



# Hotel Mallois

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** A hotel businesswoman used to having everything under control.

A cleaning lady who carries the weight of a painful past.

Katherine Taylor has it all: she owns one of the most prestigious hotels in New York and is used to getting whatever she wants.

However, when chance makes her blue gaze fall upon Jodie Sinclair, one of her hotel's cleaning staff, something changes.

Jodie has many problems in her life and the last thing she needs is falling in love with her boss, but her heart has a mind of its own and doesn't obey her brain.

Two women from completely opposite worlds. Their lives couldn't be more different, but when destiny brings them together at the Mallois Hotel, they discover that feelings know nothing of social class.

**Total Pages (Source):** 43

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## Chapter 1

"I just need a couple more days, please. There's been a delay and I haven't received my paycheck," Jodie pleads anxiously.

"I'm sorry, Miss Sinclair, but we've been waiting for over a week for the monthly payment. Your mother needs special medication that we can't give her if you don't keep up with the fees," explains a man with a nasal voice and a tone that reveals his weariness on the other end of the phone.

"I'll try to solve it this afternoon," Jodie says, stopping as the head of housekeeping at the Mallois Hotel in New York halts in front of her.

"You can't talk on the phone while working, how many times do I have to repeat myself?" Marjorie snaps through gritted teeth.

Jodie covers her phone's microphone with her hand and speaks slowly.

"It's an urgent matter that can't..."

"If you don't hang up right now and get out of here in two minutes, you'll earn yourself a warning, Sinclair," the supervisor threatens, pointing her finger at Jodie.

Jodie Sinclair feels her mind might collapse at any moment. The physical exhaustion she's been carrying for so long doesn't compare to the mental burden she's been holding since a family tragedy destroyed the peace and perfect world she lived in. Her brother, addicted to gambling and drugs, led a double life that no one knew about

until he ruined the family business, then took his own life and practically took their parents' lives with him. Now Jodie is alone, working two jobs, with many debts to pay and a sick mother she can no longer care for at home, so she had to, much to her regret, place her in a nursing home. Although the institution is one of the most affordable she found, its location in New York makes it almost impossible to afford. If Jodie didn't have to face the debts her brother left behind, it wouldn't be so hard to pay the monthly fee to keep her mother well-cared for. She sighs with weariness; she's been working at the Mallois Hotel for two years now and has no problems with her paycheck, but at her other job, the one she has to go to in the evenings until late at night, there's always something happening, and she ends up getting paid late.

She promises the man on the phone that everything will be resolved that afternoon and quickly hangs up to leave the locker room and collect her work sheet. She senses that Marjorie has assigned her more rooms than she can clean and needs to start as soon as possible.

"Are you okay, Jodie?" the question comes from Sarah, a coworker who has become a good friend.

"It's the nursing home payment again," Jodie tells her as they walk together toward the laundry room.

"Can't those jerks wait a few days?" Sarah asks with a furrowed brow. "It's always the same, not even twenty-four hours after the payment date and they're already calling to collect."

Jodie shrugs. She's used to it by now; since her mother was admitted, there have been few times she's paid on time.

"This time I'm a week late, I need to find another job," Jodie says while loading clean towels and sheets onto a cart.

Sarah stops dead in her tracks.

"You can't be serious, right?" she says and grabs Jodie's arm to make her look at her face. "You often look like a ghost, you're thinner, and the dark circles under your eyes are more obvious every day. Having a third job isn't something you can even consider, Jodie. This whole situation is killing you."

"What do you want me to do, Sarah?" Jodie asks more harshly than intended. "Something always happens, when it's not the delayed weekly payment from the bar, it's some garnishment or fine. You know I can't lose the house, it's all I have left, and believe me, it's not even about keeping the place where my father was born anymore, it's because I wouldn't have anywhere to sleep."

Sarah looks at her friend with a mixture of affection and sorrow. If it were up to her, she'd take her into her home so she'd have, at least temporarily, one less worry. But her case isn't much different; although she doesn't have the debts Jodie carries, Sarah is the head of her family. She helps her parents, too old to work, and has a daughter from a relationship that didn't work out, whom she's raising alone. She knows Jodie is an incredible woman, intelligent and strong; life has slapped her hard, yet she's kept fighting tooth and nail against adversity.

"Instead of a third job, quit that sketchy bar and look for work at another hotel, Jodie," Sarah tells her, pulling her to a corner of the laundry room where there's a blind spot in the cameras. "Or better yet, ask for more hours here, you know the pay isn't bad, and if it weren't for that sexually frustrated Marjorie, we'd be living the dream."

Jodie lets out a spontaneous laugh; at least in moments of stress, Sarah always helps her relax somehow. Her friend isn't lying; if it weren't for Marjorie's presence, that tall, sickly-looking woman, the cleaners at the Mallois Hotel would be more comfortable, especially Jodie, because Marjorie seems to pay special attention to her.

"Talk to Ms. Taylor," Sarah says, opening her eyes as if she's just had the best idea in the world. "I'm sure she'll listen to you and find a place to put you."

Just hearing that surname makes a shiver run through Jodie's entire body. Katherine Taylor, the owner of the Mallois Hotel, has been her platonic love since she saw her one afternoon entering the reception area accompanied by who she now knows is her father. For Jodie, who had never believed in love at first sight, the moment she exchanged a fleeting glance with Katherine, an arrow pierced her chest and made her heart race wildly. Since then, Jodie turns into a rag doll whenever she runs into Katherine Taylor in any wing of the hotel, making her lose all the confidence that has always characterized her. Her almost platinum blonde hair contrasting with those blue eyes has the power to completely dominate her with just a blink.

"I can't even look at her when she's nearby, I don't know how you think I could talk to her," Jodie shakes her head while returning to the cart to grab it and start making her rounds to the assigned rooms. "Besides, you know I've asked Marjorie for more hours, and she's always said no."

"That bitter old woman has it in for you," Sarah grumbles. "There's always work to do in this hotel, and it seems unfair that they hire new girls when someone on staff asks for more hours. Well, what are you going to do about the nursing home payment?"

"As soon as my shift ends, I'll go to the bar to ask for what they owe me. I hope the owner is there and pays me," Jodie sighs, knowing it would take a miracle for that man to be there early and actually have her money. "If not, I'll go to the nursing home to talk to the director personally."

Sarah squeezes her friend's arm in an attempt to give her strength before both women separate at an L-shaped hallway on the second floor of the Mallois Hotel.

Jodie enters the first room she has to clean that morning. She lets out a groan as soon as she steps inside, seeing sheets on the floor, the minibar in chaos, and all kinds of waste telling her the clients' night has been quite wild. She puts on her gloves and mask to start picking everything up. Her mind is a whirlwind, constantly thinking about everything she's had to live through in recent years, and she begs heaven for a bit of luck so her situation might change, just wishing, at least for a while, to be able to breathe easy without worry and debts suffocating her.

## Chapter 2

"Thank you so much, doctor," Katherine Taylor says, shaking the physician's hand.

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"Thank you, Mrs. Taylor. Keep taking such good care of your father, and I'll see you in six months."

"Six months? I don't plan on coming back here for five years," Warren Taylor grumbles, starting to walk down the hallway.

Katherine follows him after making an apologetic gesture to the doctor and positions herself by his side.

"You should be more polite, Dad," she scolds him, taking his arm.

"I am polite," he says, "but I don't know why we always have to come here. You've seen I'm fine."

"That's exactly why - to make sure that heart of yours keeps working perfectly. These are just check-ups, Dad. I don't understand why you have to make such a fuss every time we come to one," Katherine complains.

"Because it's a waste of time. You have much more important things to do than waste time here with me."

Katherine stops dead in her tracks just as they cross the exit doors and stares at him.

"Nothing is more important than your health, is that clear?" she says in that sharp, cutting tone that characterizes her.

"Sure," her father responds with a sigh. "You're just as stubborn as your mother, rest

her soul. Did you know that?"

"I know, you've told me many times," Katherine smiles, "but that won't get you out of these check-ups. Besides," she adds, resuming their walk to the car waiting in front of the hospital, "if I didn't bring you, I'd have to deal with your daughters' complaints, and they're more persistent than I am."

Warren Taylor's laughter catches the attention of several passersby, but father and daughter remain unfazed as they reach the car, where Mike Foster, Katherine's driver and loyal shield-bearer, waits with the back door open.

"How did it go, Mr. Taylor?" he asks politely, with the familiarity granted by his years of service to his daughter.

"Perfect, Mike, you know me, strong as an ox," Warren jokes as he climbs into the back seat.

"Glad to hear that, sir," Mike smiles and closes the door.

"He's impossible today," Katherine comments while Mike accompanies her to the other door.

"He enjoys seeing you annoyed, that's all," Mike responds.

"Yeah, since he retired he gets bored a lot. Let's see if Caroline comes and takes him to some of her meetings," she comments, referring to her younger sister.

"I'm sure she'll come soon," Mike says before closing the door.

Katherine is fastening her seatbelt when her phone starts ringing. She looks at the screen and shows it to her father, raising her eyebrows.



"See? We haven't even left the hospital, and your daughter Caroline is already calling to find out how it went."

Warren doesn't comment before Katherine answers her younger sister's call, but the man couldn't be prouder of the daughters he has.

"Everything's perfect," Katherine says, "and he's being grumpy, as usual. How are you? Are you on the cruise yet?" she asks, activating the speakerphone.

"Boarding in a few minutes," Caroline answers. "I'll stay a few days to make sure everything's running smoothly, then head back to New York, so be good while I'm away, Dad," she says, raising her voice, causing Katherine and Mike to laugh.

"I'm always good. It's your sister who complains too much."

Katherine rolls her eyes and turns off the speakerphone to continue talking with her sister.

"Do you want to come to the hotel, or would you prefer Mike to take you home first?" Katherine asks when she ends the call.

"Home. Hospital visits put me in a bad mood, you know that. By the way, I heard you fired your personal assistant again. What happened this time?"

Katherine looks at him, mouth agape.

"Do you have a mole in my hotel?"

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"Actually, I have quite a few, daughter. Do you think any of your employees would refuse to give information to Mrs. Taylor's father?"

Mike's laughter calms Katherine, who also catches the humor.

"Well, I hate to tell you they've misinformed you. I didn't fire her, I reassigned her."

"Right," her father rolls his eyes, "what did this one do? Try to organize your desk or your underwear drawer?"

"I just want them to clean the penthouse, Dad. I don't ask them to organize anything."

"First of all, calling living in one of the hotel suites a penthouse seems inaccurate, but fine. Since you're a workaholic and I can't do anything about that, at least I don't have to worry about anything happening to you on your way to work. As for those poor girls, they're just trying to do their job as best they can. It's not their fault your desk looks like a jungle. Even I feel tempted to organize it every time I visit."

"My desk is fine as it is, okay? I know where everything is, and if you dare touch anything, I'll have you banned from the hotel," she threatens playfully just as Mike parks the car.

"I'll escort him, Katherine, stay here," the driver offers, but Katherine declines and, as always, she personally accompanies her father into his apartment and only leaves when she's sure he'll be fine.

Two hours later and after attending a board meeting, Katherine Taylor finally goes up

to the top floor of the Mallois Hotel to access the luxurious suite she's turned into her apartment. She takes a shower and collapses on the couch, planning to rest for a few minutes before attending the meeting scheduled in half an hour, but she hasn't even closed her eyes when her mobile starts ringing and Rachel's name, her older sister, appears on the screen.

"Well, you were the only one missing," Katherine says when she answers.

Katherine makes herself comfortable to continue talking with her sister after updating her about their father's hospital visit.

"Hey, when are you coming to visit?" Rachel asks.

"I wish I could, Rachel, really, I'd love to come see you and Ashley, but right now I have tons of work. It'd be easier for you to come here."

"Mmmm," Rachel says, being mysterious.

"What?" Katherine frowns.

"That's impossible right now. Your niece and her friends convinced me to set up a small concert venue in the bar, and you have no idea what a mess I'm dealing with."

"Why blame Ashley when you're the one who's been pushing music on her since she was little?" Katherine laughs. "You're both the same that way, except she started a band with her friends and you're a lone wolf."

"That's true," Rachel admits.

