”

“That’s not exactly a day off,” I reply. “I mean like a break.”

She shrugs.

“It’s fine, Andy,” she says. “Really.”

There’s a tone of finality in her voice and I know better than to press her. I know that Tricia needs this job even more than I do, being a young single mother with a nine year old boy to take care of. So while I might be fed up with Nick’s crap, Tricia isn’t in a position to tell Nick no.

Kind of like how I’m not in a position to be like Deepti, and run off with a man I just met to Disney World, leaving reality behind.

Sometimes I wish I could. But then I remember that things will be easier after exams, and that my hard work will be worth it.

“Travel appointment today,” Tricia says. “So don’t get too comfortable.”

“What? Again?” I blink at her. “Don’t tell me it’s that Elijah guy. I told you, let the new girl handle the travel appointment. Especially for that guy.”

“What’s the deal?” Tricia frowns. “Was he rude to you or something?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s not a big deal, I guess. He just, he didn’t tip me. I don’t think he likes me. And...”

I don’t complete my sentence. I’m about to tell Tricia about how the man also overheard my rant about him and his rich ways, but I doubt she needs the added stress of worrying that I offended an important client.

“Well,” Tricia says. “I’m not sure why he didn’t tip you, but he certainly seems to have liked your service because he called here this morning to make sure you would be the one to show up for his appointment today.”

“That’s...surprising.”

“Maybe he’s not much of a tipping person,” she says. “You know how people are. It’s like a culture thing or whatever.”

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I nod. I don't want to tell her anything more, like the fact that healwaystipped Deepti for a massage, and generously so at that.

"Four o'clock," Tricia says, nodding at the clock on the wall. "You better get going or you'll be late."

I exit the spa, my hands free of the burden of carrying the giant table this time. That's at least one thing to be grateful for, I guess. But at the same time I can't quell the nerves in my stomach as I make my way to Elijah's office, wondering why the hell he requested me specifically.

Maybe he wants to tell you off to your face, I think.

But that's crazy. Why would he waste his time like that? Or his money, for that matter!

When I get to the building, the familiar receptionist remembers me.

"All dry this time!" she says with a smile. "I'm sure you're grateful for that."

"I am," I agree, walking to the elevator.

"Mr. Stone asked me to remind you," she says behind me. "That he has a room in his office for his appointment. He'll be waiting there. It's the big door to the right of his desk."

I smile grimly.

“I remember,” I say. “Thank you for the reminder.”

“No problem!”

She’s so damn cheerful, a contrast to my own stormy, nervous mood. I envy her and the fact that she gets to remain on the ground floor, alone, behind the safety of her desk. Meanwhile I ascend the tall building to floor seventeen, not sure of what I’ll find when I get to that little room with Elijah Stone.

4

Elijah

I’m waiting on the table, face down with my head in the hole, when I hear a knock at the door.

“Come in,” I say gruffly.

“Mr. Stone, it’s Andy. Are you ready?”

“Ready, I reply.

Damn. I haven’t even laid eyes on her and already I’m getting hard. It the sound of her soft voice really that powerful, that it can have this effect on me within seconds?

I spent last night and most of today distracted as hell, knowing that it was a matter of hours before I’d get to see Andy again.

In the time since our appointment last week I’ve gone back and forth. My firm boundary between business and personal eroded over time until, before I knew it, I was finding that I was convincing myself that this boundary doesn’t matter much,

anyway.

I mean, who gives a shit if Nick has a problem with me having a relationship with one of his employees? Nick might be rich, but I'm wealthy. And unlike Nick, I have leverage. Power. I'm an investor in The Angel Spa, and it's only with my financial backing that he's currently planning to open up a second location in another part of town.

So what is Nick going to do? Tell me I can't date Andy?

I'd like to see him fucking try.

"How's the pressure?"

Her soft voice interrupts my mess of thoughts, taking my mind off my plans and bringing me back to the present.

"Fine," I say.

"Are you sure?" she asks.

"Yep," I grunt.

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She continues in silence, her hands finding my shoulders.

“More knots,” she says. “You must be torturing yourself in between massages. I think these are worse than the ones last week. Do you slouch often?”

I clear my throat uncomfortably.

“Uh, no,” I say. “I tend to get a lot of tension up there...Deepti might have mentioned it but I sustained a back injury a long time ago. My spine healed but the soft tissue has never been the same. The weekly massage is sort of a...maintenance thing, more than relaxation.”

Her hands hesitate over my shoulders for a moment before continuing.

“I didn’t know,” she says. “May I ask what the injury was, and how long ago?”

Talk about a boner killer. But if I didn’t want her to ask about this at all, I probably shouldn’t have brought it up.

“Bit of a long story. I was an active duty marine. Served a couple of tours overseas...”

I drift off.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Andy says quickly. “I’m sorry. We get a lot of people coming to us after car accidents...things like that. I didn’t mean to pry.”

Her softness makes me feel bad, remembering last week and the way she seemed almost terrified of me. Maybe I'm more intimidating than I think I am.

"It's fine," I say. "I don't mind discussing it."

This is a blatant lie. I hate fucking talking about it. Most of the time I pretend that this part of my life never happened. There's very little about that period of time that I am able to think about without feeling...feelings.

So I do mind talking about it. But for Andy, for some reason I feel like I need to. I need to show her that I'm not as big of a jerk as she seems to believe I am, and that she doesn't need to be afraid of me.

Others are afraid of me. Some of my employees. Other men. But women aren't supposed to be afraid of me like that, especially a woman like Andy who — despite my best efforts to pretend to be a gentleman around her today — makes me want to bend her over this massage table and drive my cock deep inside of her.

"So you were injured during one of your tours?"

"You know, that's what most people think," I say wryly. "But no. Actually, I made it home with not much more than a twisted ankle and a few stitches. Training was harder than my deployments ever were. After training, twelve months in the desert felt almost easy."

"So...if you didn't get hurt while deployed, what was it?"

"You're going to laugh," I mutter.

"I would never!" Andy says, her hands pausing on my shoulders again.

“Well, maybe you wouldn’t. But you’ll think it sounds dumb. I fell out of bed.”

“You...just fell out of bed?” Andy asks. “Like...fell from a bunk?”

“Nope,” I say. “Just an ordinary bed.”

She’s quiet.

“Told you it was dumb,” I say to break the uncomfortable silence.

“It’s not dumb,” she insists. “Why would that be dumb? Getting injured sucks. And people get injured in the strangest of ways. I see it all the time. Some people don’t even know how they got injured in the first place. They just wake up in the morning in excruciating pain.”

“Sometimes I wake up like that now,” I reply. “My shoulder. It’s like the shoulder of an eighty year old, or something. Doesn’t take much to set me back and before I know it I’m icing it down all day long and can’t lift anything with that arm.”

“That must be so awful,” she murmurs.

“It’s not so bad,” I reply. “It’s not like I’m a baby or something. It’s just a stiff shoulder.”

“I wasn’t suggesting that you were a baby,” she says, some reproach and hurt in her voice.

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I sigh.

“Sorry,” I reply gruffly. “I guess shaking off the sympathy of others is a reflex. I resist it like it’s some kind of deadly disease. You’re fine. I’m out of line.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t ask you this but I can’t help it,” she says after a beat. “Why do you think you resist the sympathy of others?”

I think for a moment.

“I guess...I don’t really know why,” I say. “It’s just something guys like me do, I guess. I picked it up in the Marine Corps. The men I served with are like brothers to me, and I’d do anything for them. But damn if they weren’t some of the meanest guys I’ve ever known, too.”

“Mean to you?”

“To me,” I say. “To each other. To everyone. Sometimes even their own wives and children, though it’s not like they meant to be that way.”

“Wow.”

I should quit while I’m ahead. I never talk about these things with anyone but for some damn reason, I can’t seem to stop running my mouth around Andy today.

Maybe it’s because she’s a beautiful woman.

Or maybe it's because I'm face down, unable to see her face with her unable to see mine, too. There's a certain anonymity involved...even when her hands are touching my bare skin all over my back at the same time.

Whatever. I'm not going to overthink this shit. Maybe this is what I should have done instead of all the therapy they made me go to when I got back home. Screw sitting on a couch talking to a doctor; just let me strip naked and lay down for an hour while a beautiful, soft, kind woman gives me a back massage.

"Weakness wasn't tolerated in that world," I continue. "Being strong was mandatory, because sometimes being strong was a matter of life and death."

"I can only imagine," Andy murmurs.

"The men around me were tough on me," I say. Why the fuck am I sharing so much with her? She's a stranger. A hot stranger. But still.

"Tough as in hazing?"

"No," I reply. "I mean, we pranked each other sure. And there were fights, too. But it's not a fraternity. It wasn't hazing for the sake of it. It was training. The guys were tough on me, but it was for my own good. It was a safety thing. You had to learn to be tough, because one weak link could make the whole group suffer. Eventually I became just as tough as they were. It took me a long time to adapt to civilian life when I left. I was hardened...calloused, inside and out."

Andy says nothing, falling into a thoughtful silence with me. I shake off the memories that are swimming in my mind, focusing on her touch, the tension in my muscles melting away.

"Maybe this is rude to say," Andy says. "But the last place I expect to find a tough

guy ex-marine is...well, in here.”

I smile.

“We’re everywhere,” I say. “But sure, I guess it’s probably weird to think of my past, seeing where I am now. Still, if you’ve ever served, I think it makes sense. You learn discipline and hard work. To power through obstacles and find creative solutions.”

“I guess overcoming adversity is a useful skill on the battle field and in the board room,” Andy says with humor.

“It is,” I agree. “It’s my competitive edge. And all I had to do to get here was bust up my shoulder a little.”

“I doubt that was the only price you had to pay,” Andy says softly.

I don’t reply.

“I’m sorry,” she says quickly. “Now that definitely was a prying thing to say. Forget I said it.”

“It’s okay,” I say.

Except it’s not okay. In my endless blabbing to Andy I’ve accidentally stepped into forbidden territory. Things I don’t like to think about, much less talk to other people about it. The only person who hears about this shit is my therapist — and that’s only because I force myself to do it the way a person might force themselves to suffer through a needle in order to get their flu shot.

I breathe deeply through my nose and exhale slowly as Andy continues to work the muscles in my shoulders. It feels so damn good and I have to admit, even if I wasn’t

so attracted to this woman, I probably would be requesting her as my new regular massage therapist from now on. The girl is talented at what she does, digging into my shoulders with her fingers like her life depends on it.

“Pressure is okay?” she asks. “Not too much?”

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“Do your worst,” I say. “You can’t hurt me. Trust me.”

She laughs.

“Don’t challenge me,” she says. “The last guy who said that to me on the table had a bruise on his back for weeks!”

“Bet it was worth it,” I grunt. “Seriously, do your worst.”

“You asked...” she says.

* * *

I’m not a wimp. But damn. By the time I’m putting my clothes back on — Andy waiting outside the relaxation room for me to come out — I can already feel the sore spots on my back where Andy dug her hands and elbows into my muscles.

Do I feel loosened up? Yes.

And...do I feel like I just got the shit kicked out of me? Also yes.

But in a good, deep tissue massage kind of way.

“I can’t believe you didn’t complain even once,” Andy says when I come out of the relaxation room. She’s shaking her head and looking at me with slight awe. “Seriously, you’re okay?”

“Yep.”

No way am I going to tell her that at one point, I was wincing and nearly waved the white flag.

“Be sure to drink lots of water for the rest of the day,” Andy reminds me as she packs her bag, returning the bottle of massage oil that she brought to a little pocket inside of her backpack.

She glances out of the window behind me.

“The sun still sets so early in the day,” she sighs. “I can’t wait for the summer sun to fully hit so I can actually get some sunshine after work.”

“I apologize for keeping you so late,” I reply.

“Oh!” She exclaims, looking at me as though she forgot I was there. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to complain! I was just thinking aloud.”

“It’s okay,” I reply, gesturing to the window. “I often think about the same thing myself. Most nights I’m here too late to enjoy the sun on my face after work. There’s something to be said about getting some direct vitamin D every day. And not having to commute back home in the dark.”

“You can say that again,” she says. “The subway can be so gross at night.”

I nod, putting my hands in my pockets.

“I’ll have my assistant move my weekly appointment to earlier in the day,” I say. “I shouldn’t be keeping you so late in the evening.”

I say all of this, despite the fact that Wednesdays are busy as hell for me at work. Lots of meetings. Lots of deals to close. It's a miracle I even carve out a couple of hours a week for a massage.

But still, I'm offering. Maybe because Andy is so damn cute. Maybe because I feel guilty thinking that I'm the reason a beautiful little thing like her is taking the subway at night, something I wouldn't subject a woman that I love to if I could give her any alternative means of transportation.

"Oh, I can't do it earlier in the day," she shakes her head. "I do the afternoon and evening appointments on purpose. I'm in school. My classes are all in the mornings so...you know, can't do work in the mornings too."

"You're in school," I raise a brow. "Graduate program?"

"I wish," she laughs. "Undergrad for now. Though I wouldn't say no to getting my MBA eventually. It's just so expensive."

I study her face.

"I knew you were young," I say. "But didn't realize you were that young. Undergrad? You must be twenty-two, twenty-three then?"

"Wrong again," she smiles. "I'm a late bloomer, I guess you could say. All of my classmates are younger than me. Which is awkward sometimes. They're all about partying and having fun. I outgrew that stage a while ago. Actually, I'm not sure that I ever went through that phase at all. Not really a big fan of crowds, parties, or alcohol for that matter."