"Well, if you're renovating the bar, I guess I'll have to come see it when it's all done," Katherine says.

"Hope it's soon, and please, drag Dad and your sister with you."

Katherine laughs and promises she will, but says goodbye and ends the call when someone knocks on her door.

"Hi, Olivia, is it time already?" Katherine asks with a comic grimace when she sees her secretary at the door.

"It is, dear," the woman responds and steps aside to let her pass.

Olivia, who has been working for the Taylor family since Katherine can remember, briefs her on her daily schedule until they reach the elevator. Both women step inside, and Olivia presses the button for the main floor, where, in addition to the reception and two dining rooms, they have several private rooms that clients use for closing deals, and one of them is reserved exclusively for Katherine Taylor.

"Time to put on the bitch mask," Katherine says when the door opens.

Olivia doesn't like the crude language she sometimes hears from Katherine or her younger sister, but she doesn't protest, just nods and follows because she knows Katherine is right - to survive in a man's world, she must become a predator, and if she's famous for anything in business, it's for being as fierce as a wolf.

### Chapter 3

"Stop what you're doing right now and come with me," demands the head of housekeeping at the Mallois Hotel.

Jodie, who is changing the sheets on an oversized bed, freezes, not understanding what's happening. Marjorie has entered the room she's cleaning with her usual loud and dismissive tone, accompanied by one of her coworkers, who keeps her head

down.

"What's wrong? I still need to finish this room and clean two more," Jodie replies, confused.

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"I told you to leave it," Marjorie snaps and turns to look at the other girl. "Regina, take care of finishing what's left."

The girl just nods and approaches the bed to continue her coworker's work. Jodie has no choice but to drop the sheet and leave the room with Marjorie, who keeps glancing at her sideways and shaking her head.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" Jodie asks again, starting to feel nervous about all the mystery.

"The hotel manager is waiting for us," Marjorie responds, cryptic, and continues walking without taking her eyes off the housekeeper.

Jodie decides not to ask any more questions and uses the time it takes to reach the manager's office to mentally review everything she's done in the last twenty-four hours. Yesterday, she finished her shift at the hotel and went to the bar where she works in the evenings. When she arrived, her boss was leaving, and Jodie didn't miss the chance to claim the salary she'd been waiting for days, but the bastard only paid her a portion. She didn't think twice and went straight to the nursing home, talked to those in charge, handed over the money, and reached an agreement—again—committing to pay the remainder in the coming days. They weren't very happy there, but at least she managed to ensure they'd continue caring for her mother. She couldn't see her, unfortunately, but she knows that by the end of the week, they'll be able to spend some good time together. Today, she's returned to the hotel, first cleaning one of the dining rooms with two coworkers, then moving through the rooms until Marjorie appeared. Jodie concludes she hasn't done anything she should fear.

"Go in," Marjorie tells her when they reach the hotel manager's door.

The man, always serious-looking, sits behind his desk with visible annoyance on his face.

"Mr. Kumar, will you explain what's happening?" asks the housekeeper, tired of the dirty looks and lack of answers.

"We've received a complaint from a guest," Lamir Kumar begins. "He assures us that this morning he left his room for breakfast, and when he returned, it had been cleaned, but his watch was missing."

Jodie raises her eyebrows in surprise. It's quite common for these types of thefts to occur in hotels, but at the Mallois, it's not usual. The pay is good, employees have flexible hours and work-life balance; in New York, that's rare to see. That's why many people want to work at Katherine Taylor's hotels, and those already on staff, grateful for the good conditions, remain loyal and respectful.

"And what do I have to do with all this?" asks Jodie, who hasn't yet realized she's there because they think she's the culprit.

"The security team has reviewed the cameras, and you're seen entering minutes after the guest left his room. Half an hour later, you appear again, this time pushing the cart down the hall after closing the door," explains Lamir after adjusting his glasses with his finger and then placing his hands on his desk.

Jodie frowns; there's no way they're going to accuse her of something she hasn't done. If she were the type to steal, she wouldn't be in such a precarious situation, and she certainly wouldn't have to make deals or pay interest at her mother's nursing home. She opens her mouth to defend herself, but Marjorie speaks first.

"We need to search her," the supervisor decides and approaches the housekeeper. "From experience, they never keep the loot in their locker, they usually hide it in their clothes."

Jodie takes two steps back and hardens her expression.

"You haven't even heard my side, and you're not only accusing me but also trying to search me, which by the way is illegal and only the police can do," she responds, looking into Marjorie's eyes and alternating with those of the hotel manager.

Lamir Kumar shifts uncomfortably in his chair, knowing the girl is right, but he struggles to control the supervisor's zeal, whom he fears more than his own wife.

"That's what they all say, but if you were innocent, you wouldn't mind letting us confirm you're not hiding anything on your body," Marjorie continues and this time moves closer to Jodie.

Jodie Sinclair's nostrils flare rapidly. She looks at Marjorie with a defiant attitude; she's not a thief, and no one is going to falsely accuse her. Fortunately, the manager clears his throat, rises from the chair where he seems to have been glued, and brings order.

"I need to call Ms. Taylor's secretary to report what happened and let her notify the police, it's protocol," the man settles with a loud voice and picks up the phone resting on the polished wood.

Marjorie isn't very satisfied but stays still watching as the manager picks up the device.

"Keep her in your office, I'm going to call Chief Greenwood of the New York Police and have him send a patrol right now," says Olivia, who's on the phone with Lamir



Kumar.

"What happened, Olivia?" asks Katherine Taylor, who's on the couch with her laptop on her legs.

"The manager informs me there's a theft complaint against one of the housekeepers, I'm going to activate the protocol," explains the secretary, and before she can make the first call, Katherine stops her.

"I'll go," she says, to the secretary's amazement. Katherine doesn't usually handle these matters personally. "I need to get out of here to clear my head, and this way I'll find out firsthand what's going on."

"Wouldn't you prefer the security team handle it as usual?" asks Olivia, puzzled.

"Today's meetings have left me overwhelmed and tired," Katherine responds, standing up. "Some fresh air will do me good."

Olivia simply nods and, as soon as her boss steps out of the suite, calls Mike to inform him that Katherine is moving through the facilities. The few times these incidents occur at the Mallois Hotel, the security team, led by Katherine's bodyguard, is the first to be informed, and although they're usually not inside where the first conversation with those involved takes place, they're always outside to ensure the situation is controlled.

Katherine Taylor walks calmly to the manager's office, observing everything around her to verify nothing is out of place. When she reaches the door, she knocks twice and enters the office.

"Ms. Taylor," Lamir Kumar stands up as if he had a spring in his rear, surprised by Katherine Taylor's presence.

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Jodie feels a sudden tremor in her body that she struggles to control. If she was already nervous and angry about the accusation, now she experiences a sensation she can't describe. Katherine Taylor, the woman she's been in love with for almost two years, is there in the same room as her and looks at her with an expression she can't decipher.

"What happened, Lamir?" Katherine asks for explanations to focus her attention on something other than the woman who's in a corner of the office, near the head of housekeeping.

Lamir Kumar relates to his boss what occurred. Katherine turns her head again to focus on Jodie, and this time she does it to verify that what she felt when she saw her upon entering wasn't just curiosity. But there it is, that feeling of protection that she doesn't know where it comes from. It's like when you don't want anything to happen to someone very close to you and you fight to keep them safe. Katherine doesn't understand it, it's the first time she's seen this woman with sad and tired eyes, and she struggles to comprehend why she feels this way.

"She refuses to let us search her," Marjorie suddenly says with a sharp face. "If she had nothing to do with the watch theft, she wouldn't object."

Katherine abandons her thoughts and approaches Marjorie with a dangerous expression.

"In my hotel, things aren't done this way, Marjorie," Katherine Taylor responds, emphasizing her words calmly. "There's a very specific protocol for these cases, and the first step is trying to resolve it internally. What's your name?" this time Katherine

focuses on the housekeeper.

"Jodie Sinclair," she manages to answer, but without daring to raise her gaze.

"Would you like to say something, Miss Sinclair?" Katherine asks in an unusual tone. Too sweet. Something that amazes and bothers her in equal measure.

Jodie breathes agitatedly. The situation—adding everything she's been carrying for years—is overwhelming her, and having Katherine Taylor in front of her, with her loose hair, bright eyes, and that citrus perfume, is more than the woman can handle. But she knows that if she stays quiet, she won't have a chance to defend herself, so she makes her best effort.

"It wasn't me, Ms. Taylor. I've never stolen anything in my life, and I certainly won't do it in your hotel. Every day I come here, I complete my work sheet, and I leave to return to my post the next day. I haven't touched that watch they're talking about," Jodie explains in a rush with her gaze fixed on the floor.

"She's lying!" exclaims Marjorie in a tone that startles Lamir. "Yesterday she was talking on the phone during her work shift, by the way, and I heard her say she didn't have the money to pay. Now a watch disappears, it seems too much of a coincidence to me."

Katherine tries to calm herself by filling her lungs with as much air as possible.

"Marjorie, wait outside," says the hotel owner.

The supervisor opens her eyes wide and looks at Lamir Kumar, who seems like an inanimate figure standing behind his desk. She hesitates but decides to leave the office, not without giving a look loaded with something quite negative to a very nervous Jodie.

Katherine composes herself. She raises her shoulders and takes control of the situation and her thoughts again.

"I have no choice but to suspend you while we conduct the investigation," Katherine says, addressing Jodie, who nods without moving from her spot.

Katherine turns and opens the office door. She knows Mike is there, as always, so she signals him to come in.

"I need you to handle this, be discrete and quick so we can know something as soon as possible."

"Of course, right away," Mike responds and glances at the housekeeper, who trembles imperceptibly.

"I'll be in the suite, keep me informed, Mike," Katherine tells her bodyguard and focuses on Jodie. "We'll notify you when the investigation concludes, go home."

Katherine Taylor doesn't wait for responses, leaves the office releasing a sigh that Mike doesn't miss. The owner of the Mallois Hotel hurries up to her home, wanting to bury her head in all the documentation she has to review and rid her body of that strange sensation she had upon meeting the enigmatic housekeeper, Jodie Sinclair.

## Chapter 4

Katherine Taylor sits disconnected, having spent fifteen minutes in front of Preston Bradford—the client who reported the stolen watch—listening to him repeat over and over how unacceptable it is for something like this to happen at a prestigious hotel like the Mallois.

"Well?" Bradford says, crossing one leg over the other.

They're in the hotel lobby, seated on one of many crescent-shaped sofas in front of a small marble table where service has just delivered the second glass of one of the most expensive whiskeys Bradford has ordered, knowing Katherine won't let them charge him for it. Katherine snaps out of her reverie to find Preston Bradford watching her with a smile she's not sure she likes, but what she does know is that the man expects her to speak.

"I'm very sorry about what happened, Mr. Preston," Katherine says, fidgeting with her wristwatch.

Preston Bradford's eyes travel across Katherine's fitted jacket to rest on her hands, then move to her legs covered by a pencil skirt below her knees.

"My head of security is handling the matter, and I assure you we'll have an answer to this unfortunate incident shortly."

"Haven't you called the police?" Bradford asks, offended. "It's obvious that cleaning lady stole from me. It wouldn't be the first time these women take what isn't theirs thinking nobody will notice. Damn fools," he adds, clicking his tongue, "as if they didn't get enough from the tips we give them."

Katherine can't tell him what she thinks about people who believe they're superior to others because he's her client, but she won't play along or let him continue talking about the cleaning staff like that in front of her.

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"If necessary, we'll notify the police, don't worry. Meanwhile, I've made sure you're assigned a new room with the best views, and you can enjoy the hotel facilities at your discretion, on the house. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to make sure this incident is resolved as soon as possible."

Katherine stands up just as Preston Bradford adds some words, but she can't tell if they're of gratitude or more complaints because she leaves him sitting on the sofa and heads to the elevators to go straight to the security room.

"Please tell me you have something because if I have to deal with that man again, I might lose it," she growls as soon as she enters the room.

Mike, who asked the security guard to take a break while he checks the footage for anything that might help them discover what happened, turns toward the entrance with a mysterious smile that immediately calms Katherine.

"Got anything?" she asks, narrowing her blue eyes.