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I breathe a sigh of relief. I know Andy is younger than me. But I'm not sure I could date a twenty-two year old. It would feel too much like dating a teenager, which would makemefeel old as fuck, and also like a creep.

"So how old are you?" I ask.

"Twenty-eight," she says. "I went to massage therapy school after I finished high school instead of college. I needed to be able to make money and support myself, and I didn't have four years to spend in college. Or the tuition money for that matter."

"So you've been supporting yourself since you turned eighteen?" I ask. "That's a little unusual."

"I've had a little support from family," she says lightly, looking away. "But you know...my mom doesn't have a lot of money either. So I wanted to be able to support myself as soon as possible. Didn't want to feel like a burden."

"I respect the hell out of that," I say with a nod.

"You do?"

"You carved your own path and you stand on your own two feet," I reply. "Of course I respect that. Why wouldn't I?"

She bites her lip.

"I guess I'm just insecure about my lack of college education," she replies. "I mean,

all of my friends are done with school now. They have jobs and..."

"You have a job," I point out.

"Yeah but you know," she shrugs. "They have good jobs. Full time jobs, too. I'm still living like a college student for now. But hopefully not soon."

I look at Andy, weighing a decision for a moment. And then I walk to my desk and press the intercom button on the phone.

"Yes, Mr. Stone?"

"Bring me a whisky neat as well as a ..." I say. I glance at Andy. "What will it be?"

She hesitates, shifting the strap of her backpack on her shoulder and looking at me nervously.

"Have a drink with me," I say, more clearly, in the commanding voice I normally reserve for work colleagues alone. Or for women I want to fuck and then forget.

Andy is neither of those things to me. But I can tell she's going to need a firmer push from me in order to spend some time this evening with me.

And I want her to stay and spend some time with me. I don't know why. Hell, I have about a million things to do piled up on my desk tonight and at this rate I'll be leaving the office at three in the morning, if I leave the office at all tonight.

The last thing I need to be doing is having a drink with a woman tonight. But I don't want her to leave. I'm not ready to say goodbye to her, not this soon.

"Just a water, I guess," she says.

I nod, giving the orders to my assistant and gesturing to the leather couch on the wall for her to take a seat. She does so and I take a seat opposite her. Wordlessly, my assistant brings our drinks in and leaves them on the coffee table in front of us, leaving the room as quietly as she entered.

“It must be nice,” Andy says. “Having an assistant. That’s so cool.”

“It’s very helpful,” I reply. “Let’s me spend my time on more important things to me. And provides someone else with a job at the same time.”

“Do they stay at the office late with you?” Andy wonders.

“No,” I reply. “They leave at six most days, if not earlier.”

“After that, I guess you have to get your own drinks,” Andy replies.

“I do,” I say. “It’s awful.”

She laughs.

“What’s next?” She asks. “Having to cook your own food? Drive your own car?”

I smile.

“Believe it or not, I do know how to cook,” I say. “I enjoy it a lot, actually. Wish I had more time for it.”

She looks at me with interest.

“What?” I ask, reading her expression. “You’re surprised that a guy like me is handy in the kitchen?”

“A bit,” she says. “You seem more like a power tools kind of man, I guess.”

“I like power tools too,” I say. “Just carpentry and little house projects, though. I don’t fix up cars or stuff like that. Nothing frustrates me more, actually.”

“So you don’t fix your own cars,” she nods. “What about driving them? Do you drive your cars?”

“Not in the city,” I say. “Again, it’s about efficiency. New York City traffic is disgusting. I’d rather hire a driver to deal with that while I get some work done on my phone.”

“Makes sense.”

“When do you graduate?” I ask, wanting to get off of the topic of myself.

“In a few weeks,” she says. “Assuming I pass all of my exams, of course.”

“I’m sure you will,” I reply. “You seem smart.”

“You think?” She asks.

“You’d have to be smart to be able to balance school and a job at the same time,” I say. “And after completing massage therapy school too. That’s not easy to do. You seem hard working as well. In my experience, smarts and hard work go together well. You’ll be successful, no doubt about that.”

Her cheeks color a little and I feel pleased knowing I’ve managed to make her blush.

“So,” I say. “Are you studying business, then?”

“I am,” she says. “What did you study?”

“Nothing,” I admit. “I had the option to attend college after I served — paid in full and everything.”

“So why didn’t you?”

I shrug.

“I guess I was ready to be done with working for somebody else,” I reply. “Done taking orders. And that’s sort of what school is. Someone telling you what to learn and when. Assigning work to you with a deadline attached. And then you get your grades and it’s someone else telling you how well you did, whether you’re allowed to continue on to the next thing. I felt like it would drive me crazy to go right back into that kind of thing.”

“That makes sense,” she says. “So...you just went right into the real world and started your own business?”

“I did.”

“That’s incredible,” she says. “Look at what you’ve built. It’s amazing. And you got what you wanted. You are your own boss. Nobody tells you what to do, I bet.”

“You’re right,” I agree. “Nobody has told me what to do in a long time.”

“But you tell other people what to do,” she says.

“I do,” I grin. “Feels good.”

“I guess my goal is to be in a situation like yours too,” she says. “I mean...obviously I don’t expect to be as...successful as you are. But I’d like to run my own spa one day, instead of working for these chains all over the place. I’d like to step back and just manage things instead of performing the services myself.”

I nod. It’s a shame, in a way, because Andy is without a doubt the best massage I’ve had. But she seems made for different things; I can tell just from watching the way she talks. She’s got that fire in her eye, the same one I have, and I can tell she’s going to go far in business. She’s determined enough to get this far; she’s got what it takes.

“Mr. Stone,” Andy says. “Can I ask a question?”

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“Of course,” I reply. “But I’d prefer you didn’t call me Mr. Stone. Elijah is fine.”

“Nick says we have to call clients by their titles,” she says, looking away.

“Well, right now I’m not your client,” I say, taking a sip of my drink and draping my arm over the back of the couch. “You’re off the clock.”

She nods.

“I won’t tell Nick,” I continue, and now she relaxes a little, reassured.

“Well, Elijah, I have to ask...why are we hanging out right now?” She gestures at her drink. “Actually, why did you ask for me again when you set up your appointment? I figured after what happened last time, you weren’t super happy with me.”

I grin at her.

“You mean when you insulted me?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she says with a small smile. “Also, I showed up late...it’s not good. Nick would be furious if he knew.”

I frown, wondering whether Nick scares all of his staff as badly as he seems to scare Andy.

“It was an honest mistake,” I reply. “And a miscommunication on my part. Knowing you were a new therapist, my assistant should have mentioned the relaxation room.

And I should have come out to investigate once you were five minutes late, to see if you'd gotten lost. I'm the one who should be apologizing to you. Not the other way around."

"I don't know about that..." she murmurs. "But thank you. Is that why we're having a drink? You feel sorry about last week?"

"Sort of," I say. I'm weighing whether to be truthful or to opt for the polite lie. I decide on the truth. "But honestly, Andy, the reason I requested you and the reason I asked you to have a drink with me is because I think you're the most gorgeous creature I've ever seen. And I'd like to get to know you better."

There's no doubt that she's blushing now, her cheeks heated to a brick red.

"Oh," is all that she says next.

I lean forward on the couch.

"I don't mean to make you uncomfortable," I continue. "I just thought it would be better to be honest with you."

"Okay," she breathes. "That's fine. It's not what I was expecting you to say, that's all."

"I like you," I say. "I like your mind. And I like your body. Normally I'm not this forward and normally I'd draw a line in our relationship and not cross that line. But with you, I feel like that's not even possible. No restraint or will power is going to keep me from wanting you in that way. But I need to know if you feel the same. If you don't, I'll leave you alone. I won't talk to Nick about any of this, and you don't have to see me ever again. But I couldn't just let you walk away last week without finding out if there's something here. If you feel it too."

Andy is frozen on the couch, the glass of water between her palms in her lap, her eyes wide, cheeks still red.

“So,” I continue. “Do you think there’s something here?”

“You’re asking me if I’m attracted to you?” She says with a slight laugh.

“Yes.”

“Of course I’m attracted to you,” she says, shaking her head. “Every woman who sees you is probably attracted to you.”

“There’s a difference between finding someone attractive and being attracted to them,” I reply. “I need to know whether you feel the latter. Because if you do, I’m going to need to see you much, much more.”

She stares at me.

“You’re being serious, aren’t you?”

“Dead serious,” I answer. “I need to see you more, Andy. Will you see me again? And not as my massage therapist, but as my date?”

“As your date?” She echoes.

“As my date,” I reply, smiling a little. “I’m asking you on a date, Andy. Go to dinner with me. Clear a little time in your studying schedule, and go out with me this weekend.”

5

Andy

Pinch me,because I'm pretty sure I've died and gone to heaven.

This entire thing is so surreal. His office, the talk we've had tonight, the drink on his couch, his expensive suit and delicious cologne.

And now, his lips so close to mine, his body leaning into mine with his arm draped casually over the back of the couch behind me. Just a little closer and we'd be touching, our lips and our bodies too.

I'm trying to formulate a response to Elijah's question — except it's more like a command than a question — when the elevator door dings open and a portly man in a brown suit steps out. He's looking down at the phone in his hand, a Bluetooth headset in his ear, loudly continuing a conversation on his phone without looking up at us.

“And make sure we get that price down...I don't care if their margins are razor thin, I'll buy them out before I partner with them for that price...well tell them that's their problem...I don't give a fuck if they have to lay off half the staff and cancel Christmas bonuses, we're not going a dime over my offer...good...okay...get it done.”

He hangs up the call without saying goodbye, and continues speaking in his loud, nearly-shouting bark when he looks up.

“Stone, we’ve got an issue down on level four. The imports from...”

He drifts off when his pouchy eyes land on me, his shining face breaking into a lopsided, yellow-toothed grin.

“Oh, didn’t realize you had company, Stone,” he says. “You two look cozy! Don’t mind me, sweetheart, I just need to talk to your boyfriend for a moment.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I say quietly, shifting away from Elijah on the couch.

“Oh,” he raises a brow. “Not a boyfriend, eh? More like a transactional relationship? No need to tell me the details sweetheart. Whatever Elijah wants, Elijah gets. I know this by now.”

I have no idea what he means and I’m about to explain that I’m not with Elijah in that way, that I’m just his massage therapist, when the man winks at me.

That single wink makes every hair on my body stand up and suddenly I’m on edge.

Sometimes Deepti talks about auras. Says everyone has an aura, and that the color of someone’s aura tells about their personality.

I usually think it’s a bunch of nonsense, but in this case, I can feel the bad energy coming from this man so strongly that it’s nearly visible, perceptible by my eyes as though he has a literal cloud of ugly aura around him right now.

“Dan, it’s a bad time,” Elijah says beside me in a stern voice. “I told you to call before dropping by my office from now on.”

“So now I need an appointment just to come by and chat business with my old pal?” Dan scoffs. “This will just take a moment.”

“No,” Elijah says, standing up and leaving me behind on the couch. “Go.”

Dan’s eyes slide from Elijah to me and I want to shrink away, sink through the couch and protect myself from him and his gross gaze.

“I see,” Dan says, giving me a once over and grinning in that sick way again. “Well, seeing as you’re urgently occupied with something else at the moment, I’ll save this for the morning.”

“Leave,” Elijah says again and I notice that his entire body has gone rigid and tense, his right fist balled at his side.

Dan holds up his hands as though surrendering.

“You’re the boss,” he says. He aims his twisted grin at me, giving my body a once over again. I cross my arms over my chest, wishing I could turn invisible. “And you — it was very nice to meet you. Do me a favor and give Elijah a great massage. He’s earned it.”

Ew. Ew ew ew ew ew.

He disappears behind the elevator doors and I exhale strongly. Elijah continues staring at the place where Dan had been standing, his fist still balled at his side, stiff and unmoving.

“Um,” I say. “I think I better go now.”

He says nothing, so I put the empty water glass on the coffee table and stand, grabbing my backpack and pulling it on.

When I walk toward the elevator, I turn back. Elijah is still standing there, his brow

deeply furrowed, as though lost in thought.

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“Mr. Stone?” I ask, waving a hand in front of me. “I’m going to go now. I’ll see you at our next appointment?”

He looks over at me, as though just remembering I’m still here. He nods.

“See you next time, Andy.”

His voice has completely changed. It’s tight, strained, and his jaw is clenched tight. Anger radiates from every inch of his body. For the first time, I find him a little scary. Not just intimidating, but scary.

I leave through the elevator. When I get to the reception area it’s dark and the receptionist has gone home. But when I get to the curb outside there is a black town car waiting for me. The driver opens the door.

“Are you Andy?” He asks.

I nod silently. Nothing would surprise me tonight anymore. Today has been strange and being picked up by a stranger and kidnapped would not be out of place.

“I’m Mr. Stone’s driver,” he says. “He sent me here to pick you up and take you wherever you need to go.”

“I don’t need a ride,” I say. “I’m fine taking the subway.”

“Miss, I’m under strict orders to pick you up and take you directly home. You can take the subway if you want, but just so you know my boss is not going to be very

happy with me if he finds out that I let you Go home on your own.”

I turn and look Up at the tall building behind me. Somewhere up there, on the 17th floor, Elijah is still in his office. I wonder if he still standing where I left him, still glaring at the spot where Dan was before. What had happened to make him seem so angry with me? What did I do? I turn back to the driver and Give him my address. He opens the back door of the car beckoning me in.

I’m buckling my seatbelt still looking out the window at that 17th floor window, the only one with the lights still on. I realize now that Elijah neglected to give me a tip once again. And yet he said he’d like to see me again.

I think about Dan and his gross insinuations. Maybe Elijah’s motives for requesting me as his massage therapist today weren’t as honorable as I previously assumed. He asked me out on a date tonight, but was that really why he wanted me to stay and have a drink with him — just to ask me out?

Or...did he expect more from me, the waysomemen sometimes do from a massage appointment? Even though The Angle Spa is a nice place, not the kind of establishment where those kinds of boundaries are ever crossed, rich and powerful men always think they’re above the rules. Men like Elijah probably think that anything can be bought, that everything has a price.

What would have happened, if Dan hadn’t walked in when he did? If we’d been left alone longer to talk, to have another drink?

What was his real plan? Is it possible the reason he seemed so angry with me at the end is because his plan was interrupted, and because I was leaving?

I’m not sure of any of the answers to my questions. And by the time the driver pulls up to my building and lets me out, I’ve decided I don’t ever want to see Elijah Stone

again.

6

Elijah

I nearly killed Dan for the way he talked to Andy.

And if it hadn't been for the fact that he left the building completely last night before I could track him down, I might have buried my fist in his highly-punchable face instead of what I ended up doing...drinking until I passed out on my office couch.

Why? Because any time I revive those old memories that Andy inspired me to talk about last night, I end up getting drunk.

Also, because Andy left me behind with the worst case of blue balls I've ever had.

Not that I actually expected anything to happen with her last night. I've got more patience than that, and more respect for her. She's a sweet girl, younger than me, and seems like she's a little afraid of me too. Or afraid of me calling Nick and saying something to him that causes him to fire her from her job.

So yeah. There's a power dynamic there that I'm not willing to abuse. I want Andy so fucking bad, but I'm not going to risk pressuring her into saying yes to sleeping with me.

If she says yes — no, when she says yes — it'll be because I've got her so turned on that she's soaking wet between her legs and is begging for my cock.

Not because she's afraid that if she doesn't fuck me, I'll tattle on her to her boss.

I mean, I know I'm a bit of an asshole at work sometimes, a little rough around the edges...but I'm not a scumbag.

And I'm not out for an easy fuck anyway. If all I wanted was sex, I could have it. I've never had a problem arranging a casual encounter, in fact women seem to throw themselves at me ever since I made a fortune in business and gained a reputation.

Those shallow connections lose their luster overtime. Sex feels good, obviously it feels fucking amazing.

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But it's still shallow sex. Sex with someone who is practically a stranger. Sex with someone who doesn't know a god damn thing about me.

And Andy? After last night, she knows more about me than most people in my life. My background. My shoulder injury, for fuck's sake. I don't tell anyone about that, not about how it happened.

Fell out of a bed.

It's technically the truth. And more information than I've ever given someone voluntarily, before.

I wonder what a sweet thing like Andy would say if she knew the full truth though, if she had all of the information about how I damaged my shoulder.

Would she look at me differently? Would she seem more afraid of me than she already seems at times?

I don't really want to find out. That's why I had to shut up last night, before I found myself accidentally spilling way too much information.

Today, I'm hungover and nursing a large mug of hot, black coffee. Waiting on floor thirteen, leaning casually against a wall by the elevator as people get out, filing past me with curious, slightly fearful looks on their faces, whispering to one another once they think they're out of earshot.

Whatever. Probably wondering why the fuck the "big boss" is on their floor this

morning.

Good. Let them be afraid. And let them be curious and nosy, too. A bigger audience for what I'm about to do is even better. I've been looking forward to humiliating Dan since last night.

Finally the thing I'm waiting for happens. Dan steps out of the elevator, a spring in his step, holding his morning latte and talking fast to his young assistant who is rushing to write down his many instructions for the day.

"Morning, Dan," I say grimly, stepping in front of him so that he has to stop short.

"Morning, Stone," he simpers.

Dan's always been such a kiss ass, something that I can't stand. But he does good work, and for that reason, he's been around for a few years, climbing the corporate ladder in his department. I tolerate him in small doses, thankful that I don't have to deal with him in any major capacity, but ever since his recent promotion, he's been like a fly buzzing in my ear. Annoying as hell.

Still, I wasn't about to fire him for that. If I fired everyone I found annoying, I would only have a handful of people left.

But last night? Last night crossed a line and I'm not willing to tolerate another fucking second of his shit. I don't care how well he can do his job. I'll hire five people to replace him if I have to, as long as it means I don't have to see his stupid face again.

His stupidpunchableface.

"We need to have a little chat," I say to him icily, enjoying the way that I can sense

the whole floor's eyes on my back.

Dan's eyes widen slightly for a moment but then he's back to his cool, simpering demeanor.

"Certainly," he says. "Please, my office is just this way. Amelia, will you take notes please?"

"No need," I say, holding a hand up to Amelia. "This is a private matter and should only take a minute."

Dan raises a brow but says nothing else, leading me to his ridiculous corner office while Amelia hangs back, looking unsure.

Heads turn as we walk and I make sure that everyone can witness the unhappy look on my face as I turn to shut the door of Dan's office, locking the two of us inside.

Dan sits behind his desk, folding his hands on the top of it and looking up at me.

"What can I do for you, Stone?"

"It's about last night," I say.

"Oh, the Cook account," Dan says, snapping his fingers. He opens a drawer and begins to talk some more. "Of course. Well, don't worry about a thing. I put the pressure on them big time and they've agreed to come down by ten cents per unit. It'll mean eating into other parts of their business and some jobs might get cut...but hey, that's life right?"

"It's not about the Cook account," I snap.

“Well, then what’s it about?” Dan laughs nervously. “You know Cook has been my sole focus for the last few weeks...if it’s something else I’ve asked Amelia to handle it so you might need to-”

“It’s about Andy.”

“Andy?”

Dan’s face is blank, not a trace of recognition on his face. The fact that he seems to have no idea what — or who – I’m talking about makes me even angrier.

“Andy,” I repeat. “The woman in my office last night.”

Understanding dawns in his eyes and a smile twists across his face.

“Right, Andy,” he says, drawing her name out slowly. “The hot young thing in your office last night. Gotta admit, Stone, she’s a little heavier than the women I’ve seen you with in the past. But she carries it in all of the right places if you know what I mean. More than a handful of ass. And those tits — ”

“Shut the fuck up,” I hiss, coming forward with every intention of kicking his desk and then ripping him up from the chair he’s seated in. But out of the corner of my eye I see people peering over their cubicle walls and through the glass window of Dan’s office door.

I want to humiliate Dan, sure. But my employees are already scared enough of me as it is without rumors about me assaulting a senior manager floating around like some kind of stupid urban legend.

No. Better not let myself get too out of hand with witnesses here.

Firing him and making sure nobody else in this city will ever hire him again will have to be revenge enough.

“You’re done here, Dan,” I growl. “I won’t have you talking about an employee in that way.”

“She wasn’t an employee,” Dan scoffs. “She was some massage therapist you had delivered to your door. Like a fucking pizza.”

“Shut. Up,” I say through clenched teeth.

It’s everything I can do not to pick him up and throw him through the wall right now. Every ounce of restraint in my body is needed right now to force my feet to remain rooted in place, my fist balled at my side but not raised, not aimed in the direction of Dan’s weak jaw.

“Look,” Dan continues. “I get it. Okay. You’re soft on this chick from the spa or whatever. I understand. It happens to the best of us. I shouldn’t have joked around like I did and I apologize. But let’s not allow that to interrupt our professional relationship.”

“We don’t have a professional relationship,” I say. “As of right now. And I never want to see you again. Get your shit and go before I pick you up and throw you out myself.”

Dan begins to laugh, that stupid smile spreading out over his greasy face. But then I take a step towards him and he flinches, jumping in his chair a little.

“I’m not going to warn you again,” I say. “Out. Now. Leave your badge.”

I stand in the doorway and watch as he scuttles around like the bottom feeding bug that he is, packing up his few belongings and then squeezing out of the cramped doorway around me.

If he had a tail, it would be tucked under his legs.

I'm pretty sure nothing can give me more satisfaction than watching his cowardly retreat.

Nothing except maybe seeing Andy again.

7

Andy

I haveno idea how Elijah Stone got my personal phone numberandmy address.

I'm pretty sure the latter has something to do with the fact that I gave my address to his driver last night.

But how do you explain the phone number? The Angel Spa handles client communications. I never text or call a client from my own phone, so I know I've never given Elijah my number.

The only explanation is that he's got some kind of rich guy spying methods and got my phone number that way.

Still, though I've come to believe this theory on my own, it doesn't stop me from asking Elijah about it too.

"How the hell did you get this number?" is all that I blurt out when he announces who he is.

"I have my ways," he says, and I can hear his grin in his voice.

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For a moment, I feel my heart flutter the way it did last night.

No, Andy! Remember last night? Remember his creepy colleague and the nasty way that he looked at your body like it was his own personal dessert to eat, making your skin crawl?

Last night I had to go upstairs and take an extra, extra hot shower just to scrub off that creepy crawly feeling that this Dan guy left on me. Extra hot water, extra soap, and I scrubbed my skin so hard that even this morning, it feels a little bit raw.

Dramatic? Maybe. I see creepy guys all the time. I mean, I live in New York City for goodness sake. I've been cat called and even followed home more than a time or two.

So I thought I'd built up an immunity to being creeped out at this point. But I was wrong.

Maybe it's the fact that I wasn't expecting to be creeped out, the fact that I was caught by surprise right after letting my guard down with Elijah.

I don't know. Or maybe it's fact that I was being harassed by a man in an expensive designer suit in a fancy office building, instead of some random guy on the street yelling "NICE ASS" as I walk back to my apartment after class.

"So you got my number," I reply dryly. "However you did it, congratulations on your invasion of my privacy. But if you need to get in touch with me about your next appointment, you should call the spa directly. They can help you there."

I hang up the phone before he can reply, then stare at the screen. Sure enough, it lights up a few seconds later, the same unfamiliar phone number on the caller ID.

“What do you want?” I sigh.

“To talk,” he says. “Not about my appointment either. I asked you to go on a date with me. Remember? Only you never gave me an answer one way or another.”

“You can’t be serious,” I say numbly. “You’re still trying to take me out? After what happened last night?”

“I’m still trying to take you out especially after what happened last night,” Elijah replies. “Because I need to make it up to you. What Dan said was not okay. And I’m very sorry.”

“You’re...apologizing to me?” I ask.

“Of course I am,” Elijah says, puzzlement in his voice. “Why on earth wouldn’t I apologize for that?”

“I don’t know,” I say, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Maybe because last night you seemed furious with me? Or...because, both times I’ve done your massage, you haven’t tipped me at all when normally people tip me at least ten percent if I’ve done a good job?”

I don’t mention the fact that Deepti told me that he used to tip her. That feels over the line, like private information I shouldn’t know about him.

“I wasn’t angry with you last night,” Elijah says quickly. “I was angry with Dan. You’re right, I was furious last night. But not with you.”

I bite my lip.

“You thought I was mad at you?” Elijah asks, breaking our silence.

“Yeah. Kind of.”

“I wasn’t angry at you Andy,” he says again. “Not in the least. I’m just so sorry you had to endure Dan’s filthy mouth. I promise, you won’t see him again. I fired him this morning.”

Holy shit.

“Fired him?” I repeat. “Like...firedfired?”

“Firedfired,” Elijah says firmly. “For cause. He sexually harassed you, Andy, and I don’t tolerate that kind of treatment of anyone, especially not the women I’m seeing.”

Oh? So Elijah is seeing me now?

“Wow,” I say. “I almost feel kind of bad for him.”

“Almost?”

“Almost,” I say. I can’t resist smiling.

“Yeah. Well, that’s good of you. You’re a sweetheart for that. But I don’t feel bad for him at all. In fact, I sort of regret that I didn’t just kick his ass last night as soon as those words were out of his mouth. But I didn’t want to scare you even more than I already do.”

“I’m not scared of you,” I say.

“You’re not?”

His voice has changed. Elijah sounds genuinely surprised, taken aback as though I’d just said something unbelievable, impossible, like “The sky is green” or “I have three eyes”.

“No,” I say slowly. “I’m not scared of you...should I be?”

“Maybe,” he says quietly. “I wouldn’t blame you if you were.”

It’s strange, the way our conversation has shifted so many times in only a few minutes. From cold, to warm and friendly, and now cold again as I feel Elijah pulling back, pulling away from me as though I’ve said something wrong.

Damn. This guy is harder to figure out than one of those jumbo sized twelve-by-twelve Rubik’s Cubes.

“Let me take you to dinner,” Elijah says, shifting the subject and his tone all at the same time. “I want to make it up to you. I need to show you that not all of us are bad.”

“‘All of us’?” I ask.

“All of us rich guys,” he says. “Some of us are actually pretty nice. Just a few bad eggs. Dan was a bad egg. So? I fired him. And I’m pretty sure I scared him so bad

while doing it that he pissed his pants in front of the entire office.”

I laugh.

“Dinner, huh?” I ask. “That sounds...nice. But tonight is bad. I have to study.”

“What about Friday night?”

“I have to work,” I sigh.

“I could always call the spa and demand that Nick let me have all of your Friday evening appointments for myself,” he suggests, sounding perfectly serious.