"I do, and you won't like it," Mike responds, pulling up a chair for his boss and friend to sit beside him.

"Don't tell me it was really Jodie Sinclair," Katherine says, not understanding why it causes her such disappointment when she doesn't even know her.

"Sinclair? No," Mike firmly denies, "Sinclair's just a poor cleaning lady they're trying to pin this on."

"Then?" Katherine asks with a mix of relief and fury beginning to course through her veins.

"Look at this carefully."

Mike shows her the photo of the stolen watch that Preston Bradford himself provided.

"This guy isn't just a liar, he's stupid," Mike says, leaving Katherine bewildered.

The hotel owner observes the photograph and then the images Mike shows her on the screen.

"This is Preston leaving his room before the watch was stolen, right?" he asks her, and she nods, controlling her anxiety to finally know what happened. "And this here is Sinclair entering some time later."

Mike advances the footage.

"And here Sinclair leaves, and an hour later Bradford returns and reports the watch missing."

"You're making me nervous, Mike," Katherine says, crossing her arms.

Mike smiles, unable to contain himself.

"Okay," he concedes without losing his smile and returns to the first image.

"The key to everything is right here, the moment Preston leaves the room the first time, because if we pause the image and zoom in..."

Mike does exactly what he says, and Katherine's mouth slowly drops open.

"I can't believe it, is it what I think it is?" she asks tensely.

"It is. Preston Bradford was wearing the watch when he left the room, so neither Jodie Sinclair nor anyone else in this hotel could have stolen it," Mike assures.

"Then why the hell did he report it?" Katherine frowns.

"Well, I can only think of two possibilities: either he's confused or he's faking it to collect insurance. Those watches cost an arm and a leg," he says, shrugging.

"What a son of a bitch," Katherine says, standing up abruptly. "He wasn't wearing it when I talked to him, which means he hid it afterward to claim it was stolen."

"I'll go with you," Mike says, standing up.

"No need, I can throw this guy out of my hotel by myself," she says angrily.

"I know, I'm not saying it for your safety, I'm saying it for his."

Mike Foster stands six feet three inches tall, and with his athletic build and perpetually serious expression, he usually commands respect, but now, walking one step behind Katherine Taylor toward the manager's office where they've summoned Preston Bradford, she's the scarier one.



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Katherine enters like a hurricane and fires off everything Mike discovered in an icy voice. Preston, who wasn't expecting this, takes time to react, but after a few minutes, he does, claiming all sorts of excuses.

"This is offensive," he adds, pulling out his handkerchief to wipe the sweat dripping down his left temple.

"Of course it is," Katherine says, "I'm offended that you dare come to my hotel spreading your lies without caring how it affects an innocent person's life. I'll think about whether to press charges, but meanwhile, I don't want to see you here or in any of my hotels or my sister's cruises again. I'll make sure your name goes on the blacklist, and of course, you won't leave until you pay every last dollar of what you've consumed. Mike will handle that."

Preston Bradford is about to open his mouth, but Mike plants himself in front of him.

"If you'll be so kind as to follow me," he requests, pointing to the door.

Katherine waits for both men to leave before turning to Lamir Kumar, the hotel manager.

"Find me Jodie Sinclair's address, someone needs to apologize to that woman."

"Of course, I'll send someone to her house," the man responds while typing on the computer.

"You misunderstood me, Lamir. I don't want you to send anyone, I'll go personally."

"Of course, yes, excuse me, Mrs. Taylor," says Lamir, blinking in surprise.

## Chapter 5

"Are you sure it's this way?" Katherine asks, looking through the car window.

"This is the address you gave me," Mike replies while turning on his right turn signal.

"I expected something different," Katherine responds, adjusting in her seat.

That day, Katherine Taylor had decided to visit Jodie's house, but it wasn't until late afternoon, after numerous meetings and several contracts to sign, that she could leave the hotel with her ever-present companion Mike to look for the cleaner. The neighborhood they're entering is a working-class area in southeast New York, filled with all kinds of businesses, but mostly hardworking people. When Katherine read the address Lamir Kumar had provided, she imagined all sorts of scenarios, not because she's classist - the owner of Hotel Mallois is far from it - but she's worked with cleaners for a long time and knows most live in dangerous and rather deteriorated districts. However, the streets she's seeing are far from her thoughts; everything appears organized and clean.

"Robin's pub is a few blocks from here. The area isn't bad; in fact, it's quite peaceful," Mike explains, referring to his friend's joint.

The bodyguard manages to park and steps out to do a quick inspection. Mike always checks everything and makes sure he has it under control. Katherine Taylor isn't a woman in danger; few people know who she is. The sisters maintain their privacy, though Caroline, the youngest of the clan, tends to make more headlines.

"It's that one over there," Mike says, pointing to a house with an old facade and worn colors a few meters from where they're standing.

Katherine nods and walks until she reaches the door. She extends her hand and rings the doorbell twice. Less than a minute passes when a woman with a tired face emerges from the house next door, wrapped in a yellow robe.

"Looking for Jodie? She's not home," the woman says, eyeing Mike and then Katherine, trying to guess their identities. "Are you from the bank?"

"No," Katherine answers, not wanting to give the neighbor much information but wanting to know where her employee is. "Do you know where I can find her?"

The stranger narrows her eyes, distrustful.

"Don't worry, Jodie Sinclair works for me, and I didn't want to wait until tomorrow to speak with her," Katherine says with a charming smile meant to gain the neighbor's trust.

It seems to work because after a few seconds, the woman comes closer and in a low voice spills everything she knows as if she's been wanting to talk to someone for days.

"She's at that bar where she works in the afternoons. You see, the poor thing needs several jobs to handle everything that good-for-nothing brother of hers left her with," the woman recounts while shaking her head. "Of course, with her sick mother in that nursing home and her father dead, she's all alone. Her father," the woman sighs, "what a good man, educated, handsome, and very kind. Did you know he was born right here in this house? Times aren't like they used to be; back then, midwives came to your house, and you were born in your own home."

Katherine and Mike exchange sideways glances, both shocked not only by everything the woman is sharing in just minutes but also that, if true, Jodie Sinclair has quite an unfortunate life.

"Well," says the neighbor, pulling her robe tighter, "I don't like getting into other people's business."

"I can see that," Katherine replies with another smile. "Do you know the name of the bar where she works?"

"Of course, it's that one downtown," the neighbor says, tapping her forehead. "At my age, things slip my mind. I'll go inside to look it up; I have it written down."

Jodie's neighbor goes into her house and returns with a notebook full of all kinds of notes. Mike stretches his neck a bit and notices she appears to have information about the entire block. She tells them the bar's name, and they politely bid the woman farewell.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:00 pm*

"What a nosy woman," Mike says when they get back in the car.

Katherine bursts out laughing and fastens her seatbelt.

"She's that typical busybody neighbor who knows not just where you work, but what time you get home and even what you eat," Katherine says and smiles at a photo Rachel, her older sister, sends to the group chat the three Taylor sisters share.

Thanks to New York City's unbearable traffic, it takes them more than an hour to reach the bar and over twenty minutes to find a parking spot. Despite Katherine's complaints, Mike won't let his boss leave the car alone and enter a bar that screams trouble from the outside.

They enter through a wooden swinging door, and the stench of alcohol and sweat hits them full force. The place is a dark hole with dim lights, featuring a large bar and many small tables, mostly occupied by men over fifty. Katherine feels immediate repulsion when she realizes all the waitresses are quite young, and the customers eye them like pieces of meat.

"She's over there, at the end," Mike says, discreetly pointing to Jodie Sinclair, who's carrying a tray full of drinks and what appear to be bowls of peanuts.

The hair on Katherine's neck stands so straight it causes a sudden shiver. It's a mix she can't define no matter how hard she tries because she feels that protective instinct toward her cleaner again, annoyance because the customer she's serving looks at her like he might pounce at any moment, and desire, the pulsing kind, because Jodie Sinclair, despite her tired face and the dark circles under her eyes, is a beautiful

woman.

Mike's eyes widen in horror when Katherine starts walking through the middle of the bar. The bodyguard sticks close to her and places his right hand on the gun he never parts with while staring down anyone who turns to look at his boss.

"Jodie," Katherine addresses her informally when she reaches her side.

The waitress looks up and nearly tips over her tray. She has to blink several times to realize what she's seeing isn't a fantasy product of her imagination - Katherine Taylor, her platonic love and boss, is actually there in front of her.

"Mrs. Taylor," the woman manages to say, and after the initial surprise, feels terror at seeing the Hotel Mallois owner in the bar.

"I want you in my penthouse at nine sharp tomorrow, don't be late."

And that's it. The blue-eyed businesswoman turns on her heels and heads for the exit, leaving Jodie with a lump in her throat and her heart pounding equally in the north and south. Katherine regrets being so curt, but the situation made her nervous, and she wanted to be direct. Now she just thinks about getting home, taking off her shoes, and having a glass of wine on her terrace.

Jodie Sinclair walks through the doors of Hotel Mallois at eight forty-five in the morning. She tries to go unnoticed because it's her day off, and she doesn't want any of her coworkers to notice her. She's literally had a shit night turning over that sudden appearance of Katherine Taylor at the bar in her mind. Many questions and few answers, but what she does know clearly is that she'll do whatever necessary to keep her job as a cleaner.

"Good morning, Mrs. Taylor," Jodie says, looking at an undefined point when she

enters the penthouse after Olivia opens the door for her.

"Miss Sinclair," Katherine says and stands from her chair, "how are you?"

"Fine, Mrs. Taylor," the cleaner answers, unable to say anything more. It angers her that her foolish brain acts this way when she's near the businesswoman.

Katherine feels the nervousness floating in the air, and she herself doesn't understand why her heart beat a little faster when she saw the cleaner in the middle of her living room. She decides it's best to end the matter as soon as possible.

"The incident related to the theft..."

"Please don't fire me, Mrs. Taylor. I haven't stolen anything, and I really need this job," Jodie interrupts with a worried expression.

Katherine's heart now beats faster.

"It's not about that," Katherine replies. "We know the accusations were false, and we've already taken care of resolving it. I just wanted to apologize personally; it's not fair for guests to point fingers at you like that."

Jodie, who can't believe what she's hearing, frowns immediately. It's not that she isn't happy the matter has been settled; it's that it bothers her that Katherine Taylor is the one apologizing when she was the only one who, in the midst of the accusation, supported her.

"You shouldn't be the one apologizing, Mrs. Taylor," Jodie becomes bold and looks her in the eyes without hesitation for the first time, causing Katherine to feel a hammer blow directly to the center of her chest. "What happened yesterday is normal; to the guests, we're just simple women who clean, but you were the only one

who treated me with respect and listened to my version without accusing me."

Katherine raises an eyebrow; she doesn't miss the tone in which Jodie speaks to her and feels that something or someone isn't functioning as they should within her hotel. She waits a few seconds for the woman to say more, but realizes she won't open her mouth again, and she doesn't want to pressure her, at least not at this moment.

"You have a couple of days off, Miss Sinclair. Don't worry, they'll be paid, and everything's been arranged," Katherine clarifies, having noticed the cleaner's change of expression.

"Thank you, Mrs. Taylor, they'll be good for resting," Jodie answers, not knowing why she gave that extra information.

Jodie turns, considering the conversation over when her boss falls silent. She wants to leave the penthouse; if Katherine's proximity is suffocating her, being in her home where everything smells like her is deadly.

"I need someone trustworthy to work here in the afternoons," Katherine suddenly blurts out without thinking and curses herself for her impulsiveness. She isn't like this.

Jodie stops dead in her tracks and turns slowly.



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"I spend a lot of time here; this is my home and my office," Katherine continues saying, unable to stop her traitorous tongue. "And I want someone to keep everything clean. You seem the most suitable."

"I appreciate it, Mrs. Taylor, but I work at the bar you visited yesterday in the afternoons."

Katherine seems willing to do anything.

"You know the pay at the Mallois is good, plus you'll receive a bonus for working here with me," Katherine explains, having never paid anything additional to the girls who've worked in her penthouse. "Think about it, and when you have your next shift at the hotel, give me an answer."

Jodie has nothing to think about. She's tired of working in that bar full of perverts who throw all kinds of disgusting words at her. The hotel treats her well, and although being near Katherine challenges her, she knows she can control it. She only thinks that with another guaranteed salary, she'll have no more problems paying for her mother's care. They reach an agreement, and Katherine tells her she'll have everything ready with Olivia to sign her new contract. Both women say goodbye, and an exultant Jodie leaves Katherine Taylor's penthouse with a smile.

"Need me?" Mike appears on the terrace once Jodie has left and the secretary has asked the bodyguard to come up because his boss wants to see him.

"Have your team pay attention to Lamir Kumar and Marjorie García," Katherine demands and takes a sip of her latte. "I sense my staff isn't being treated as they

should be."

"You're saying this because of the cleaner?" Mike guesses, having been by Katherine's side for so many years that he knows very well that Jodie has started to shake her foundations.

"Yes, she hasn't said much, but I've connected the pieces with their attitude yesterday, and I didn't like it - him being overbearing and Kumar, who's his superior, unable to stop him. I don't want people like that in my hotel," Katherine says with a frown, "I know they're good at their jobs, but I don't care if they don't treat their colleagues with respect."

"I'll get right on it," Mike says and winks at her before leaving the terrace.

Katherine Taylor needs to sit down for a moment. Everything she's feeling in just two days has her completely off balance. She doesn't have time for nonsense; she needs to focus on managing her hotels and the new branch that will soon open its doors. She has to get Jodie Sinclair out of her head by any means necessary.

## Chapter 6

"Are you going to eat those?" Sarah asks, pointing at the french fries on Jodie's plate.

Both cleaners, as they sometimes do when they finish their late shift, have gone to eat at the employee cafeteria in the Mallois Hotel, where, despite the ridiculously low food prices, Jodie usually brings a lunch box because she can't afford extra expenses. Today is her first day working in Katherine Taylor's penthouse, and her nerves have tied her stomach in such knots that she's barely touched the meat and salad on her plate, let alone the fries.

"No, have them," she responds, pushing the plate toward Sarah, who's been stealing

fries for a while now.

"I don't know why you're so nervous, it's just another job," her friend comments while chewing.

Jodie furrows her brow and leans forward while scanning the cafeteria before speaking.

"Just another job? I'll be in her penthouse, Sarah, in Katherine Taylor's penthouse. Do you know what that means for me? I can barely breathe when she's around, and I'm going to spend three hours in her home, breathing in her scent," she says, flustered.

Sarah stops mid-motion, her hand frozen on its way to grab another fry, and gives her a calculating look.

"Right, I had forgotten the tiny detail that you're head over heels in love with that woman," she says and bursts out laughing.

"It's not funny to me. I don't know if I'll survive this. I hope she's not there while I'm working in her place," she says, appealing to the heavens.

"That woman is such a workaholic she lives in one of her hotels, Jodie, of course she'll be there," Sarah assures her while demolishing the fries, "but you should see this as an opportunity to get closer to her. You'll never be closer to that woman than now, and hell, you'll have access to her underwear - how many women can say that?" she jokes playfully.

"Oh God, don't mention her underwear," Jodie flushes again, her heart suddenly racing.

"Okay, enough jokes," Sarah turns so serious she even pushes away the plate of fries.

"Let's look at this for what it really is."

"And what's that?" Jodie inquires.

"Your chance to get ahead. You were able to leave that awful bar job where they paid you terribly and late, not to mention what you had to put up with in there. The hotel pays well, and you're going to work double shifts. From now on, you won't have to struggle to pay your mother's nursing home fees on time, and you can keep paying your brother's debts without drowning in interest. Someday you'll get rid of all that and finally breathe, but for now, Katherine Taylor has given you some oxygen without knowing it, so take advantage of it, and if your heart beats too fast when she's near, think about all your bills and you'll see how it passes."

The laughter of both friends turns several heads in the cafeteria, but neither cares as they finish their meal talking about Marjorie García's horrible temperament.

"Good luck, friend," Sarah tells her when they finish eating.

Jodie knows she's going to need it because, although she managed to relax while with Sarah, now that she has to go up to the hotel's top floor, she feels like her heart might jump out of her mouth at any moment.

When she reaches the penthouse door, Jodie pulls out the card that gives her access without needing to knock. At first, she hesitates whether to use it, but Lamir Kumar's instructions were very clear: if Mrs. Taylor is inside, she shouldn't disturb her. Her hand trembles when she swipes it through the reader, and she curses herself for not being able to control all this anxiety that overwhelms her just from being so close to the woman she's been swooning over like a teenager for what feels like too long now.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:00 pm*

"Hello, Jodie," Mrs. Taylor's greeting catches her off guard.

Katherine is walking through the immense living room when she enters, and there are too many things that catch Jodie's attention. The first is that her blonde hair is loose and tousled, giving her an informal air that Jodie likes just as much as executive Katherine. The second is that she's wearing comfortable clothes, just cotton pants and a T-shirt under which Jodie suspects she's wearing nothing else. Those are the positive things Jodie can appreciate, because the next ones are very negative for her. The first is that Mrs. Taylor is walking toward the sofa with two wine glasses in hand, and the second and worst is that there's a sophisticated-looking woman sitting on the sofa with her blouse poorly buttoned and the clip that probably held a perfect updo now tilted to the right.

"Hello, Mrs. Taylor," Jodie responds, experiencing an unmistakable sensation of jealousy that she disguises as best she can. "Perhaps you'd prefer I come back another time."

Katherine walks to the sofa while shaking her head and hands one of the glasses to her companion.

"That's not necessary, Annie will leave soon. Meanwhile, you can start with the bedroom and bathroom," Katherine responds, sitting on her right leg across from Annie, who gives Jodie a quick glance before focusing on her host and starting to flirt with her blatantly.

Jodie has never been in Mrs. Taylor's penthouse, but she guesses the bedroom can only be down the hallway at the end, so she heads there quickly, grateful to lose sight

of this Annie and not have to witness how that woman seduces the only one she yearns for while simultaneously processing a detail she didn't know and which is undoubtedly a ray of hope in the darkness she's feeling: Katherine Taylor likes women too, and that was something Jodie didn't know. Once in the hallway, she leaves the cleaning cart and, as if by intuition, heads toward the door on the left. Indeed, there she finds Katherine Taylor's bedroom, but what Jodie didn't expect was to find the sheets rumpled and clothes thrown on the floor.

Clenching her jaw in an impulse she can't control, she storms in and starts picking up the clothes while wondering what would happen if she got rid of all the underwear and left Annie with nothing to wear. A mischievous smile crosses her face for an instant, but it fades when she concludes that she's probably already showered and put on something Katherine lent her.

With the clothes collected and the sheets changed, Jodie enters the bathroom inside the bedroom, and if she had any doubts about what happened between the two women, she finds a vibrator resting on the marble counter after having been cleaned by someone. Jodie appreciates not having to clean it herself and continues with her work until she hears Katherine and Annie's laughter in the living room. Then she freezes, her heart constricting, understanding definitively that even though Katherine Taylor likes women, she doesn't stand a chance because they belong to completely different worlds, and Katherine would never see her the way Jodie sees her.

With that thought weighing on her chest, Jodie finishes picking everything up and throws the dirty clothes in the cart, promising herself she needs to erase Katherine Taylor from her thoughts as soon as possible.

## Chapter 7

"We haven't received the other part of the payment as promised, and we can't keep postponing this matter any longer," Jodie Sinclair hears on the phone. "If you don't

resolve the debt this morning, you'll need to pick up your mother from our facility this afternoon."

Jodie has had the phone pressed to her ear for several minutes. She stops listening to the nursing home director when he repeats twice that it's impossible to keep a patient who doesn't pay her fees. The housekeeper, overwhelmed and furious, went to the bar where she used to work, but the owner refused to see her. He owes her for the last two weeks she spent serving drinks there, and without that money, it's impossible to pay what she owes.

"You won't put my mother out on the street," Jodie snaps with determination, tired of everyone dismissing her. "I'll call you as soon as I can."

After hanging up without giving her interlocutor a chance to speak again, Jodie stores the device in her locker and heads straight to talk to her supervisor. As much as she despises that woman, she knows she needs to ask permission for anything she plans to do at the hotel. When she leaves the locker room, she heads to the small office next to the cleaning supplies closet, where Marjorie Garcia spends several hours a day making schedules, reviewing work sheets, and plotting—according to Jodie—how to make her workers hate her more. She doesn't make it into the office because the supervisor is at the door talking to a coworker.

"Shouldn't you be on the third floor already?" Marjorie asks as soon as she spots Jodie.

"Yes, I wanted to talk to you," the housekeeper replies.

Marjorie raises an eyebrow and releases air like a buffalo. She gives Jodie a head gesture to tell her what she wants.

"I need to request an advance, I have a prob—"

"Absolutely not," Marjorie interrupts her, shaking her head. "Your behavior and productivity lately leave much to be desired. Advances and other privileges are earned. Now, get to work unless you want me to write you up for starting late."

Marjorie turns and enters her office. Jodie feels an irrepressible urge to grab her by the neck and give her a good punch. It's not a good day for the housekeeper; she'd rather be at home resting instead of begging to get some money to face the debt she has at the nursing home. Driven by desperation, she goes straight to Lamir Kumar's office to talk to him, who's actually the person who can handle these types of requests.

"Miss Sinclair, what do you need?" Lamir asks when, after being announced that Jodie needs to speak with him, the housekeeper enters his office.

"An advance," she responds directly.

The man nods, slowly, and interlaces his hands on his desk.

"This first has to go through human resources, who then usually checks with Olivia, Mrs. Taylor's secretary," explains Lamir, who knows the procedure by heart. "I have no problem with it, but that's how it's handled."

"Whatever is necessary, but I need it as soon as possible, please," Jodie asks, politely.

Lamir picks up the phone and makes two calls. He has seen the desperation on the housekeeper's face and, after he himself had judged her for a theft she didn't commit, he wants to make the process easier for her. He notifies Olivia directly so the approval will be faster and, when he's about to tell Jodie that she'll surely have that advance during the morning, the director's office door suddenly opens and a very angry Marjorie Garcia enters. Her eyes shoot fire and Lamir Kumar, who always seems to be afraid of her, draws a look of horror on his face.



"Seems like you have trouble following orders," Marjorie says, approaching Jodie, "I told you you couldn't ask for an advance. Are you deaf?"

Jodie takes a few steps and ends up very close to her supervisor. She has to look up because Marjorie is taller, but she doesn't intimidate her, she never has, it's just that the housekeeper has always preferred to maintain good behavior and not do anything that puts her job at risk.

"I've never disrespected you," Jodie says through gritted teeth. "I ask that you don't disrespect me."

Marjorie clicks her tongue, moves away from Jodie, and approaches Lamir.

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"We need to terminate her contract. She's disobeyed an order, she's gone over my authority, and she's not fulfilling her work hours," Marjorie says with contempt. "Because of her rebellion, we're running behind and the rooms won't be ready as scheduled."

Silence falls in the office and only Jodie's broken breathing can be heard who, upon hearing her supervisor, feels fear climbing up her back and threatening to suffocate her until she passes out.

"She's Mrs. Taylor's employee," Lamir Kumar answers. "I remind you that she now works directly in the penthouse."

Marjorie releases air like a buffalo again. She knows she needs to be careful with these types of impulses, especially if they directly affect her boss.

"I'll be watching you," responds Marjorie, who has turned to address Jodie.

The phone rings and the director welcomes the truce. Katherine Taylor's secretary asks him to tell Jodie Sinclair to come up to the penthouse immediately.

"Go see Olivia," Lamir tells Jodie after hanging up the phone. "She wants to talk to you."

Jodie nods and leaves the office to find the elevator. Her body trembles, her mind is a hotbed of thoughts, and her ears buzz. She curses the moment her late brother left her such a burden. If he had done things right, her father would be alive, her mother out of the nursing home, and she would be running the family business. While the

elevator goes up, Jodie loses herself in memories and how happy she was being a girl with the privilege of working in what she liked, going out for drinks with her friends, and enjoying the body of some woman in bed when she had the chance.

She rings the doorbell of her boss's penthouse and, confident that it will be Olivia who opens, she startles when it's Katherine who appears at the door.

"Come in," she asks Jodie and steps aside.