“Don’t you dare!” I gasp. “You can’t cancel all of my regulars, they’ll be so disappointed. Besides – I can’t go on a date while I’m technically on the clock at work. Nick would kill me if he found out.”

“Why? I’d pay the spa for the appointments, so it’s not like your boss would be out any money.”

I sigh, unable to find the words to explain to Elijah that his idea is a terrible one, one that puts my professional reputation in jeopardy while pretty much sealing the deal on any rumors that this creep Dan might have started around Elijah’s office about me doing more than just massaging Elijah’s back up on the seventeenth floor in his relaxation room.

I mean...even if I’d get away with sneaking off to go on a date during work time, those rumors are the last thing I need right as I’m about to graduate college and finally begin a fresh start as an up and coming business woman.

I want to be taken seriously. I want to prove to others that I’ve got what it takes to

make it. Not that I slept my way to the top, getting favors from rich guys in exchange for sexual favors.

Fuck that.

I'm about to try to explain all of this to Elijah over the phone when he lets out a heavy sigh.

"Fine, forget about Friday," he relents in a dark voice. "But if you tell me you're also busy on Saturday, I might have to go down to that spa myself and have a word with your boss Nick about these inhumane working hours for smart and beautiful women."

Biting my lip at the sudden complement, I glance at the dry erase calendar stuck to my refrigerator door. Miraculously, this Saturday happens to be free.

An open Saturday night is rare for me, and I have no plans for it...other than refreshing the online grade-book every five minutes to see if any of my exam results have been uploaded yet.

"I'm free on Saturday," I say to him quickly.

"Good," he says, "Because Saturday evening, you're mine."

8

Elijah

For the rest of the week, I'm in an unusually good mood. My assistant Rebecca notices immediately, raising her eyebrows when I order something different for my morning coffee and breakfast, telling herself to get herself something too.

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Then on Friday evening, when I tell her to take off a full hour earlier than usual, she's so surprised that she looks almost concerned.

"Are you feeling okay?" she asks with a frown.

"Sure," I reply, not looking up from my work at my desk. "Why? Do I look ill?"

"You look fine," she says. "It's just that I've worked for you for nearly five years and you've never told me to go home early on a Friday before. You're not going to call me tomorrow and ask me to work over the weekend or anything, are you? Because I'd rather just get my work done now and enjoy my Saturday uninterrupted."

I finally look up at her.

"You make me sound like such a hard ass," I say. "Am I really that awful to work for?"

"No," she says quickly. "Not at all."

"Relax," I reply. "You can tell me the truth. I know I'm not exactly a ray of sunshine around here, but I'm not going to fire you for saying that I'm tough on you."

"Well, obviously you're not going to fire me," Rebecca says, folding her arms across her chest and rolling her eyes a little. "You wouldn't last a day up here without my help, and you know it! It's just, the way you fired Dan a couple of days ago has everyone on edge. Including me."

“Dan had it coming,” I reply darkly.

“So you’ve mentioned,” she murmurs. “Care to elaborate on what Dan did to ‘have it coming’ though?”

“For the last time, that’s confidential,” I reply, aiming my gaze back at the work spread across my desk.

“Could your good mood have anything to do with that cute little massage therapist I saw leaving the office late on Wednesday?” Rebecca asks, eyeing me speculatively.

I sigh and lean back in my chair.

“You were here Wednesday night?”

“Just wrapping some things up,” she replies. “Andrew asked for help putting together some materials for a report...and apparently I’m the only person in this office who understands how to fix a printer. Your brother might have a Ph.D. in Biomedical Engineering...but he can’t figure out how to fix a simple paper jam to save his life.”

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

“You should give me a raise, Mr. Stone,” she says. “I’m not sure anything would get accomplished up here without me.”

“I have no doubt that this place would go to shit immediately if you were to quit,” I say with a sarcastic bow of my head.

“Uh huh,” Rebecca says dryly. “Well, anyway, I saw her leaving the office that night. Your driver picked her up at the curb. I’ve never seen you loan your driver to anyone, not even me. You make me take an Uber!”

“An Uber charged to my company credit card,” I point out. “And since when is an Uber a punishment?”

“Still,” she continues. “I’m just saying. Obviously something about her made you extend a special favor to her that you don’t give to anyone else.”

I don’t respond.

Rebecca is fishing for information. She’s nosy as hell...and she’s also smart as a whip and knows me well after being my trusted assistant for five years. So I know that if I crack and give her even the tiniest bit of detail about Wednesday night, she’ll quickly put everything together.

She’s done it before.

“You know,” Rebecca says slowly. “I think I saw Dan that night too. He left before the massage therapist did. Then the very next morning you fired him. Just a coincidence?”

“Yes,” I reply. “A coincidence.”

“Sure,” she says with a sly smile. “Well, to be honest, I don’t really care either way.”

“For someone who doesn’t care, you’re sure putting a lot of effort into this interrogation,” I say. “I thought you’d be excited to go home early today, but at this rate, you’ll be in the office until six as usual.”

“I’m leaving, I’m leaving,” Rebecca says breezily, holding her hands up. “I’m just highly suspicious of this strange change in attitude, that’s all. But you’ve been warned — call me on Saturday morning about work, and you’ll be met with my answering machine. I’ll be laying out by the pool, soaking in the sun.”

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“You do that. Enjoy your weekend and your pool.”

“I will!” she says brightly. “And you enjoy your date with the massage therapist.”

My eyes dart from my desk back up to her.

“How did you know about that?”

“I didn’t,” she says victoriously. “But now I do! Have a great weekend, Mr. Stone. See ya Monday, bright and early.”

I curse under my breath as Rebecca exits through the elevator.

9

Andy

“What are you going to wear?”

“I don’t know,” I groan. “What the hell do you wear on a date with a billionaire, anyway?”

Deepti surveys the spread of clothing on my bed, the reject pile that grows larger with every desperate change of outfit that I do.

Nothing looks right. It’s either too casual or too formal. Too boring, or too flashy and trying too hard. Too revealing, too conservative...the list goes on and on.

I examine my ass in the mirror while wearing a purple dress from two years ago.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve gained at least ten pounds this year,” I groan, smoothing my palm over my hip. “Damn senior year stress. Exams alone probably added at least three pounds. Too much Chinese takeout. Lo Mein and International Finance are a deadly combination.”

“Stop it,” Deepti groans, flopping back on my bed on the pile of discarded clothing. She puts an arm over her eyes. “Don’t talk to me about diets, or exercise plans, or three pounds this and that. Aren’t we getting too old for that shit?”

“Too old for what?”

“Worrying about being fat,” she says, sitting up and looking at me in my full length mirror. “I mean...look at us. Four years of yo-yo dieting, forgotten New Year’s resolutions, low fat yogurt, Diet Cokes, and working out with Thigh Blasters.”

“Wait a second. I never bought a Thigh Blaster,” I point out. “That was you. And it was the most hilarious thing I’ve ever fucking seen.”

“I was desperate!” she says, gesturing to her ample thighs. “Look at me!”

“It’s genetics,” I reply. “Your mom is built the same way. And you should be grateful. A lot of women would kill to have your hourglass body.”

“Speak for yourself, then,” she says, standing up and picking a piece of lint off my purple dress. “You’ve got a bangin’ body, Andy. Accept it. Obviously Elijah thinks the same thing if he’s asking you to dinner.”

“He just feels bad for me,” I reply. “He’s making amends because of his creepy employee. Probably hoping I don’t sue him or his company, or something.”

“Please,” Deepti rolls her eyes. “I doubt he’s worried about that. No offense, but you’re obviously broke and he’s one of the richest guys in the world. He could make that whole incident disappear if he wanted to. Buy you out, make you sign a bunch of paperwork swearing you to secrecy or else. Stuff like that.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I guess that’s true.”

“He’s into you,” she insists. “And I’m so jealous! I had to massage that man’s body for weeks and weeks, I know what he’s working with underneath those custom tailored suits and it is nice.”

“I thought you were into Aiden now,” I say. “What happened with him?”

“Ugh,” Deepti says. “Don’t even talk to me about Aiden. I don’t want to hear you say I told you so.”

“I won’t say that,” I promise. “What happened?”

“Cheated.”

“No! That fucking asshole!” I say.

Deepti laughs.

“You’re a good friend, you know,” she says. “But you’re a terrible actress. Pretending to be shocked that Aiden cheated on me when you called it from the very beginning. But I appreciate your effort.”

“I do my best,” I reply, giving her a hug. “Fuck him. Maybe I can find out if Elijah has a brother, or something.”

“Please do,” she says. “Or better yet, a twin or a clone!”

* * *

I change three more times before I finally come back to the purple dress. The tried and true stretchy fabric has never let me down, and even with a few extra pounds on me, fits me well and flatters my figure. It’s also got enough room in it for me to actually eat a full meal — no sucking it in required.

Though when my eyes land on Elijah tonight waiting for me by his car, I’m not so sure that I’ll be able to eat dinner tonight anyway. How could I when he’s looking at me with so much intensity, so much desire, that my feet can barely walk me to the car in their strappy nude heels?

“You look great,” Elijah says as he opens the door for me. I climb inside the luxurious car, feeling his eyes on my backside as I do so. He shuts the door and rounds the front of the car, getting in on the driver’s side.

“I was surprised to see it’s just you,” I say. “I figured you have your driver take you everywhere. Isn’t that what you said?”

“Normally, yes,” he says, starting the engine. “But for tonight, I thought it would be nice to have some privacy. Din’t you think so?”

“Definitely.”

I focus on my breathing as he drives me into the city, hardly able to pay attention to the small talk he’s making as we head towards the restaurant he picked out for us tonight. He’s talking about work, about the city, asking me light questions about the rest of my week, about the spa, and other topics. I give short answers, hardly aware of what I’m saying or how far we’ve driven. All I can think is that I’m in Elijah Stone’s car, this man who is so good looking that he seems like he’s not real, like he’s from some other planet or from the pages of a celebrity magazine. Except even though he’s physically perfect, he’s also...not. He’s rough around the edges. Unpolished. Not perfectly refined, like some of the other clients at the spa. He wears nice suits, good cologne, and there’s a watch on his wrist that could probably pay off my student loans and more.

Yet, even with all of this, I still notice the little things. A small scar on his jaw, his crooked smile, the way his speech pattern weaves in and out of formal talk, slipping into working class slang here and there.

He’s gruff. And yet he seems like he’s doing his best to be a gentleman tonight, to show me a good time and to be charming.

The fact that he’s trying is endearing. And flattering.

Is he doing this for me? Because he likes me? Could Deepti be right about his intentions after all?

“This is my favorite restaurant,” Elijah says as the valet pulls away with his car. “I’ve always wanted to take someone special to it.”

I glance at him, my cheeks coloring at the implication that I’m ‘someone special’ to him. He’s also implying that he hasn’t taken many others to this restaurant...that he doesn’t have a lot of people in his life, a lot of women in his life, who he counts as ‘special.’

“What’s your favorite thing to order?” I ask as the hostess shows us to a private table in the back. He pulls my seat out for me and then pushes me in before taking his own seat. Around us there are dark green ivy plants on ledges, spilling down walls, and ivory candles flicker from every available surface.

It’s...romantic. And secluded. Almost as though we’re not in a restaurant at all, but in a private garden where it’s just the two of us.

“My favorite thing to order,” Elijah muses. “Well, the only thing I ever order is the filet mignon. Caesar salad on the side.”

“You’ve never ordered anything else?” I ask. “Really?”

“Really,” he says. “It’s a good filet. What can I say?”

I shake my head and look at the short but delicious menu in front of me. It’s printed in dark gold and black ink on thick card stock, and the fact that not a single item has a price beside it tells me that I don’t even want to know how much any of it costs. Especially the filet mignon.

“I wouldn’t be able to resist trying everything on this menu,” I confess, looking back up at him. “I mean, how do you only stick to one thing?”

“It’s just how I am,” he replies. “I know what I like. I’m not interested in sampling other things, things that aren’t the very best. I want what I want. Nothing less, nothing else.”

His eyes have gone dark and they’re aimed square at me. I shift in my seat, pressing my thighs together.

“Why do I feel like you’re not talking about the filet mignon anymore?” I ask quietly.

“Because I’m not,” he says, the corner of his mouth lifting a little.

I am lost, unsure of what to say next. Thankfully, the waiter saves me the trouble of having to think of anything to say, interrupting us to inquire about our drink orders. I let Elijah choose a wine for us and when the waiter brings it to us, he samples it and gives a curt nod of approval before the waiter pours our glasses, leaving the bottle on the table between us.

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“Are you always this bold with women you like?” I ask him.

“No,” he replies. “But then...I guess I haven’t liked many women.”

I raise a brow.

“I’ve dated,” he says. “And I’ve met women I’ve enjoyed talking to, spending time with...but I wouldn’t say I’ve really felt romantically attached to many of them, if any.”

“But you feel that way about me?”

“I do,” he replies. “Does this make you uncomfortable?”

“No,” I lie.

He tilts his head, his intense eyes boring into me.

“It’s okay if it does,” he says. “We’re strangers. You don’t know a lot about me.”

“And you don’t know a lot about me,” I point out. “Yet you feel attached to me. Why?”

He leans forward.

“I won’t lie to you,” he says. “A great deal of it is physical. I like the way you look, Andy, and I can’t seem to stop imagining you naked in my bed. Ever since I first saw

you.”