Jodie doesn't understand it, but her body boils with a number of negative feelings that she's not being able to control. Maybe it's the mountain of shit that has accompanied her for years, but what has put the cherry on top that day is that, after the confrontation with Marjorie and the conversation with the Mallois hotel director, she has to go up to give explanations to Katherine Taylor herself.

"What, do I have to tell you why I need an advance too?" Jodie roars. "I know my rights, and this is one of them. I know it can be approved or not, but I have every right to ask for it without having to justify myself or explain what the hell I want the money for."

To Katherine, who remains standing in front of Jodie with an impassive expression, inside her heart gives several taps warning her that something in the housekeeper's attitude has delighted her. The owner of the Mallois hotel realizes that Jodie Sinclair truly attracts her. Since she met her, there was something that made her particularly attentive to the housekeeper and she thought—wrongly—that Jodie constantly paraded through her mind only because Katherine had awakened a protective feeling given the woman's unfortunate situation. That face sharpened by seriousness, the gestures she makes with her hands, and that overwhelming attitude, are making Katherine's groin pulse with the force of a hurricane unexpectedly. But she is Katherine Taylor and, of course, she won't let Jodie dominate the situation.

"If you know your rights so well, please enlighten me. Maybe I need an update," asks the businesswoman in a flat voice. "What else are you entitled to?"

Jodie doesn't take long to answer. She has so much rage that she doesn't think about the consequences her outburst might have.

"I know I have the right to be treated with respect and not humiliated by a person who claims to be the head of housekeeping at your hotel. Marjorie is a bitch and I'm sick of her abuse," Jodie spits in front of her boss's gaze. "Now, if you want, fire me for being a snitch, but I'm tired of staying quiet."

Katherine doesn't say anything, not because she doesn't care, but because her employee is so nervous that she doesn't think it's appropriate to ask questions that might worsen her state.

"How much money do you need?" asks the hotel owner, radically changing the subject.

Jodie lifts her head, closes her eyes for a moment seeking calm, and answers Katherine, who nods and walks down the hallway disappearing behind one of the doors. Jodie can hear a couple of beeps that she knows are from a safe and, after a few minutes, her boss stops in front of her.

"Here you have it," Katherine says and hands her a white envelope with the Taylor group logo. "You have as many hours off as you need to solve your problem. When you return, let Lamir know you're back. The money will be deducted from your next four paychecks, so your weekly salary won't be as affected."

Jodie's hand trembles when she receives the money and stores it in her uniform pants. She knows she needs to apologize to her boss for the attitude she's had, but she doesn't think it's the right time. She still has that ball of fire in her chest and prefers to

be serene before speaking again. The housekeeper thanks her and leaves to head to the nursing home where her mother is interned.

Ten minutes later, Katherine Taylor walks with Mike to her hotel director's office. Upon entering the office, she finds Lamir with a tired face and Marjorie walking like a tigress while gesturing and letting out some profanity.

"Any problem?" asks Katherine, leaving them both paralyzed.

"No, Mrs. Taylor, none," answers Lamir nervously, as if Katherine were a boss to fear.

"I wanted to talk to you," says Marjorie who, although she tries, her anger shows on her face.

"Go ahead, Marjorie."

"We need to let go of one of the housekeepers. She starts her shift late, uses the phone during work hours when she knows it's forbidden, and disobeys the orders I give," explains Marjorie counting each reason with her fingers. "Jodie Sinclair isn't good for your hotel."

Katherine moves her head as if she's really listening to her.

"Maybe it's just my impression, but it seems you always have complaints about this woman in particular," points out Katherine with feigned ignorance. "This wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that we hired her instead of your niece, would it?"

Marjorie Garcia tenses up. The Mallois is the best hotel in New York to work for and she wanted her niece to join the ranks as a housekeeper. The girl didn't pass the two interviews they gave her, she really didn't want to work and her aspiration wasn't to

clean rooms, but to be a boss directly, even without having any type of experience. The position wasn't for her and after interviewing Jodie, they opted for her profile. Marjorie didn't take it very well.

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"In any case, Marjorie," Katherine doesn't let her answer, "I remind you that your job is to ensure not only that my hotel's housekeeping service works, but also that the workers are well. I live here because I like to have control of my businesses and know my employees' needs up close. I won't tolerate disrespect or injustices in my hotel."

Katherine's expression is so harsh that Marjorie doesn't want to tempt fate. So she decides to show submission and accept what her boss says.

Katherine Taylor leaves the office with a sensation she's never had in her life. She's always been one of those businesswomen who analyze everything that has to do with their businesses, thinks with her head and never lets herself be carried away by an outburst, but she's been about to fire Marjorie Garcia because, apparently, she has it in for the girl who's starting to own all her thoughts, and that's starting to worry her a lot.

### Chapter 8

Like most of her rare days off, Jodie takes the opportunity to visit her mother at the nursing home. Every time she crosses the threshold, she feels a knot in her stomach because, out of the last fifteen visits, Amanda Claris has only recognized her daughter twice. During the others, sometimes she looked at her as if she were just another piece of furniture in the room, and other times she screamed, thinking she was a stranger coming to attack her. The doctors warned her these situations would come, but Jodie can't get used to them, and each time it happens, she leaves the facility in tears.

"How is she today?" she asks one of the caregivers in passing, head down.

The woman, somewhat plump with skin so dark that Jodie always finds herself fascinated by the contrast with the pure white of her eyes, has been caring for Mrs. Claris since she arrived and has witnessed several times when she didn't recognize her daughter.

"She's more lucid than I am," she responds, winking at Jodie, who stops dead in her tracks while feeling her heart pound.

"Really?" she asks hopefully.

"Very really, honey, so don't waste time talking to me and go see her."

"Thanks, Gladis," Jodie says before running down the hallway.

Indeed, as soon as she opens the door to the room, her mother recognizes her immediately, and when Jodie hugs her, she feels as if they've gone back in time. For a moment, she loses herself in memories of those years when her brother wasn't hooked on drugs and the whole family worked harmoniously running the family restaurant.

"You're thinner, honey, are you sure you're eating well?" her mother worries.

"Yes, I'm just a bit stressed with work, you know."

Her mother sighs, and Jodie can tell by the sadness reflected in her gaze that she's very aware of their current family situation. Again, she thinks of her brother and has that mix of conflicting feelings. On one hand, she misses him, and on the other, she hates him because she considers him responsible for everything that happened after his death.

Marvin Sinclair entered the world of drugs, and from there everything went downhill for the entire family. They tried everything possible to help him, but addiction turned



her brother into a liar who knew how to manipulate and handle them as he wished. By the time they realized he wasn't just stealing money from the restaurant but had mortgaged it, it was too late, and within months, they entered an unstoppable spiral that ran toward a precipice that ended with Marvin's death by overdose, the loss of the family restaurant after selling it to avoid losing the house a few weeks later, and their father's suicide within a few months.

Jodie and her mother were also left with several debts that Jodie still pays today, but the worst part was that her mother let herself be overcome by sadness and dimmed in such a way that she became another burden for her daughter, until Alzheimer's also arrived a few months ago and Jodie had no choice but to place her in a nursing home.

"But I'm fine, Mom," Jodie adds immediately, taking both her mother's hands while drawing a genuine smile. "I'm not working at that bar you hated anymore."

"Really?" Amanda's eyes widen as she asks.

"Really," Jodie confirms. "The owner of the hotel where I work in the morning offered me to clean her penthouse in the afternoons. Just imagine the change - I went from being behind that filthy bar surrounded by creeps while serving drinks non-stop to get paid always late, to being in a luxury penthouse, cleaning what's already clean, working fewer hours, earning three times more and..."

Jodie stops just in time before saying she works next to a stunning woman.

"And what?" her mother demands to know with great interest.

"Nothing, just that Mrs. Taylor is lovely, nothing like that bunch of perverts."

"You make me so happy, Jodie," her mother sighs. "You're fighting so hard and you don't deserve what you've had to live through."

"It is what it is, Mom, none of us chose it, but it's what happened and now you and I are still here," Jodie says with her lower lip trembling.

"I know," her mother smiles and hugs her.

"With this new position, I think I'll be able to save a bit to try to cancel the debts as soon as possible. Today I asked Mr. Kumar to let me do overtime in the afternoon at Mrs. Taylor's penthouse and he gave me permission," Jodie smiles.

"No wonder you're so thin," her mother huffs.

"I'm fine, Mom, besides, I told you everything's very clean. I just have to maintain it and do basic things like the bedroom, bathroom, or kitchen."

An hour later, Jodie enters the Mallois hotel radiating happiness from every pore after visiting her mother. Not even running into Marjorie before reaching the elevators and having her almost pierce her with her gaze manages to dampen the joy that spending quality time with her mother has produced.

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Once changed and pushing her cart, Jodie exits the elevator on the top floor with the same smile she entered with a few minutes ago, but it vanishes instantly when just before reaching Katherine's penthouse door, it opens and she finds her boss dressed in a silk robe, barefoot, with damp hair while letting out the same sophisticated woman from the other day, Annie.

Jodie can't hear what the two women say to each other when they kiss cheeks, but something burns in her chest without her being able to control it, and she feels she could turn into a dragon and breathe fire when both women notice her and Annie passes by her side, looking down at her as if she were nobody. The cleaner follows her with her gaze until Annie reaches the elevator and enters, at which point Jodie turns and meets Mrs. Taylor's surprised look.

"I didn't know you were coming today," Katherine says, caught off guard.

"I'm not scheduled," Jodie responds harshly, "but I asked Mr. Kumar to let me do an extra shift and he approved it, I thought he would have notified you."

Katherine pushes a strand of hair behind her ear thoughtfully. Jodie would spit another fireball at her if it weren't for how incredibly seductive she finds the gesture.

"Maybe he did by email, but I haven't checked," Katherine says.

"It doesn't matter, it's obvious I caught you at a bad time, I better leave," Jodie says, turning the cart.

"Don't be silly, you're already here, come in, after all, I..." Katherine catches herself

just in time before saying something inappropriate.

Jodie clenches her jaw and turns the cart back around, though she tries, the fury inside her grows unstopably because jealousy is eating her alive. It's the second time in three weeks she's seen that woman with Katherine. Are they officially a couple? Just thinking about it makes her want to run out, find Annie, and wipe that stupid smile off her face by dunking her head in the dirty laundry basket; she's sure she'd never recover from such trauma.

"I suppose you want me to start with the bedroom," she says as she passes in front of Katherine, without looking at her face while pushing the cart forcefully.

Katherine follows her, observing her defiant attitude and that furious look the cleaner has had since she arrived, and immediately believes she can guess what's happening. While closing the door, a twisted smile forms on her lips and she tells herself she shouldn't play this game, but before she knows it, her tongue has already loosened.

"Actually, no," she responds sharply, making Jodie turn in surprise, "today we fucked on the couch."

Jodie holds her gaze for a few seconds while swallowing, then glances sideways at the couch and thinks about how much she'd enjoy setting it on fire.

"Fine, I'll start with the kitchen then," she says, feeling that if she doesn't get away from Katherine, she might throw something at her head.

"Suit yourself, make yourself at home," Katherine smiles, walking to a table full of documents, grabbing her laptop, and sitting on the couch to check her email.

Jodie busies herself emptying the dishwasher and filling it with dirty dishes while trying to calm down, but she can't stop imagining Annie with her hands on

Katherine's body and finds it impossible. She leaves what she's doing and goes decisively to the cleaning closet to, after a minute, appear in front of Katherine with the steam cleaner ready.

"I need you to move from there, I have to disinfect that couch."

Katherine raises a defiant look and connects it with Jodie's, causing a surge of tension in the penthouse. Both women maintain it for a few seconds until Katherine nods, calmly closes the laptop lid, and rises very slowly until she's standing in front of Jodie, who feels her heart has just dropped between her legs.

"You're very bold speaking to me like that," Katherine says, approaching her ear before walking away and disappearing down the hallway, leaving Jodie drowning in her own desire.