My breathing quickens and I feel heated, like his eyes might set me aflame on the spot right now.

“But it’s not just that,” he says. “It’s not just lust. Sex without anything of substance is empty. It leaves people lonelier than if they’d just been alone the whole time.”

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

“I am,” he says. “And I decided that I’m tired of that emptiness. I don’t like the hollow feeling it gives me, I don’t like the transactional nature of that kind of relationship. I want more than that, and I want it with a woman who makes me feel something other than shallow lust.”

“I make you feel that way?”

He nods.

“You know more about me than you think,” he continues. “You make me want to...talk.”

“Talk?” I repeat.

“Talk,” he agrees. “It might not sound like much but I’m not a very talkative man to begin with, I guess. For me to be talking this much on a date at all, talking as much as I am right now with you, is...weird. It’s a new experience for me. And it means a lot. You make me want to talk to you, you’re a good listener and you’re...”

“I’m what?” I ask.

“Sweet,” he says with a shrug. “In that innocent, open-hearted, optimistic kind of way. You listen and you’re compassionate. I like that. You’re so different from me.”

“You’re not compassionate?”

He shakes his head.

“I’m a cold-hearted son of a bitch,” he says. “At least, this is what I’ve been told.”

I laugh.

“I feel like that can’t be true,” I say. “Or you wouldn’t have fired that gross Dan guy on my behalf.”

“The way that I fired Dan was far from compassionate,” he says darkly. “Dan’s just lucky that I didn’t do worse than fire him. But he’s got more coming to him. He’ll find out how ruined his reputation is in this city when he tries to find another job. Nobody with any sense, nobody who wants to work with me or my companies in the future, will touch him with a ten foot pole.”

I stare at him, shocked by the bite in his voice.

“That’s a little harsh,” I say.

He looks at me, grinning a little.

“Told you,” he says. “Cold-hearted son of a bitch, remember? And here you are, the compassionate sweetheart, feeling sorry for a man who treated you like crap.”

“I didn’t say I feel sorry for him,” I say. “Maybe I’m just less vengeful than you.”

“Everyone is less vengeful than I am,” he corrects me. “So this doesn’t surprise me at all. You seem like a kind hearted person.”

“Maybe,” I say.

“You do,” he replies. “I think this is why it’s so easy to talk to you.”

The waiter returns, and I realize I haven’t looked at the menu at all. So when Elijah orders his usual — the filet - I just ask for the same.

“This place is so...fancy,” I say, looking around. “No wonder I haven’t heard of it before. I don’t think I’ve had a meal that costs more than fifteen dollars in...ever.”

“Expensive doesn’t always mean quality,” he says. “I’ve had fifteen dollar meals that taste better than hundred or even five hundred dollar meals.”

“Like what?” I ask.

“Like In-N-Out,” he replies with a grin.

“No way,” I say. “You eat In-N-Out? When?”

“I wasn’t always wealthy, you know,” he says. “Besides. Wealthy people enjoy fast food, too. You know, I once saw Elon Musk at a Taco Bell?”

I laugh.

“Well, where are there any In-N-Outs around here, anyway?” I ask. “I haven’t had a burger since I went on a vacation to San Diego.”

“I was stationed on the West coast for a little while,” he replies. “Had so many double doubles that I got sick of them for a while. They were my go-to on my days off. A step above McDonalds, but still somewhat affordable on my salary.”

“So I guess you haven’t had them in quite a while,” I comment. “Being in New York City and all.”

“Oh, I definitely have,” he replies. “I have offices all over the country and I travel every few weeks. I, uh, may or may not have set up a location in San Diego just so I’d have an excuse to visit that area from time to time.”

I laugh.

“The perks of being the boss,” I say, shaking my head.

“Indeed,” he replies. “I love San Diego. The weather is so beautiful. I swear, people over there are just happier. It’s the sunshine and the beach.”

“Hard to be gloomy when it’s always seventy degrees and gorgeous outside,” I agree.

“So,” he says. “How long ago was this vacation to San Diego?”

“A few years,” I say. “I was in high school, going to an orchestra competition.”

Elijah’s eyebrows skyrocket.

“Orchestra,” he says. “I’ve heard of sports competitions, but never an orchestra competition.”

“Oh, it’s brutal,” I nod. “The competition is fierce. And the scholarships are well worth it. I must have practiced until my fingers bled for the weeks leading up to the final competition.”

“What did you play?”

“Cello,” I say.

“Do you still play?”

I sigh.

“I could,” I reply. “If I had an instrument. I’m probably rusty, but it’s one of those things that I did for so long. I could probably recall it pretty quickly with a little practice.”

“What happened to your cello?”

“Sold it,” I reply simply. “It went for a couple thousand, which helped me put the deposit on my place in the city.”

“Ouch. That sucks.”

“It’s a large instrument anyway,” I say, shrugging this off. “My apartment is small and besides, I’m sure my neighbors would complain about me playing music. They complain about everything. The walls are paper thin.”

“City living,” he nods.

“It is what it is,” I giggle. “I mean, it has its perks. For instance, I can basically hear the neighbors having sex every night. It’s so loud, almost like I’m sitting right there in their bedroom watching.”

His eyes widen and I laugh again, pleased that I can shock this worldly tough guy.

“And this is a perk for you?” he asks.

“I mean, it’s something to do in between episodes of Stranger Things,” I reply in delight. “Come on, don’t tell me you wouldn’t mute the TV and listen closely if you heard moans coming through the wall. I can’t resist!”

He shakes his head, looking at me thoughtfully.

“So,” he says. “You play the cello, you’re wrapping up your college degree, and in your spare time you watch Stranger Things while spying on your neighbors in between episodes.”

“It’s not spying if they go at it so hard that their headboard bangs into the wall behind my couch,” I point out.

“Fair enough,” he says, bowing his head. “You are fascinating. What else can I learn about you, Andy? I want to know everything.”

My body heats up, once again feeling his intense and watchful gaze on me.

10

Elijah

Is it just me, or is this date going spectacularly well?

I’m not a smooth talker. Tonight I realized that for the last few years, not only have I not gone on many actual dates, but none of those past dates were ones where I actually cared about the outcome.

Sure, I wanted the woman to like me well enough to sleep with me.

But nothing more than that.

And because of this, I would let the woman lead, let her dominate the conversation, relying on her shock and awe of me and my status, my wealth, in order to earn her favor.

Andy is more of a challenge. Not just because I actually give a damn what she thinks about me, and don't just want her to sleep with me tonight. But also because, though she seems intimidated by me, she also isn't overly impressed with my wealth.

We're not talking about the brand of my car, or my vacation home in Aspen, or the three thousand dollar bottle of wine we're sharing.

No. Instead we're talking about fast food burgers, the first concert we ever saw (Me:Radiohead. Her:The Arcade Fire).

We're talking about the weirdest things we've ever seen on the subway, about what kind of tattoo we would get if we didn't care about who saw it, about her plans after she graduates college in a couple of weeks.

When this last topic comes up, I wait for her to announce some kind of agenda, some angle with me. She wants to run her own business, and I hold my breath and wait, expecting her to dive into a request, a favor she needs from me, in order to kick start this dream.

Surprising myself, I realize I'm willing to say yes to whatever she needs. Not because it's a means to an end, a way to get her to come home with me and climb into bed, but because I actually give a fuck. I want to see Andy succeed. Why?

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Because she seems kind. And hard-working. And like she deserves a chance.

But the request doesn't come. She doesn't ask me for any favors as she elaborates on her dreams, her five year plan, her ten year plan. Her eyes are alight with passion as she describes it all in great detail and I can tell she's thought about it a lot.

Seeing this, my respect for her only grows.

Our meals are finished, and when the waiter comes by to get our dessert order, Andy shakes her head.

"I'm way too full," she says, looking at me. "And you've already been so generous."

I'm disappointed. I'm not ready for the night to be over, and one more course would give us a chance to keep talking, for me to learn more facts about Andy to add to my growing collection.

"How about a coffee?" I ask. "They've got a great cafe con panna."

"You're the boss," she says. "After the wine, a little caffeine sounds great."

I order for the both of us, feeling relief that I can prolong the goodbye for a little while longer. The waiter is back quickly, setting the two small mugs and saucers in front of us. I give him my Amex black card without looking at the bill, wanting as few interruptions as possible for the rest of our date.

"So, something you said keeps bothering me," Andy says carefully after the waiter

walks away.

My stomach drops.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Earlier, you said you’re vengeful, that everyone is less vengeful than you are,” she says. “But...you don’t seem that way to me right now.”

“You mentioned,” I reply. “I can’t believe I don’t scare you.”

“Should you?”

“Maybe,” I say. “I don’t know. I’m so used to people responding to me in a certain way. I guess I don’t know any different and it’s odd, being with someone who meets me at my level. Not afraid of me, not kissing my ass or trying to get something out of me.”

“That sounds like it can be lonely,” she comments.

I drain the rest of my mug and think about her words. Is it lonely? Fuck yeah it is. Only, I don’t think about it very much. I keep myself occupied with work, outrunning my own demons, avoiding my own inner thoughts and — gag— my feelings, too.

“I just...I don’t know you very well and I’m wondering what you mean when you say you can be vengeful. You fired Dan, for instance, and it almost sounds like you’re going to try to ruin his career too. Like it’s not enough to fire him for something, you have to make sure you follow him wherever he goes afterwards. Vengeful.”

“Vengeful,” I agree.

“Have you always been this way?” she asks.

“No,” I say honestly. “Well. Maybe a little. But the military sort of changed me.”

I don’t elaborate, not sure how much I want to tell her. She knows more than I meant to tell her already, and giving the full story might be the difference between a second date...or her running for the hills.

“Changed you,” she repeats, sipping her drink. “I can imagine it changes everyone to some degree. How did it change you though? It made you more...vengeful? Angry?”

“Yes and yes,” I reply. “I mean, it’s not like every guy who comes out of the service has to be transformed into a militant asshole or something. That’s a stereotype. It’s not always like that. But I had to do some work when I got out.”

“Work like therapy?” she asks.

Bingo. Even though I’m trying to hold back, Andy is jumping forward, uncomfortably close to the truth as though she can read my mind, my forehead transparent, a window into my mind where the truth is projected in big bold letters: Warning – This man is screwed up. Do not get too close.

“Like therapy,” I say. “Even if I didn’t get hurt in the field, I saw some stuff that...that most people don’t have to see in their lifetime. It changes people, witnessing that kind of thing. Therapy is a necessary tool.”

“Do you still go?”

“To therapy?”

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“Yeah,” she says. “Sorry...you don’t have to get deep into this if you don’t want to. I know we barely know each other.”

We barely know each other, but I want to know you much, much more, I think to myself.

And because I want to know Andy much more, I’m willing to give more, tell her the things I hardly speak to my own brothers about.

“It’s okay,” I reply. “It’s not my favorite thing to talk about. But I can talk about it now, thanks to the therapy. Yeah, I’m still in therapy. For maintenance, that’s what my therapist calls it.”

“Like when you get a hair trim,” she says with a smile. “Maintaining your hair health. Maintaining your mental health.”

I smile back at her. If only therapy were as pain-free as getting a hair trim. Then maybe I wouldn’t dread it all week like I do.

“It’s more akin to a dentist appointment, maybe,” I say. “A necessary evil in life. I know I need it, and that if I don’t do it, bad stuff could happen. But damn if I can’t wait for it to be over.”

She groans.

“That the dentist,” she says. “No matter how much I floss, I always have a cavity. Always.”

“You’re too sweet,” I reply. “It’s unavoidable.”

She laughs.

“Now that was the cheesiest thing I’ve ever heard a man say about me!” she says, her eyes dancing in the candlelight. “And I can’t believe it came out of the mouth of a man like you. You say you’re this angry vengeful guy. But you’re also...”

“Also what?” I ask.

“Adorable,” she finishes.

I frown.

“Don’t think I’ve ever been called adorable before,” I say. “You make me sound like a fluffy dog.”

She giggles again and I can’t help it, I laugh too.

We move on to other topics, totally at ease. The waiter brings my card back with the receipt and I barely glance at it, hardly notice the night growing later and later as the candles around us slowly extinguish themselves one by one.

When she leans forward and absentmindedly strokes the back of my hand with her fingertips, my heart feels like it stops for a moment, then returns with a quickened, uneven beating. And even though I know the purpose of tonight is to be a gentleman, to show Andy a nice evening, I can’t help it. My mind thinks of sex, of how amazing her cleavage looks in that deep purple dress, about how that dress would look better on the floor of my bedroom...

“We should get out of here,” Andy says, glancing around. “I’m pretty sure we’re the

last people left in the entire restaurant, and that nice waiter probably wants to go home soon.”

11

Andy

I don't ever sleep with a man on the first date, but there's a first time for everything. I'm so drawn to Elijah; I can't explain it. He's nothing like any other man I've been with before, in every possible way.

And it's a good thing.

A very good thing. Because I like the way Elijah put his hand around my waist and guides me to outside. The way he opens the car door from me and guides me inside, the way he holds the steering wheel with one hand while his other hand rests possessively on my thigh.

When he asks if I want him to take me home, I can tell what he wants. And I want it too. So I shake my head.

“My place?” he asks. “For another drink?”

Even though we both know it's not just for another drink.

I nod.

I like the way Elijah can be strong and soft all in the same moment, at the same time. Tough but vulnerable. The way he opens up with me, is honest about his struggles and about the fact that he's been to therapy.

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That he's aware of his own faults, of his own areas where he needs to work on things. That he continues to work on things, even though he's accomplished so much in his life already.

He's ambitious. Strong. Powerful.

It's admirable. It's who I'm striving to become, a business owner like him, running my own things, answering to nobody. No boss, nobody around to tell me what to do. Leading my own way through things, scary as that might be, has always been what I truly want out of life.

"Wow," I whisper as we pull into the underground garage beneath his condo. Even the place where he parks his car is massive and luxurious, with warm lights lining the silver tiled walls.

We take the elevator up, and the doors open to a penthouse with views overlooking Central Park. A pool — a real pool — lines one wall, and the other is outfitted with a large sectional sofa facing the windows.

"It's heated, if you'd like to get in," Elijah says, nodding to the pool that I'm staring at.

"I didn't bring a suit," I laugh.

"That's never stopped me," he grins.

He strides to a drink cart on the other side of the room, pouring us both a glass of red

wine.

“How long have you lived here?” I ask as he brings me the glass.

“Not long,” he replies. “I’m not sure I’m keeping it.”

“Not sure?” I gasp. “How could you sell a place like this?”

“I have a couple of others not far from here,” he says. “I own a lot of real estate. But lately I’ve been thinking about consolidating...finding something else, maybe something out of the city. The condos are nice, and have been strong investments...but nothing I own has ever felt like home to me. That’s why I keep buying and selling, I guess.”

“You’re searching for home,” I say softly.

He nods, then leads me to the couch where we take a seat.

“What does home feel like, to you?” I ask.

“That’s a deep question,” he says. He takes my ankles, picking my feet up and putting them in his lap. Before I can protest, he’s removing my heels and massaging my feet.

Thank god I have a fresh pedicure, I think, my cheeks turning pink. I lean my head back, unable to even think straight as he continues to knead my feet, the tension from wearing those high heels melting away.

“And here you thought you were the massage therapist,” he says with a grin.

“Clearly you can teach me a thing or two,” I agree. “But stop distracting me! I asked you what home feels like to you.”

He sighs.

“I guess home is...a feeling more than a place. At least, that’s what I’m figuring out. I’ve had so many places in the city. Had them renovated. Professionally decorated. Filled with photographs and art. Then emptied and sold, so I can try again in another place. It never works. I’ve realized it’s because you can’t force that feeling. You have to let it grow over time. You have to allow that feeling to happen.”

“I guess it’s hard to do that when you’re always getting up and moving on to the next place,” I say.

“And traveling,” he agrees. “And...living alone.”

I nod.

“I hate having roommates,” I say. “But I have to admit, it’s nice to have somebody there when I get home after a long day.”

“I wouldn’t know what that feels like,” he says. “Haven’t lived with anyone in a long, long time. Especially a woman.”

I look around the condo.

“This place is so huge, someone could be living with you and you wouldn’t even know it,” I tease. “Maybe you’ve got a squatter as a roommate!”

“Maybe,” he grins.

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Finished with the divine foot massage, his hands glide up my legs now, and then he pulls me onto his lap, palms sliding over my ass.

“Is this too much?” he mutters as I gaze down at him. “Too fast?”

“It’s too fast, but I don’t care,” I say, wrapping my arms around his neck. “You make me want to go too fast.”

I put my legs on either side of him and straddle him, grinding against his bulge. He groans, fingers digging into my hips as he clutches me tightly against him.

And this is why I want him. Because he makes me feel so fucking wanted, so desired, so beautiful. He looks at me and touches me as though he doesn’t just want me, but needs me.

“I don’t expect to do anything physical tonight,” he says hesitantly, pulling away. “Really. If you feel pressure...”

“I don’t feel pressure,” I say. “I feel absolutely no pressure. I want this. Of course, if I’m pressuring you I can always go home...”

I give him a teasing smile and make to get off of his lap. His hands quickly pull me back down onto him and he holds me there tightly by the hips.

“No way,” he growls, tasting the base of my throat, his whiskers scratching against the sensitive skin there in a way that triggers a full-body shiver in me. “I don’t need to be pressured into fucking you, Andy. It’s all I’ve been thinking about since I first

saw you.”

“You’ve got a dirty mind,” I reply. “Thinking about me in that way when I was there to do a job.”

“Only have a dirty mind for you,” he mutters. “It’s been torture, having a woman like you rubbing hot oil all over my body. Feeling your breasts brush against my shoulder when you lean over me. Your pussy only inches from my face at times, with you standing so close to me.”

His fingers find the zipper of my dress and pull it down, letting the dress slide off my shoulders and fall to my waist.

“I knew it,” he says, looking at my chest hungrily. “No bra beneath this thing. You’ve been torturing me all fucking night.”

“Not my intention,” I say with a smile, covering my breasts with my hands.

He grabs my wrists roughly, pulling them away so that my breasts are bared, nipples hard and waiting. Then he leans us over so that I’m laying back on the couch, my wrists held firmly over my head by one of his enormous hands while his other hand rips the rest of my dress down.

“I think your intention was very much to torture me,” he says, pulling my black lace thong down my thighs as well. When he pulls it off my ankles I see him pocket the underwear rather than throw it on the floor like he’d done with my dress and I know he intends to keep them and send me home without anything beneath my dress.

The idea of him keeping a souvenir, something of mine, is such a fucking turn on.

He stands up, holding me against him in his arms. Then he throws me back onto the

couch, so suddenly and quickly that I scream in surprise. When I land he dives after me, pulling me by my ankles to him and pushing my legs apart.

“You’ve got a beautiful pussy,” he says, stroking my lips with his fingers. “And look...you’re already wet for me.”

I feel so exposed, so vulnerable and self-conscious in this position. I stare at the ceiling, trying to catch my breath as his fingers continue stroking me softly, then gently open me.

When I feel his whiskers scratching against my inner thighs, I instinctively try to shut my legs around him.

His strong hands grip me by the thighs, pushing them apart again, and I go limp beneath him, breathing hard.

“Are you okay?” Elijah asks, coming back up to meet my eyes.

“Fine,” I say. “Just...nobody’s done this to me before.”

I’m almost embarrassed to admit this truth but if anything, Elijah seems more turned on.

“So after tonight, I’ll be the only man who’s tasted you?” he asks, fire behind his eyes as he stares me down.

“Yes.”

“I like that,” he says. “Ireallyfucking like that, Andy.”

Before I can respond — not that I even know what to say to him right now — his

head is between my legs again and this time he doesn't go slowly, his fingers parting my lips so that his tongue has direct, unshielded access to my clitoris.

His tongue feels amazing, better than my fingers or even my toys at my apartment have ever felt. Firm, hot, and wet, it circles my clit slowly. Unconsciously, I begin circling my hips in time with his tongue, deepening the pleasure. I feel his fingers gripping my ass, squeezing me so tight that it nearly hurts, pulling me against his mouth as his tongue goes faster...and faster...

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As I feel my orgasm mounting, I forget everything.

I forget the fact that I've only known this guy for a couple of days.

Forget that he's a client, and that I'm pretty sure my boss would kill me if he knew.

I also forget that he's a billionaire and that I'm a broke college student, that he's chiseled and carved like a Greek god while I shop in the (clearance) plus size section.

None of it matters. Though we couldn't be more different, more unexpected of a match, none of it even matters in this moment. We're two people, bodies and souls bared, sharing this night together and the pleasure it brings.

His tongue is flicking me now, fast and hard, and his hands have traveled up my torso to caress my breasts. They overflow in his fingers and he massages them softly, his thumbs sliding roughly over my nipples again and again.

All while his tongue relentlessly attacks, bringing me closer and closer to orgasm.

My screams and moans reverberate off the penthouse ceilings as I come. He drinks me in, sucking and licking between my legs like he can't get enough, like I'm the most delicious thing he's ever tasted.

He leaves me shivering and quaking on the couch as he stands up and pulls a condom from his pocket. He unbuckles his belt and I watch him pull the zipper of his pants down, then push his boxers down. He pulls his cock out, gripping it by the thick and meaty base. The tip of it is already glistening with his arousal.

Rolling the condom over his shaft, he pushes me back on the couch again. I'm still panting, still struggling for air as he guides himself to my opening. His eyes are on mine, intense and dark, as he slowly penetrates me. I feel him, all of him, as he slides further inside of me, so deep, stretching my walls and overwhelming me.

"Fuck," he growls when he's all the way in me, his hips pressed against my ass and thighs. "I'm going to come fast, Andy. You are so goddamn perfect."

"Come," I tell him, stroking his chest as I try to relax my core, to get used to his size inside of me. It doesn't hurt; it just feels like...so fucking much. Like delicious, overwhelming pleasure that begins inside of me and radiates outward.

He pulls his hips back slowly until his cock is nearly out, only the tip of it pressed inside of me. Holding himself there, just barely inside of me, Elijah leans down and kisses me softly and slowly, his tongue parting my lips and invading my mouth, caressing me.

Without warning, his hips slam down against me, his cock sliding into me in one smooth, quick motion.

"Fuck!" I shout, my exclamation muffled against his mouth.

He's already pulling back again, so agonizingly slow. And then he does it again — slides his entire length back inside of me with brutal force, so hard that it pushes me up on the couch.

Again and again, he fucks me hard, hips slamming against me. He leans over me down, his heavy torso pressed against my chest, his mouth at my ear so that I can feel his breathy moans.

"You're mine," he growls in my ear. "Say it. Say you belong to me."

His words send chills through my body. I don't know how he does it but he's somehow dark and light, soft and hard at the same time. Owning me from the inside out with his body and his words all at once, his cock crashing into me, stretching me, pushing me to my limit as he hisses these directions in my ear, commanding me.

"Say it," he growls again. "Say you belong to me."

"I belong to you," I gasp.

"Yeah," he grunts. "You do. You belong to me. Mine. You. Are. Mine."

And I believe him. I don't know why, but I do. And even more confusing to me, is the fact that I don't even mind that he's claiming me, deciding that I belong to him, and acting as though I have no say in the matter. It doesn't bother me like it normally would.

Instead it just feels...right.

Belonging to Elijah feels right.

It seems impossible for Elijah to fuck me any harder than he already is but as he approaches his own orgasm, he does, his hips quickening the pace and thrusting into me so hard that if it weren't for his strong arms holding me in place, I might be pushed right off the couch from the sheer force of his love making.

As he comes, he grips my jaw in his hand and directs my mouth to his, kissing me hard, claiming me as his.

It takes minutes for me to catch my breath. I'm sprawled on the couch, naked and

soaking wet. I watch him, my mind still in a post-orgasm haze as he buckles his belt and wipes his mouth before going to the drink cart and bringing me back a bottle of water.

“Water,” he says, pulling me to a sitting position and handing me the bottle. “Drink.”

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“Bossy, bossy,” I mutter, but I uncap the bottle and take a long drink.

“I need you hydrated if I’m going to fuck you all night, Andy.”

My eyes widen.

“All night?” I ask.

He nods.

“That was round one,” he replies. “But I’ve got more rooms in this house than I know what to do with, and I think I need to fuck you in each one of them. Might help make this place feel more like home, if you know what I mean.”

“I’ll collapse from exhaustion!” I say with a laugh. “There’s no way we can do it in every single room tonight. You’ll have to pick your favorite room first, and we’ll go from there.”

“I make the rules,” he says with a dark smile. “But I like that approach. We’ll start with my favorite places and work our way to the bottom of the list.”

“And what’s your favorite place?”

Elijah takes the bottle of water, now half empty, from my hand and puts it on the coffee table. Then he picks me up, lifting me easily from the couch as though I weigh nothing, and carries me to the window.

“I’ve always wanted to fuck against the window,” he says, putting me down and turning me so that I’m facing the window. My legs still feel weak from my orgasm and I brace my hands against the thick glass for balance.

I hear his belt and then his zipper, then the wrinkle of a condom wrapper. I gasp as I feel his sheathed cock press against my entrance.

One of his arms snakes around me, his palm grazing my breast before sliding upwards, fingers gripping my throat lightly — just barely a squeeze, not enough to even be close to cutting off my air supply, but firm enough to assert dominance, sending fresh waves of desire to my core.

“I like the idea of being seen like this,” he growls in my ear. “Of people seeing me fucking you from behind and knowing you belong to me.”

“Can people see into these windows?” I ask, my eyes opening in panic. I look at the buildings across from the park, at the few pedestrians far below us on the sidewalk. Surely nobody could possibly see us.

“Definitely not,” he says. “Not with the lights off, anyway. Want me to turn them on?”

“No!”

He laughs softly in my ear, then his hand leaves my throat and journeys between my thighs, stroking me softly and slowly.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he says. “Are you sure you don’t want to be seen? It seems like this turns you on.”

“I don’t want us to be seen,” I gasp.

“Then be a good girl and come for me,” he says, his finger stroking me faster. “Come on my cock again, show me how bad you want me.”

I’m still sensitive from my last orgasm and it doesn’t take long before I’m climbing to new heights, tense from head to toe as Elijah stokes my clitoris with his rough fingers, his cock sliding slowly into me from behind.

“Fuck,” he growls in my ear. He leans his weight into me, pushing me roughly against the window so that my entire upper body is pressed against it, my cheek turned to the side, my breasts squished against the freezing cold glass.

“You like that?” he asks as I moan.

“Yes,” I breathe, eyes closed.

“Come for me,” he growls against my skin as he plants rough wet kisses up and down my neck, on my cheek, at my jaw beneath my ear. “I want you to come for me, Andy. Show me how much you like this. Come on my cock.”