## Chapter 9

Another day arrives, and Jodie Sinclair returns to the Mallois Hotel at her usual time. She follows her daily routine; enters the locker room, puts on her uniform, checks her work sheet, and collects the cleaning cart with everything needed to change sheets, towels, and leave everything spotless. The morning passes without incident, and after lunch, this time alone because Sarah has the day off, she prepares to go up to Katherine Taylor's penthouse. She's nervous because she doesn't know what she'll find today, though she's pretty certain it won't be Mrs. Taylor's friend—she thinks with a hint of mockery—since their encounters tend to be more spaced out. Jodie runs her hand through her hair and slides it along the ponytail she made that morning, scolding herself for keeping track of the days Annie visits the hotel. Even though Katherine might own her thoughts, and why not? The source of her solitary orgasms, the housekeeper knows she could never compete with someone like Annie, whose sophistication is worlds apart from Jodie's bearing. And the money—she doesn't even want to think about it.

She reaches the penthouse door and exhales through her nose before taking a deep breath. She takes out the magnetic key and enters her boss's home.

"How are you at taking notes?" asks the Mallois Hotel owner while flashing a smile that Jodie labels as ironic.

"Very good, actually, it's one of the best things I do," answers the housekeeper, matching her boss's tone.

It's not that Jodie has changed overnight and stopped being that reserved woman who couldn't look Katherine in the eyes without her legs shaking. The housekeeper has always had a strong character and never hesitated to hold anyone's gaze, but since the mountain of debt and problems fell on her, she had to tame that fierceness that had always accompanied her to get a job—or two—that would help her stay afloat. And when she saw Katherine Taylor and her heart decided to become a cheerleader at a football game, her mind collapsed and adopted a shyness that until now she didn't know she had. That's over now, something in her has rebelled, and finally, she can be the real Jodie in front of her boss and anyone else.

"Then you're perfect," Katherine says while searching for her purse and grabbing a notebook. "Olivia is going to be a grandmother soon and has taken leave for a few months to help her daughter. The poor thing is a first-time mother and is having a terrible time controlling her nerves."

Jodie nods, and when her boss walks past her to go to the door, she can't help but check out that round bottom she considers perfect. She asks for permission to change clothes and runs to the locker room to do so. Later, as they cross the hotel lobby, an employee stops Katherine, and she tells Jodie to wait in the car.

"Good afternoon, Jodie," Mike says with a bright smile and opens the back door of the vehicle.

Jodie freezes and has to turn her neck to make sure he's opening the door for her. She's not used to this.

"Hi, Mike," responds the housekeeper, snapping out of her trance and entering the car when the bodyguard gestures for her to get in.

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Katherine, who observes the scene while walking toward the car, approaches Mike with narrowed eyes.

"You never smile at Annie like that," the businesswoman teases, "much less open the door for her."

Mike says nothing, just looks at his boss and friend, winks at her, and invites her to sit down. It's no secret that Annie doesn't sit well with the rest of the mortals.

"To the Magnolis?" Mike asks when he gets in and starts the vehicle.

"Yes, let's see what disaster we find today," Katherine responds with a gesture of weariness.

Jodie can't contain her curiosity.

"Magnolis?" the housekeeper decides to inquire.

"The new hotel," Mrs. Taylor clarifies and fixes her gaze on Jodie's eyes. "Last year I bought an old one that had been closed for more than ten years. Nobody wanted to invest in it because the heirs were asking for an absolute fortune."

"Is it worth it?" Jodie asks with great curiosity. She hasn't missed that sparkle in Katherine's eyes when talking about the new acquisition.

"It used to be. It was a relic, but the heirs' neglect made it lose customers until it fell from grace. Now what's really valuable is its land, and they wanted to sell it for a



fortune."

"I hope you'll continue the story because if that hotel is yours now, you must have managed to buy it at a good price," Jodie says, seeing that her boss has fallen silent, giving it a touch of mystery worthy of a suspense story.

Katherine smiles with a mischief that takes her companion's breath away.

"I put an offer on the table, and one of the brothers rejected it immediately. I wasn't going to give them any more, so I withdrew, but just a week later they called saying they accepted."

"You accepted, and now the hotel is yours," Jodie guesses.

Katherine smiles again and shakes her head.

"No, I told them that offer was no longer valid and said I'd buy it, but for ten percent less than what I had offered."

Katherine Taylor's beauty might catch many people's attention, but at that moment, Jodie Sinclair realizes that's what captivates her least. What she really likes about this woman is her strength, that fierce personality, and how tough she is in business. Beauty is fleeting, character and personality are not.

"Now we've been doing renovations for months, and it's been a real headache," Katherine continues explaining. "They've stopped construction three times, and New York City Hall has sent several inspections."

"Construction work is such a headache. I remember when we had to close our family restaurant for a small renovation that was supposed to last two weeks and ended up taking two more," Jodie recounts, remembering her parents on the verge of a nervous

breakdown every time they returned from supervising the changes and found a new drama.

"You had a restaurant?" Katherine asks, interested in her employee's life.

"Yes, The Rustic Fork," Jodie answers nostalgically.

Katherine can't see the girl's sadness because she's caught up staring at her lips and how she moistens them after speaking.

"I can't believe it," says the Mallois owner, opening her eyes wide, "my father loved the food from that place. He said they made the best..."

"Stuffed turkey in all of New York," Jodie says simultaneously, and they both smile. Jodie, uncomfortable because talking about The Rustic Fork breaks her heart, and Katherine with slightly exaggerated enthusiasm.

The Mallois Hotel owner's phone rings and saves Jodie from a conversation she didn't want to continue. Katherine apologizes and answers the call, embarking on a chat that only ends when Mike parks the car and both women get out to enter the hotel under construction. As soon as they enter, Katherine meticulously observes everything and sees a couple of things she doesn't like, so she starts saying single words that Jodie quickly writes down. The businesswoman approaches a tall, very burly man wearing a completely sweaty shirt and a yellow helmet half-worn.

"Mrs. Taylor, how are you?" asks the man, who appears to be the construction foreman.

"I could be better if this was already finished, Joshua," Katherine answers, and Jodie can't help feeling a sudden wetness between her legs as she witnesses firsthand the strong character of the woman she believes she's in love with.

"You told me this whole section would be finished this week, and all I see are holes," Katherine continues speaking, and the man nervously wipes the sweat from his forehead with his hand.

"Two guys got sick, and that's delayed us, but it will be finished this week as I promised, Mrs. Taylor. Monday we can start the touch-ups upstairs, and in no time, we'll be done," Joshua explains, holding his breath. The middle Taylor sister commands respect.

"I'll be here Monday," Katherine says and continues walking through the hotel.

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For the next hour, Katherine checks every corner of her future hotel. The construction is well advanced, and she estimates they can inaugurate it in a few months. Behind her, Jodie writes everything down, and Katherine can't help feeling very comfortable with her temporary assistant. On one occasion, the hotel owner turns toward her, ready to ask her to take notes, but realizes that Jodie has everything under control and doesn't need to be told what to do. When they finish, they walk toward the exit, and Jodie doesn't notice a piece of wood on the floor, stumbles, and if it weren't for Katherine's quickness in grabbing her arm and pulling her firmly against her body, the housekeeper would be on the floor with some bruises.

"Be careful, I wouldn't want to lose my new assistant so soon," Katherine whispers in her ear. Jodie struggles to hide that she's completely willing to open herself to her boss with just a couple of words spoken in that voice that drives her crazy.

### Chapter 10

Jodie still finds it strange to assume this new position as Katherine Taylor's personal assistant. She thought yesterday was a one-time thing until she found another assistant to replace Olivia, but today, mid-morning, Katherine ordered someone to call her, making another coworker replace her much to Marjorie's displeasure, and had her come up to her penthouse.

"I didn't ask you yesterday if you wanted to help me," Katherine says while collecting several papers from her work table in the living room, which Jodie hasn't dared to organize despite being horrified every time she looks at it.

Jodie clears her throat.

"I work for you, I'll do whatever you ask."

"That's not what I'm asking," Katherine lifts her gaze and fixes it on Jodie, making it hard for the cleaner to breathe. "Being my assistant isn't part of your duties, maybe you're not comfortable with that."

"Yesterday I enjoyed taking notes more than ever," Jodie blurts out with a playful tone that satisfies Katherine more than she expected.

"Good, because I need you to accompany me today too. Obviously, all this will be paid separately as extra if you agree."

"Yes, of course," Jodie responds, trying to control her excitement.

"Great. Go change while I finish preparing what I need, we'll meet at the car in ten minutes."

Jodie can't remember ever changing so quickly in her life. She comes out two minutes early, and yet, when Mike opens the door for her to get in the car, Katherine is already inside.

"Sorry for being late," she apologizes, flustered, and Katherine tilts her head toward her with a half-smile drawn on her face.

"You're not late."

The morning flies by for Jodie in Katherine's company. First, she accompanies her to a building where the Mallois owner has a meeting where she sat right behind the businesswoman and took notes of everything that seemed important for Katherine. Then they stopped by the dry cleaners before going to a law office where Jodie waited outside with Mike, and now they've just gotten back in the car.

"Where to?" Mike asks, looking at Katherine through the center mirror.

"To the bank, I need to take some papers to Annie."

Jodie's stomach twists when she hears this and shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

"To Annie?" Jodie asks, pointing her finger in the direction of the Mallois hotel, unable to contain herself.

Katherine frowns and nods.

"Yes, to Annie," she responds with a dryness that makes it clear to Jodie that she didn't like her indiscretion.

During the entire ride, there's a palpable tension inside the vehicle. Jodie can't help it, hearing that woman's name is the same for her as seeing her near Katherine, and she doesn't know if she can bear being in the same room with both women, even if it's a bank.

When Mike parks, Jodie unbuckles her seatbelt, ready to get out, but Katherine stops her by raising her hand.

"No need to come in, wait here with Mike," she says and gets out of the car without waiting for a response.

Jodie doesn't know what bothers her more, being in the presence of both women or not knowing what's happening now that Katherine has gone in alone, making the fifteen minutes it takes her to return to the car feel endless.

"To the Mallois?" Mike asks when his boss buckles her seatbelt.

"No, to lunch at the same place as yesterday."

Jodie, who's still tense and very uncomfortable, looks at her bewildered.

"I think it's better if you drop me off at the hotel," she says checking the time on her wristwatch, "I should eat there and change, then I have to take care of your house," she adds, barely looking at Katherine.

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"What nonsense is that?" Katherine responds, staring at her intently. "You need to eat and so do I, we'll return together," she says and picks up her phone to end the conversation.

Jodie turns her head toward the window, accepting that her almost childish attempt to distance herself from Katherine just because she's angry hasn't worked out as she hoped. After some time that Jodie couldn't define, Mike parks so they can get out and agrees with Katherine that he'll pick them up when she calls.

They walk a few meters until turning the corner, and Jodie watches in perplexity as Katherine pushes open the door of a diner and enters.

"We're eating here?" she asks in amazement while Katherine walks between the counter and the tables with red and white padded benches on the left, next to huge windows overlooking a shopping center parking lot.

"Is that a problem?" Katherine asks, taken aback.

Jodie looks around and then fixes her gaze back on the woman in front of her. The restaurant is full of working-class people, people like Jodie, not like Katherine.

"No, of course not, but I didn't imagine you eating in a place like this," she responds while sitting down.

Katherine nods and also quickly surveys the place.

"I'm a normal person, Jodie, like you and like them. I won't deny that I like eating at



expensive restaurants because that would make me a hypocrite, but I also like eating at these places, it helps me keep my feet on the ground and, damn, I love this food," she admits just before the waitress arrives.

They both order and neither can fill the silence while they wait because the tension that built up in the car still hangs in the air between them. Jodie handles it better, she's used to keeping her thoughts to herself because, after all, she's very clear that Katherine Taylor is someone unattainable for her and she just needs time to get her out of her head, but Katherine doesn't like uncomfortable silences, especially when she suspects the reasons and believes they can be discussed.

"Alright, enough," she says suddenly, pushing her water glass to the side. "Why don't you just ask me what you want to ask and we end this uncomfortable situation?"

Jodie looks at her, at first surprised by Katherine's outburst, but then serious because, since her boss has brought up the topic, she's not going to avoid it or bury her head in the sand.

"Fine, as you wish," she says and clears her throat.

Katherine raises a hand before she continues speaking, annoyed.