I can hardly listen to him, can barely process anything he’s saying. But when he tells me to come, it’s as though my body is being directed by him, climbing to climax at his command. I lose control, screaming his name as the pleasure pulses through my body.

The rest of the strength in my legs seems to disappear as soon as my orgasm subsides, and I nearly fall before Elijah picks me up, turning me around and holding me with my legs on either side of him.

“Hold onto me,” he commands, and I muster the remaining strength in my tired limbs, clinging weakly to him with my forehead on his muscular shoulder. He carries us to the wall beside the window and pushes my back against it so that I’m braced

between the wall and his body.

Helplessly sandwiched here, he grips my ass as he pulls out of me slowly then pushes back in, using my body weight to let me fall against his cock as he thrusts inside of me with equally rough force.

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He's fucking me so hard that it nearly hurts. But...it doesn't. Instead, new pleasure begins to bloom inside of me as his cock pummels me, pumping in and out of me with furious speed. I cling to him with newfound strength, coming one last time and biting his shoulder, screaming against him. When his cock begins to pulse and swell, I can tell he's coming too.

"I really am going to collapse now," I murmur against his skin as he slows his pace, his hips coming to a stop, his cock still buried to the hilt inside of me.

"I've got you," he says softly.

He carries us to the couch, taking a seat on it, still holding me on his lap. His hands are as gentle now as they were rough earlier, only minutes before. He strokes my hair softly as I pant against him, his own chest rising and falling with slow, ragged breaths.

12

Elijah

I really could fuck Andy all night long. But I can tell from the tired look on her face after our second round, that she wasn't kidding about collapsing.

I want her body so much, I don't think I'll ever get enough. But I promised not to pressure her into anything, and that includes fourth, fifth, and sixth orgasms.

Those will just have to wait for our next date.

We finish the bottle of wine — with me forcing her to have more water, too.

She's already asleep in my arms as I carry her to my bedroom. I lay her down gingerly in the bed, tucking her in, admiring the soft glow of her skin, the way her lips curve upward in a gentle smile.

She's too good to be true. Too fucking good. And me? I'm a lucky bastard that she agreed to come out with me tonight, even luckier that she wanted to come back to my place and sleep with me.

Sleep. Now that's something I haven't done with a woman in ages. Actual sleep, not just sex. I look at the other side of the bed, the empty pillow, the space beside Andy where I know, if I were a normal man, I should be occupying right now.

But I can't.

Not tonight.

Maybe not ever.

So I leave Andy in the bedroom, closing the door behind me gently, and walk down the hall to the guest bedroom. I'll sleep here tonight. And maybe in the morning, if Andy isn't too sore, I'll fuck her a few more times before breakfast.

13

Andy

I wake up alone in a massive bed that is way too big for two, three, even four people.

But there aren't two people in the bed when I wake up; it's just me.

I look around, calling Elijah's name a time or two before climbing out of bed. There's an en suite bathroom through a door on the right, but there's no sign of Elijah even when I check the massive shower stall.

I frown, turning in a circle as if I'll find clues of Elijah's whereabouts around me. But I find nothing. Even the toothbrush on the counter appears dry and unused, and back in the bedroom, I don't see any of his belongings on the nightstand, no dirty clothes discarded on the floor, not even a wrinkle in the pillowcase next to mine.

My heart sinks when I exit the bedroom, calling Elijah's name and hearing no response. My voice echoes against the walls and in the daylight, the massive penthouse feels lonely and sterile.

I walk to the living room and find my shoes and dress, putting them on before doing another round around the penthouse, calling Elijah's name again and again. There are more doors in this place, more rooms than I could possibly search. Even if he is home, leaving me all alone in his bedroom seems a little messed up considering the maze-like layout and massive scale of this lonely space.

As a last ditch effort, I dial his on my phone a couple of times. It sends me to voice mail each time. On the last call, I hang up in frustration.

I've got a bad feeling about this. Last night we did everything. Went "all the way," as Deepti might say. And I normally never do that on a first date. Normally I take my time getting to know a man before sleeping with him, being absolutely sure that I can trust him not to break my heart.

But I broke this personal rule with Elijah, taking a leap of faith and trusting that he wouldn't let me down.

Is he going to make me regret that?

Where is he?

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I'm fighting back tears as I write a text message.

Hey. Tried to find you to say goodbye but I guess you're not here. Thanks for dinner last night. See you around.

I read the text a few times, painstakingly analyzing each word, trying to decide whether this message sounds too desperate, too vulnerable, too clingy.

Fuck it.

I send the text and take a deep breath.

It's hard to reconcile his absence this morning with the man he seemed to be last night — tender, generous, honest, open... How could all of that possibly be fake? It doesn't seem possible.

Is it possible that I was wrong about Elijah? Is it possible that he's just like the rest?

When I get to the spa, things are crazy. Saturdays are our busiest day and Tricia looks frantic when I walk in, mouthing "help me" from behind the counter where she's ringing up two customers at once, a stack of fresh towels in a basket behind her waiting to be expertly folded.

Good god, we need more staff. We've told Nick this a hundred times, but does he care?

Always trying to stretch his dollar a little farther so that he can pocket more profits. After the morning I've had, a tough day at work is the last thing I need. But I bite my lip and carry on, folding the towels at a rapid pace. They're not folded with laser-like precision the way that Tricia would have done, but they're good enough, and with any luck will get us through to the end of the day.

The towel folding takes only half an hour, barely making a dent in my shift. Even though I previously promised myself I wouldn't be checking my phone all day, desperate to hear from Elijah, after I finish folding the towels I go to the back room, pulling my phone out of my locker to see if he's sent me anything.

My heart lifts a little when I see that I have one message...until I realize it's from Deepti, not him.

You didn't come home tonight so I'm guessing your date went even better than expected. Call me ASAP! I need details.

I groan. Deepti always gets so excited about men — the ones she dates, and the ones her friends date. She had high hopes for Elijah Stone, and so did I...but unfortunately, it's looking like he's going to disappoint us both.

I text Deepti back.

Will talk later. Did not go well at all. Buy ice cream at the store.

Deepti responds within seconds.

Oh, Andy I'm so sorry. I really thought he seemed like a good one. One pint of chocolate chip cookie dough coming up. We can rent When Harry Met Sally too, if you want?

A bittersweet offer. When Harry Met Sally is our go-to breakup movie. Except, is this even a breakup? More like getting dumped after a date that I didn't realize was a one night stand...

I should have known better.

"Andy, you've got a walk-in appointment!" Tricia says, poking her head through the cracked back room door.

Sighing, I put my phone back in my locker and shut it.

When I get to spa room number three, the walk-in client is already face down on the table, a towel over his lower body.

"Good afternoon," I say, dimming the lights and turning on the aroma therapy diffuser in the corner. "My name is Andy and I'm your therapist today. Any particular areas you'd like me to focus on?"

"Oh, I don't know," the man says slowly. "I think you'll know what to do once you get started."

He chuckles a little.

Um, ooookay?

This guy is giving me weird vibes, but then again, it's NYC. Lots of people give me weird vibes.

I get started, rubbing some massage oil between my palms before pressing on his shoulders and down his back, ending at his hips.

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“You can go a little lower if you’d like,” the man says.

His voice feels vaguely familiar, but I can’t place it. And in any case, I can’t seem to get my head out of what happened at Elijah’s place this morning. So I can’t tell whether this guy is giving me weird vibes, or if I’m just in a weird space myself right now.

“Hip pain?” I ask, prodding the towel down his hips a couple of inches. “Or, lower back?”

“Like I said,” he says in that same awkward, slow voice. “I think you can figure out what to do once you get started. Would it be better if I turned over? Or will you let me know when it’s time?”

I frown.

“I don’t see how I can work on your lower back and hips if you turn over,” I reply.

“Oh, come on,” the man says, impatience in his voice.

I back up as he sits up on the table, turning to me and dropping the towel to the ground so that he’s completely nude.

Fuck. Of course. I knew I recognized that stupid, creepy voice.

“What do I have to do to get the Elijah Stone special?” Dan asks, his weak chin jutting stubbornly in my direction. “Whatever he was paying you, I’ll match it. Come

on, baby, show me what you can really do to relax me.”

“Ugh!” I back away from him, my arm reaching for the door behind me. He stands, approaching me with his sausage-like fingers outstretched towards me eerily, like some sort of ruddy-skinned zombie.

“Come on,” he repeats. “I don’t think your boss would like to hear that you’re discriminating against customers. I just want the same treatment you gave Elijah. Now, what’ll it be? You on your knees, or on your back?”

“Fuck you!” I snap. I open the door and dart out of the spa room as quickly as I can, running for the back room. When I get there I slam the door closed behind me, my heart hammering in my chest as adrenaline surges through my veins. I fly across the room and open my locker, taking my backpack and slinging it over my shoulder. Then I leave out of the back door, the one that opens to the alleyway, so I don’t have to risk crossing paths with Dan again on my way out.

I don’t stop running until I reach the subway station. For the rest of the trip home, I try to catch my breath, counting in my head slowly from one to ten over and over again in an effort to calm down. But it doesn’t work and by the time I reach the apartment I share with Deepti, I’m still just as worked up as before. Maybe even more.

“Deepti!” I scream as I wrench the door open. “Deepti!”

She comes running from the dining room to the right, eyes wide.

“What?” She asks frantically. “What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

“No,” I say shakily. “Just...ugh! I’ve had the worst day. My date was a disaster and then he ditched me the next morning after sleeping with me. Then I go into work and

Dan is there and — ”

“Who’s Dan?” Deepti frowns. “Slow down!”

“Dan is the creep from the other night,” I explain. “You know, the one that Elijah supposedly fired? Well, I’m starting to wonder if he was even telling me truth about that. He came to Angel Spa, asked for an appointment with me, and then made a pass at me in the spa room. Basically asked for a happy ending — and seems to think I gave Elijah a happy ending too.”

“THat’s disgusting,” Deepti says, her face contorting.

“Did he touch you?”

We both look to the right where Elijah is emerging from the dining room, his face cold and stony.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“He’s here to talk to you,” Deepti says. “I told him to just give you a call and that you were at work but he insisted on staying here until you got—”

“Did he touch you?” Elijah repeats, cutting across Deepti and coming to me. His hands reach for me and before I can step away he’s gripping me by the shoulders, those dark eyes holding an expression I’ve never seen before.

He’s...scary looking in this moment. Frightening.

“No,” I say.

“But he tried to,” Elijah says, the vein in his neck bulging as he clenches his jaw.

“Yeah, but — ”

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He doesn't stay to hear the end of my sentence. Instead he darts for the door and slams it behind him so loudly that the picture on the wall beside it rattles violently.

I look at Deepti.

"I am so confused," she says.

"Me too."

* * *

Deepti makes us cups of tea as I sit at the dining table and tell her about the last twenty-four hours of my life.

"I don't think Harry Met Sally is going to fix this," she says as I finish, shaking her head. "This is crazy. I'm so sorry, Andy!"

"It's fine," I sigh. "I...don't know what to think anymore."

"I know Elijah was gone when you woke up this morning," Deepti says. "He told me he was sleeping in another room though. And that he slept hard and didn't hear you. His phone died, and...well, I know you were hurt, but it seems like it's just a series of bad coincidences, Andy."

I bite my lip.

"I thought he was ghosting me," I say.

“He came over here as soon as he charged his phone,” Deepti says. “He was calling and texting you the whole time, too, and then when he found out you were at work he nearly left to go speak to you at the spa but I talked him out of it. Knowing what happened at the spa today with Dan, though, I wish I would have let him go.”

“I wish you would have too,” I say. “But, you know, it probably wouldn’t please Tricia much to have a literal fist fight break out between a couple of clients on her watch.”

Deepti laughs.

“It could only happen to you,” she says.

“Do you think he’s going to kill him?”

“Do I think who is going to kill who?” Deepti asks.

“Elijah,” I say. “Do you think he’s going to kill Dan?”

“No,” she says comfortingly, patting my arm. “Kill? Probably not. Seriously injure? Quite possibly.”

We jump as we hear a thunderous banging from the other side of the door.

“Looks like we’re about to find out about Dan’s fate right now,” Deepti says brightly, standing up. “Want me to let him in? I can make myself scarce.”

“Thanks,” I say.

Elijah walks in, looking rumpled and slightly red in the face but otherwise unchanged.

“I half expected you to be covered in blood,” I say to him. “From the look on your face when you left.”

“Believe me, I’m not the one you should expect to be covered in blood,” he says darkly. “Dan, on the other hand...”

He catches the expression on my face and stops himself short.

“Dan is fine,” he clarifies, clearing his throat. “He, uh, will probably need a few stitches. Possibly some dental work. But his mother will still recognize him if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I put my head in my hands.

“I came here to apologize for my absence this morning,” Elijah says, coming around the table and kneeling beside me. “But now it seems like I need to apologize for more than just that.”

“What else is there to apologize for?” I ask.

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“Dan is my responsibility,” he says. “He’s my former-employee. And he should have never been breathing the same oxygen as you, much less known your place of work, your name, any other detail like that. After his gross innuendo that night in my office, I should have put an end to any connection he could have to you. But I didn’t. I corrected this today, however. Nick knows not to let Dan anywhere near Angel Spa property.”

“You talked to Nick?” I ask.