"Please start using my first name, Jodie, I think we've developed enough trust by now for you to stop being so formal. It feels awkward given where we are."

Jodie feels Katherine's blue gaze pierce through her body when she speaks.

"Okay, I'll use your first name."

"Good, now fire away with that question," Katherine demands.

Jodie feels her heart can't beat any harder, but she's not going to lose the opportunity that's just been offered despite being terrified of the answer.

"What's between you and Annie?"

Katherine experiences a strange feeling of satisfaction inside. Her intuition hasn't failed her and she has to admit she likes that Jodie is jealous.

"Put simply, sex," Katherine answers direct as a bullet that pierces through Jodie, who doesn't even blink. "Annie Cohen is the person I deal with for all financial matters of my hotels; honestly, I don't trust anyone else in that aspect. She's competent and very intelligent and for me she's essential in that regard. As for the personal side, we have fun together, no more expectations on either her part or mine. Does that answer your question?"

Jodie swallows, despite feeling somewhat calmer, she still wants to incinerate Annie Cohen by breathing fire.

"Yes," she finally responds.

"I'm glad. Do you have any others?"

Katherine leans back to let the waitress place the plates on the table and Jodie doesn't respond until she's gone, meanwhile, they maintain a challenging look that only increases the attraction Katherine is beginning to feel for Jodie.

"I have many questions," Jodie responds when they're alone again, "but I don't think it's appropriate to ask them."

Katherine frowns, she doesn't need to ask to know that what's holding Jodie back is the social difference between them, but that's not going to stop her.

"As you wish, I do have a question," she says surprising Jodie. "What's your relationship status right now? Are you seeing anyone?"

"Those are two questions," Jodie points out.

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Katherine arches an eyebrow and tilts a smile that melts the cleaner.

"Are you going to make me rephrase the question?" Katherine asks, leaning slightly forward.

Jodie slowly shakes her head.

"I'm not seeing anyone, I don't have time or desire for that," she responds, expressing more than she should.

Katherine puts a couple of french fries in her mouth while processing the response.

"I can believe the part about not having time," Katherine responds, "but about not wanting to... I don't know..." she adds, shaking her head. "Do you really not want to be with anyone?"

Jodie coughs several times trying to buy time, but Katherine doesn't grant it.

"Come on, be honest, Jodie, I just was with you and I deserve the same from you."

The cleaner drinks some water and takes a few seconds while deciding.

"Fine, you want honesty?"

Katherine nods, expectant.

"Of course I want to be with someone. I've been alone for so long that sometimes I

feel the silence crushing me in my own home. I come home exhausted from work and have no one to share anything with. I can't explain how my day went or have someone to unwind with while listening to what they tell me. I go to bed alone and wake up alone, sometimes the silence is so scary that I have to turn on the TV to not feel so alone. And as for sex," Jodie continues speaking, "I'm not like you in that aspect," she says, slightly blushing.

"Like me?" Katherine raises an eyebrow, though there's nothing in her expression indicating she's offended.

"I mean what you have with Annie or with any other woman you might spend time with. I don't work that way. I can't sleep with a woman if there aren't at least some feelings involved, casual sex isn't for me, so I've gone a very long time without feeling physical contact from another person."

Katherine doesn't know what to say, she just observes her while thinking about how much she'd like to hug her.

"What happened with your family, Jodie? What put you in this situation?" she asks, increasingly interested in her life.

Jodie feels a knot forming in her stomach. No matter how much time passes, it's very hard for her to talk about everything that happened even though she'd love to tell her story to Katherine Taylor. She tries to do it, but when she looks up to speak to her, her eyes well up.

"It's okay," Katherine says extending her hand across the table to take Jodie's. "Another day," she adds giving an affectionate squeeze that sends a current through the cleaner's body. "If we don't hear from the construction manager at the hotel tomorrow, I want you to call him. You have to stay on top of these people or they'll take advantage," Katherine says, completely changing the subject.

Jodie smiles and nods, grateful for the truce and understanding from the woman in front of her.

## Chapter 11

Jodie Sinclair startles when she hears the penthouse door open. She's been cleaning for a couple of hours and today she's tackled the kitchen which, although fairly clean, had disorganized drawers. She's pleased with her work, having arranged everything her boss frequently uses within easy reach so she won't have to search through cabinets for a cup or tray.

"Good afternoon, Jodie," Katherine greets as she enters and stops in front of the fridge. She opens it, looks for a few seconds, and closes it again.

"Hi, how was your day?" asks the cleaner who, for some reason, senses a different energy in Katherine.

Katherine focuses on Jodie and feels, automatically, that her day has improved at least a little. She's used to everyone greeting her, but very few people genuinely care about how she's doing. She's felt such overwhelming sincerity from Jodie that her chest swells with pure pleasure.

"A shit day," she fires with total honesty while walking toward a cabinet right next to the terrace door, perfectly stocked with all Katherine's favorite drinks.

"Well! I hope it's just today," Jodie responds.

"What do you mean?" asks the businesswoman, not understanding the comment.

"I hope it's just a one-time thing, having a day like this, and not something that happens too often," explains the cleaner.

Katherine tilts her head with that smile that so destabilizes Jodie Sinclair.

"It happens more often than I'd like, but this is the life I chose," she answers, picking up a crystal glass. "Why don't you join me for a while?" she suddenly asks and gestures with her head toward the terrace.

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Jodie remains silent longer than expected because Katherine has fixed her blue gaze on her face. She tries to deflect as best she can.

"I still have work to do," says the cleaner and raises a cloth as if it were a rifle and she were at war.

"You can finish tomorrow," replies the owner of Hotel Mallois, "I don't feel like having this drink alone, plus, sunset's about to start and it's a sight you can't miss."

Jodie nods when Katherine lifts the wine bottle and they both head out to the terrace. The cleaner has been there several times, but always to do her job, though that hasn't stopped her from enjoying the impressive views.

"You can sit anywhere you like," says Katherine while filling both glasses with her favorite white wine.

Jodie settles into the lounge right next to where her boss has sat and immediately notices the comfort of the plush cushion.

"Comfortable, aren't they?" Katherine asks, smiling gracefully at Jodie's face when she reclines.

"Better than my mattress," she answers and lets out a sigh with closed eyes.

Katherine takes the opportunity to study her in detail now that her companion isn't noticing. Jodie strikes her as a very attractive woman, but there's something about her that goes beyond her beauty. The businesswoman could make a list of things that



have caught her attention about her employee, but for now, she focuses on that personality that sometimes drives her crazy but, at other times, she loves.

Jodie opens her eyes and turns to look at her boss because, even though she couldn't see her, she still has that strange feeling that something's up. She confirms it when Katherine takes such a long drink that she almost empties her glass and then runs her hand over her face in an unusual gesture of fatigue.

"Did something specific happen to make you feel this way?" Jodie inquires, though she's not quite sure if her question is appropriate, as Katherine remains her boss despite their growing familiarity.

"Sometimes the responsibility overwhelms me," Katherine confesses. "There are days when I'm so mentally exhausted that I want to turn off my phone and stay under my bed sheets."

"Don't you have any siblings who can help you?"

"We're three sisters and each has her own thing, though most of the time I really envy Rachel, the oldest of us all," Katherine shares while refilling her glass.

"Tell me about them," asks the cleaner, who has noticed a slight change for the better as soon as her boss mentioned her sisters.

Katherine takes another sip from her glass, adjusts herself comfortably in the lounge, and smiles.

"Rachel, Caroline, and me. My parents had the fortune of having only girls in the family," Katherine's laugh proves contagious to Jodie. "The oldest wanted nothing to do with the family business. She settled in Ithaca many years ago and has, along with my niece, a bar that's the talk of the town. Caroline, who arrived unexpectedly, is the

youngest, but she was born with an innate business sense. She owns the cruise lines and I," she points to herself and takes another sip of wine, "well, you know me."

Jodie watches her wine-moistened lips and her body responds with a shudder in her chest and a vibration between her legs. She clears her throat and moves her neck to release the sexual tension taking over her. She looks down and realizes the bottle is almost empty and now understands why Katherine has been drawing out her words.

"It's gotten quite late, I need to head home," says Jodie while pretending to check the time on her phone. She knows it's necessary to end this moment they've created against the backdrop of sunset.

Katherine nods and tries to stand up, but loses her balance and Jodie catches her mid-fall.

"Are you okay?" asks the cleaner, searching for her gaze.

"Yes, don't worry," Katherine answers with bright eyes and gestures for her to enter the penthouse.

Jodie walks with a nervousness she can't understand. She feels like she's walking through a dark forest full of dangerous animals that could attack at any moment. Suddenly she feels Katherine very close to her and an invisible force makes the cleaner stop dead in her tracks just a few feet from the terrace door.

Katherine, who feels a sudden weakness for Jodie's neck, brings her left hand close and leaves a fleeting caress. Jodie says nothing, but the hair on her neck stands on end; evidence that the caress has had its effect.

"You have a beautiful neck," Katherine says and moves closer to Jodie.

Jodie stands very still, but all she wants is to turn around and pin her boss against the wall to kiss her until her tongue hurts. However, the cleaner isn't foolish and knows two things; first is that the businesswoman's attitude stems from having a few too many drinks and she's sure that if she were sober, she wouldn't have dared to touch her that way and the other is that nothing will happen between them, there's an abyss of many impossible things between them.

"Don't go there," says Jodie, who has had to gather all her willpower to turn around and, with a hand on her boss's chest, push her body away. She feels stupid for rejecting the woman she's been in love with for so long, but she knows it's for the best, she doesn't need more pain in her life.

What Katherine feels in that moment can be described as when you're walking along the edge of a pool, suddenly slip and fall into water so cold that your body violently shakes. If the alcohol had affected her mind, it disappears instantly, leaving her completely lucid and in a state of shock that tells her she's acted like an irrational fool with her employee. While the relationship between them had progressed, she's sure that with her attitude she's returned to that starting point that had been so hard to leave behind.

## Chapter 12

Jodie and Sarah have been sitting in the staff dining room of the Mallois Hotel for fifteen minutes. Both have their tupperware containers open, the only difference being that Sarah devours her mac and cheese with delight while Jodie hovers her fork over her meat in sauce, unable to decide which piece to stab.

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"Are you going to tell me what's wrong or are you going to keep playing airplane with your fork?" Sarah asks, tired of watching her.

"What?" Jodie responds, thrown off balance.

"You haven't touched your food since we sat down, and you haven't said a word, not to mention you looked like the walking dead when we arrived this morning. I gave you space thinking you'd tell me later, but since you're not saying anything and I'm dying of curiosity, I demand you tell me," Sarah responds, pointing at her with her fork full of macaroni, with melted cheese dangling from it.

Jodie sighs while staring at her. She hadn't planned to tell her anything about what happened yesterday in Katherine's penthouse, but the truth is she can't get it out of her head, and if she doesn't vent, she feels like she'll collapse at any moment.

"Yesterday Katherine invited me for a drink in the penthouse when she got back from running some errands. All very natural, she didn't want to drink alone and asked me to sit with her."

Sarah raises an eyebrow.

"Katherine? Not Mrs. Taylor anymore?" she questions mockingly.

"Shut up," Jodie demands, not in the mood to play along.

Sarah erases her mocking expression and becomes serious again.

"Okay, you sat down with her for a drink," Sarah says, encouraging her to continue talking.

Jodie looks from side to side making sure none of her coworkers can hear them, still, she lowers her voice and leans forward.

"At one point she tried to..." Jodie blushes when she remembers and a shiver runs down her spine like a current.

"Kiss you?" Sarah gapes.

Jodie shivers again, just thinking about Katherine's lips on hers makes her dizzy.

"Not exactly. I was about to leave and suddenly she was behind me. She said she loved my neck and caressed it," she manages to express.

"Oh my god!" Sarah exclaims, covering her mouth. "And what did you do?"

Jodie clears her throat and slowly shakes her head.

"I pushed her away."

Sarah gives her a surprised look at first, but it quickly turns understanding.

"I can't sleep with her and then..." Jodie shakes her head and takes a breath.

"I understand," Sarah says, taking her hand across the table, "I don't know if I would have had that willpower, but I understand what you did and I think it was the right thing."

"Really?" Jodie asks, surprised.