“I did,” he says. “It was a necessity. He needs to keep his staff safe. And if he won’t, I’m more than happy to pull my investment from his business and put it elsewhere. I happen to know an up-and-coming business woman who is looking to break into the spa industry.”

“You’re an investor in Angel Spa,” I groan. “Of course. That makes sense.”

Elijah takes my hand.

“Andy, I am so sorry,” he says. “For Dan, and for my absence this morning.”

“Deepti says you were sleeping in another room,” I say, looking at him. “Why? Why wouldn’t you sleep beside me? After the stuff we did last night...”

“It’s a long story,” he says. “I don’t sleep with women. Not like that. Not in the same bed, all night long.”

“And that’s because...?”

“You remember when I said I fell out of a bed?” Elijah sighs, running a hand through his hair and looking away.

“Yeah,” I say. Where on earth is this going?

“That’s...technically the truth,” he says. “But not the whole story. I fell out of bed because I was having a nightmare. A night terror to be exact. When I got out of the marines, I was dealing with some pretty severe PTSD. I had night terrors. Some bad, some not so bad. While I was in the hospital treating an unrelated issue, I had a night terror that was so bad, I tumbled out of bed, got up, and charged at an unsuspecting nurse who was in the room taking my vitals.”

I gasp.

“The nurse was fine,” he says. “Scared out of her mind, but fine. But when I came to, I realized the danger I’d put her in. And the danger that a man like me poses to everyone in general, but especially to women.”

“A man like you?” I repeat. “What do you mean?”

“A man like me,” he shrugs. “Broken.”

“You are not broken,” I say, squeezing his hand. “Look at me, Elijah.”

He lifts his gaze to me.

“You are not broken. Don’t ever say that about yourself.”

“I haven’t had night terrors in years,” he says. “Almost a decade. Like I told you last night, I’ve gotten a lot of help. And I’m doing much better now. The odds of me hurting you last night in my sleep are incredibly low. But I still worry...I still see the

look on that poor nurse's face sometimes, you know. And I don't ever want you to be afraid of me like that."

I put my hand on his cheek, feeling the emotions surging in my chest. Elijah Stone, this sweet yet tough man, slept in another room last night because he was trying to protect me.

And he thinks he's broken. He thinks I should be afraid of him.

"You could have told me," I say. "I would have understood."

He nods.

"Didn't want to scare you off too soon," he says gruffly. "You're the first woman I've wanted more with, Andy. There's something about you....It's rare. I don't want to fuck it up."

"You're not going to fuck it up," I say.

He puts a hand on the back of my neck, pulling me towards him, into a possessive, consuming kiss.

Epilogue

Six months go by and I'm not even sure where the time went.

After Andy graduated school, I begged and pleaded with her to let me help her with the startup costs of her spa but she stubbornly refused.

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That's Andy, though. Stubborn and proud and strong as hell. I always pictured myself settling down with a more submissive woman, but Andy has changed all of my expectations for my life including that one.

She doesn't take orders from anyone. Especially not me.

Unless we're in the bedroom, of course.

The bedroom. That's another thing that's changed. Before Andy, I hadn't shared a bed with anyone in nearly ten years. At my insistence, we took things slow. Slept on opposite ends of the room for a few nights, just to be sure I wasn't having any problems in the night. Eventually we closed the distance between us and now we've been enjoying my king sized bed together every night for months without any issues.

My therapist says this is big progress. Not the no-night-terror thing. That's been a thing for a while.

No. The wholetrusting people and opening upthing that she's been nagging me about for years.

Apparently my relationship with Andy is what she calls a "breakthrough".

Who knew?

"Hey!" Andy says, walking into the bedroom and sitting on the bed. "Let's go, sleepy head. I'm not going to miss this exhibit just because you want to stay in and sleep."

I open my eyes and stretch my arm towards her, grabbing her around the ankle and pulling her close.

“I don’t want to sleep,” I say. My hand wanders up the hem of her dress.

“Oh no,” she says. “I’m not missing this. You’re coming with me to Deepti’s photography exhibit, which starts...like, now! Shit. I’m late. I can’t let Deepti down, let’s go.”

“Deepti will be fine,” I say, pulling her closer to me by the hips. “She has Arthur to keep her company, doesn’t she?”

“His name isn’t Arthur,” she laughs. “It’s Art.”

“Art isn’t a name,” I scoff with fake disdain in my voice. “It’s a subject in school.”

“It’s his name,” she says.

“It’s not his real name,” I reply.

“How do you know?” she asks. “Did you have your security team do a background check on him or something?”

I grin, enjoying her little joke about my security team. Does my security team do background checks on the people Andy interacts with on a regular basis? Yes. Including on one Arthur Neil Redding, Deepti’s new flame.

“You did do a background check, didn’t you?” Andy groans. “Well, do I even want to know what you found out?”

“Nothing too damning,” I reply lightly. “Only that his whole starving artist routine is

an act...shocker. He's a trust fund baby. Grew up not far from here. Private schools. Ivy League. Silver spoon. This whole photography thing is a rebellion, a way to piss off his parents most likely. But the worst thing about it all has got to be him calling himself Art. A little on the nose, right?"

"Don't mention this stuff in front of them today," she groans, adjusting her earring. "Please? It won't last anyway. None of these flings of Deepti's ever do."

"My lips are sealed."

"You're such a stalker," Andy says, shaking her head. "Checking the background of every single person in my life. It's a big city, you know. How are you going to protect me from everyone?"

"I'll do my best," I say lazily, pulling her closer to me.

Her hair smells like heaven, the mix of fruity and floral scents wafting from the glossy brown strands. I close my eyes. I don't want to get out of bed. I don't want to go anywhere at all. It's a rare Saturday where both of us have the day off. My own work keeps me busy, but so does Andy's, with her raising money for her spa that is scheduled to open at the end of the year.

Like I said; Andy is one ambitious, independent woman. Unlike any other that I've ever dated.

She doesn't need me. She wants me.

And she doesn't think I'm broken. She thinks I'm perfect exactly as I am. Even with my history, my faults, my occasional possessive anger when it comes to protecting her.

Dan won't soon forget the lesson I taught him all those months ago. After I finished rearranging his face, I had my lawyers corner him into an airtight NDA and then a contract agreeing that he won't step foot in any of Andy's regular places in the city.

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In the end, he decided it would be best to leave NYC altogether, and the last time my security team updated me, he'd moved across the country, far from me and my girl.

Good.

“Seriously,” Andy says, pushing off of me and climbing out of bed. “I don’t want to miss it. This is Deepti’s big day!”

“I thought she wasn’t even into photography,” I grumble, getting out of bed reluctantly. Andy is standing in front of the full length mirror on the other end of the room now, turning around in her dress to look at it from all angles. I enjoy the view, the way that light blue dress that I bought her flutters over her thick, tanned thighs and dips down in the front, giving me an ample view of her cleavage.

She’s beautiful.

And perfect.

And mine.

All fucking mine.

She won’t let me control her, to overrun her with demands and orders and instructions. She won’t let me run her life, and I know her better than to ever try to do that.

But she’s still mine. She still comes home to me every night, still kisses me with the

same passion, still looks at me with those adoring eyes — admiration I can't even begin to deserve or earn from her.

If I'm broken and damned, she's the angel that came to redeem me.

She's got fire in her chest, and big dreams. I won't stand in her way. I'll support her, help her — when she lets me help her, that is.

Most of all, I'll protect her. For all of my days, all I want to do is make sure Andy is taken care of. If she won't let me take care of her financially, I'll take care of her in every other way. Emotionally. Physically. Sexually.

"I think your navy button down shirt would go best," she says. She's invading my closet now, holding my dress shirts up to her own outfit in the mirror. "Or maybe...maybe the white linen one?"

"You want us to wear matching outfits?" I ask, quirking an eyebrow up.

She turns and smiles at me.

"Notmatchymatching," she says. "But I want us to coordinate! Like a real couple."

"We are a real couple," I say, standing and taking the shirt from her.

I watch the way her eyes navigate away from mine, taking in my shirtless torso and low-hanging shorts. Lust clouds her gaze.

"I thought you said we need to hurry," I say as she drops the shirt to the side and runs her hands up my chest, kissing me softly just below my pecs. "We're already running late."

“Fuck the exhibit,” she says, guiding me backwards to the bed. I sit down and she climbs into my lap, her dress riding up her thighs as she straddles me. Her fingers rake through my hair and she holds my face by the chin, kissing me deeply, her tongue...

“Wait,” I say, pulling away.

“Oh come on,” Andy groans. “Now you care about being punctual? Deepti won’t even notice we’re late, she’ll be too busy with Art-”

“I’m not worried about being late to the exhibit,” I say. “It’s just, I was about to give you something to complete your outfit.”

“Fuck the outfit,” she says, and she starts to tug the straps of her blue dress down.

“Wait,” I laugh. “I want to do this the right way.”

“Dowhatthe right way?”

I pick her up and put her down on the bed next to me. Then I stand up and cross the room, running my hand over the back of my neck nervously.

“Elijah,” Andy says slowly. “What’s up? Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I say, barely biting out the word. “Just...”

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I sigh and rub my hand over my jaw, looking around the room. Is this the right time? The right place? I don't know. I've overthought this moment for so long, trying to figure out how I know it's the right time...

"Elijah, you're kind of freaking me out. Is something wrong? Is it something about your family? Is everyone okay?"

"Everyone is fine," I say. "This is good news. I think. Well. I guess whether it's good news depends on what you say, but..."

"Please tell me what the hell you're talking about," Andy begs, her eyes wide. "I'm so confused right now."

I shake my head, crossing the room quickly before I can change my mind. I tug the drawer of my nightstand open and pull the velvet box that's been in there for months out, holding it up to her.

"I had a whole speech in my head," I say gruffly. "I should have written it down though, because every time I think about giving this thing to you, my whole mind goes blank and I can't think straight. So I'm going to do my best and you'll have to let me write the speech down later...in a card, or some shit. I don't know. I'm not good at talking about feelings and shit. You know that."

Andy is smiling at me, her hands in her lap. That same adoration in her eyes, the kind I see multiple times a day. I have no clue how I got this lucky.

No fucking clue. But I know one thing; I'm not going to fuck it up, and I'm not going

to let it slip through my fingers.

“Elijah Stone, are you asking me to marry you?”

“I...yes,” I say. Then I remember that I’m supposed to actually open the fucking ring box so she can see it while I propose. So I do that, and then get down on one knee in front of her on the bed.

“Look,” I say. “You belong to me. Okay?”

She raises an eyebrow.

“Don’t,” I warn her.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t give me the whole ‘I don’t belong to a man’ speech,” I say. “I know you were about to do it.”

“I was,” she laughs. “But okay. I won’t.”

“Good,” I reply. “Because like it or not, you belong to me. And honestly, I don’t give a fuck what you say to this proposal, I don’t give a fuck if you say no right now –”

“Excuse me?”

“-Because even if you say no,” I continue over her. “Even if you break up with me one day and never want to talk to me again...as far as I’m concerned, you will always belong to me. I intend to take care of you, now and always. There’s no turning back now, no getting out of that part of our deal.”

She stares at me, happiness on her face mixed with utter confusion.

“But...if you agree to be my wife, if you say yes, I also promise to make you happy,” I continue. “Not just protect you, but to spend the rest of my days doing everything in my power to give you the best life you can possibly have. To support your dreams, to lift you up. To be a soft place for you to land and a shoulder to cry on.”

I sigh deeply, wracking my brain for all of the eloquently worded speeches I’d practiced in my head before. The words aren’t coming easily at the moment, and the longer I talk, the more I seem to trip over my words.

“I might not always say the right things,” I say slowly. “That’s pretty clear at this point. But I want you to know that even if my words aren’t quite right, my actions will always show you who I really am and how I feel about you.”

“Elijah...” Andy says. “This is so unexpected. We’ve only been together for five months.”

“Six,” he says. “We met six months ago.”

“Yes, but we’ve only been dating for about five,” she says.

“Doesn’t matter,” I reply. “It’s like I said. You belong to me. You’ve belonged to me since I saw you. You’ve belonged to me for six months, four days, and...”

I glance at the clock on the nightstand.

“Seventeen hours,” I finish. “Maybe you didn’t know you belonged to me yet. But you did. And you always will, Andy. I love you. I love you so deeply that it scares me. After I got out of the military, I sort of pictured myself being alone. Just focused on my business...I thought it was enough. But it’s not enough. You came into my life

and showed me just how lonely I was, how much I was missing. You make everything more meaningful, more important, because after I met you, everything I did became about you. Everything I do now, the man I strive to be on a daily basis, it's for you. I want to be enough. I want to be good."

"You are good," she says. "And you are enough. You're perfectly perfect for me, and I wouldn't change a single thing about you."

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She reaches for me but I stop her, grabbing her left wrist. I take the ring from the box and guide it to her left ring finger. It slides on; a perfect fit.

“You’re going to marry me,” I say, giving her a kiss.

“I never said yes,” she grins against my lips. “You can’t just tell me that I’m going to marry you.”

“You’ll have to stop me, then,” I murmur, kissing her again and leaning her back on the bed. “But I don’t think you’re going to. I think you want to marry me. I think you want to be Mrs. Andrea Stone, my wife, my possession.”

“Maybe,” she sighs as I kiss her neck and then downwards, sliding the dress off her shoulders and pulling it down her torso. I thumb her nipples through the thin lace bra beneath, making her breath hitch.

“Mine,” I say against her skin.

“Yours,” she agrees.