"Yes. You and her belong to two completely different worlds, and I'm not saying she can't like you, but a woman like her, I don't know, must be used to things you can't even imagine, and I guess someone like us can only be entertainment. You did right to stop her, you need this job and sleeping with her would have only complicated things."

Jodie nods in complete agreement with Sarah, although a part of her—a very big part—had hoped her friend would tell her she had made a mistake and try to fix it.

"And what do I do now? In a while I have to go to her penthouse and I don't even know how to look at her," Jodie asks anxiously.

"Just act like always, go there, do your job and don't bring up the topic, like it never happened, I'm sure she'll do the same. Besides, I imagine someone like Katherine Taylor isn't used to being rejected, it must be so new for her that it'll be the last thing she wants to talk about."

Despite the circumstances, Jodie can't contain a loud laugh.

"I'm serious," Sarah insists, infected by her laughter. "Those people never get told no, and you rejected her, her wounded ego won't let her bring it up."

While walking from the elevator to the penthouse door, Jodie keeps thinking about Sarah's last words. She doesn't know Katherine well and maybe she's too blinded by her feelings for her, but she's never seemed like a person dominated by ego; instead, she relishes thinking about how Annie would feel facing rejection, it would probably cost her several sessions with the most expensive therapist in the city.

When she takes out the card to access the penthouse, Jodie sighs and prays everything she knows so Katherine won't be inside, but as usual, her prayers go unheard and the businesswoman sits at that work table that looks like a hurricane has passed through.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:00 pm*

"Good afternoon," the cleaner greets while closing the door.

"Hello, Jodie," Katherine responds, looking up over her laptop screen.

For an instant, their gazes lock and Jodie feels everything spinning around them, but then Katherine returns her attention to what she was doing and Jodie's lungs start getting air again. Taking her friend's advice, she decides to get to work while wondering if Katherine is thinking about that moment of tension they lived yesterday or if she has completely erased it from her mind.

"Tomorrow I'll need you to come with me to the Magnolis again," the businesswoman says when Jodie has barely taken two steps.

"Sure, whatever you need."

"Good," Katherine responds without lifting her gaze from the screen.

She doesn't understand why, but Katherine's coldness bothers her. Jodie leaves her things and after cleaning and tidying the room, she goes into the kitchen to collect her boss's lunch remains, which from the plates and several coffee cups she finds, suggests she hasn't left her penthouse today.

She finishes rinsing the last plate and when she turns to put it in the dishwasher, she finds Katherine standing by the kitchen island. It's not that Jodie gets scared, but she feels such a jolt through her body seeing her there, in a basic t-shirt, casual pants, and her famous blonde hair pulled back in an informal ponytail, that the plate slips between her fingers and crashes to the floor.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry," she apologizes nervously, looking from side to side, unable to remember where the broom is that she herself put away just minutes ago.

"It's okay, it's just a plate, Jodie," Katherine says, approaching.

"I'm so clumsy," Jodie berates herself, increasingly agitated, moving erratically around the ceramic pieces scattered on the floor.

Suddenly, she feels the burning heat of Katherine's hand closing over her left hand. Jodie freezes, paralyzed.

"I said it's okay," Katherine whispers, looking into her eyes, "I'll clean it up. Okay? Stay there."

It's not really a question but an order, because Katherine, with her other free hand, motions for Jodie to step aside, and a couple of minutes later, she's throwing the remains of the plate she just swept into the trash.

"Done, nothing happened here," she resolves, turning to Jodie, who has remained hypnotized watching her boss do something she should have done.

"I really am sorry, I'll pay for the plate."

Katherine lowers her head and sighs before raising it again and piercing Jodie with her gaze.

"Stop talking nonsense, will you? You think I've never dropped a plate?"

"I don't know," Jodie hesitates, scratching her head.

Katherine lets out a sudden laugh that calms the cleaner a bit.



"Well, truth is I don't remember ever breaking a plate," Katherine admits, "but glasses yes, many. In any case, I didn't come to talk about broken plates."

Jodie swallows. Suddenly she feels an uncontrollable insecurity and becomes terrified contemplating something she hadn't thought about, that Katherine might fire her to avoid having to see her after what happened the day before.

"I wanted to apologize for yesterday," the businesswoman says, leaving Jodie disoriented at first and relieved afterward.

"There's no need, it's fine," the cleaner responds, trying to end the topic as quickly as possible.

"Yes, there is, Jodie, I crossed a line. I'd had a shitty day, I was stressed, I drank too much and I was comfortable with you, and I don't know, I got carried away."

Jodie looks at her with a clenched jaw. She appreciates the apology because it only confirms what her intuition has told her from the beginning, that Katherine isn't one of those people who think their power gives them the right to take whatever they want at will, but it really bothers her that she's using drinking as an excuse, because that means if she hadn't been drinking, Katherine would never have approached her, and that hurts a lot.

"I promise it won't happen again," Katherine adds, unaware of that strange anger beginning to invade Jodie without her being able to control it.

"It's forgotten, Mrs. Taylor, there's no need to keep apologizing," Jodie spits out, taking the broom and dustpan her boss just used.

"Back to Mrs. Taylor?" Katherine asks, not understanding anything, but Jodie doesn't answer and walks away from the kitchen to put away the cleaning supplies.

Chapter 13

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:00 pm*

"See you tomorrow, Jodie," Sarah says goodbye to her coworker after their shift ends.

Jodie Sinclair remains in an odd mood that doesn't let her think straight. She slept poorly last night and has been lost in thought all morning. She scolds herself for her attitude because she was the one who rejected Katherine Taylor, but it infuriates her to know that her boss only made advances because she'd had too much wine. With this thought, she arrives at the penthouse and sighs when she realizes she left her access card at home, inside her uniform pants that she tossed in the laundry basket. She has no choice but to ring the bell and hope Katherine is there, but to her surprise, the blonde she expects isn't the one who opens the door.

"Hi," the stranger says in a honeyed tone accompanied by a wolfish gaze that leaves Jodie's heart racing.

The woman in front of the cleaner smiles and moistens her lips.

"Can I help you?" she asks after Jodie's silence.

"Yes," Jodie manages to say, not immune to the girl's stunning beauty, "I work in Ms. Taylor's penthouse."

"Then come on in," she replies, and when Jodie enters, she follows her with her gaze. "What time do you finish your shift? I know a bar nearby that serves the best mojito in all of New York."

Jodie is stunned, she hasn't even had time to think about who this woman might be, but immediately rules out that she's another one of her boss's flings, because if her

ears haven't failed her, the girl just asked her out with complete boldness.

"Caroline..." Katherine's voice suddenly echoes from across the living room.

When the doorbell rang, Katherine was finishing a call, so her sister Caroline, who was there beside her, signaled that she would answer it. The middle Taylor sister heard Jodie's voice and immediately intuited what would happen next, knowing her younger sister never misses an opportunity to flirt when an attractive woman crosses her path. She wasn't wrong - the brazen Caroline Taylor was trying to pick up her employee. The annoyance is immediate, and Katherine can't remember when she last felt such rage course through her veins watching her little sister flaunt her potential.

Caroline turns and, seeing Katherine's icy expression, raises her eyebrows and lifts her hands in surrender.

"Sorry. I didn't know you two were involved," Caroline replies with a mischievous smirk, "you don't tell me anything anymore."

Katherine shoots her a look that could wipe out an entire state.

"We're leaving," she says, approaching Jodie with no desire to respond to her sister's provocation. "I don't want you bothering the guests or hearing anything about you in this hotel, understood?" she adds threateningly.

Caroline smiles daringly, making the vein in her older sister's neck throb with the force of a thousand demons.

"Yes, ma'am," she answers, winks at Jodie, and turns to head out to the terrace.

Katherine feels her chest vibrate and an annoying buzz pierce her eardrums. Caroline has always been like this, a bold woman who with just a sideways smile - a Taylor

trademark - can bring the world to her feet. She's the youngest, the most attractive, and above all, the smartest, but also the one who gives her two sisters the most headaches. Katherine has never minded her flirting with any of her girls, but what she just felt now when she saw those immense blue eyes land on Jodie scares her, and deeply.

"Good morning, Mike," Jodie smiles genuinely when they exit to the hallway and the bodyguard appears like a shadow.

Mike answers while throwing an inquisitive look at the cleaner upon seeing his boss's twisted expression. Jodie, who hasn't noticed the harsh exchange between the two blondes, shakes her head, and Mike frowns.

"Always the same, damn it," Katherine mutters so low that only her bodyguard understands what she's talking about and can't help but laugh.

"Your sister, right?" Mike asks.

"The one and only," Katherine responds and releases an impatient sigh.

Jodie finally emerges from that silly daydream she seems to be stuck in and understands that this Caroline is the youngest Taylor. Besides Katherine having talked about her the other night, the physical resemblance is incredible. The difference is that Caroline is noticeably younger than Katherine, and her style of dress is the complete opposite of the hotel owner's, as the cleaner can't imagine the blonde of her dreams wearing either a miniskirt or such a daring neckline as Caroline's.

"Where to?" Mike asks once they've gotten into the car.

"City Hall," Katherine responds with a seriousness that sends chills down their spines.

They've been going from place to place for almost three hours, including the new Magnolis hotel. Mike limits himself to driving in silence while Jodie takes notes and even makes several calls her boss requests. Katherine is so irritable that neither of her employees dares to say a word. The Mallois hotel owner unconsciously huffs every time she reads something on her phone, mutters certain words that Jodie has never heard from her, and keeps giving orders like she's an army captain.

"Have you heard anything about Caroline?" Katherine asks Mike as the bodyguard parks in front of the hotel.

"She's not at the hotel," Mike answers and looks in the rearview mirror as his boss relaxes. "Seems she went out with your father and hasn't returned. They saw her leaving in the truck more than an hour ago."

Jodie notices how that tense expression that has been accompanying Katherine for hours suddenly disappears, and although she can imagine many things, she doesn't want to be the one to guess what's bothering her boss.

"I need to know when the furniture arrives at the Magnolis, call the limo company and the cleaning service," Katherine fires one order after another, and Jodie just writes while walking behind her boss.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:00 pm*

"Ms. Taylor," the hotel's maintenance chief calls out to her as they reach the elevator. "The air conditioning in..."

"Not now, Jamal," she responds quickly. "Talk to the director."

The businesswoman's response is so sharp that the man nods and turns to disappear down the hallway where the offices are. Jodie looks at her and feels the need to help drain all that annoyance she seems to have, but she doesn't know how, and she doesn't want to resume that dangerous confidence they had acquired. So she decides to speak casually.

"I was thinking of making a dinner reservation for you and your sister, but I see you don't get along well with her," Jodie drops while they enter the elevator that takes them to the penthouse.

Katherine raises her gaze and connects it with Jodie's. The compartment increases by several degrees when the two women observe each other with a strange mixture of uncertainty and desire.

"Caroline and I get along very well. My sisters are what I love most in this life."

"Then your bad mood must be due to something else," Jodie dares.

The Mallois hotel owner clenches her jaw while continuing to look at Jodie but doesn't open her mouth. She doesn't dare say what's going through her mind, and the cleaner, who has already let loose, spits out what she thinks.

"Since you won't talk, then I think what's happening is that you felt jealous that your sister wanted to invite me for a drink. She's a girl..."

The world stops. Katherine Taylor has moved so fast that her body has fully impacted Jodie's and her mouth has connected with her companion's as if they had two magnets. The union is impressive; their tongues caress for the first time, making them both moan with pleasure at the sensation. Katherine presses closer to her and with her hand squeezes Jodie's hip to try to contain her urge to unbutton her pants and caress her. The two women lose themselves in the kiss and aren't aware that the elevator has stopped and the doors are opening until the outside noise makes them separate abruptly. If Marjorie García's eyes get any wider, they'll surely fall to the floor; she can't believe what she's seen - her boss and an employee devouring each other with kisses inside the hotel elevator.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Taylor," the head of the cleaning team says with a certain mocking tone.

"Marjorie," Katherine greets, sparing with words. The hotel owner doesn't care that she saw them. Jodie does.

The cleaner gets so nervous that her forehead immediately beads with sweat. A million things run through her head and anxiety takes over. In a reflex action, she exits the elevator almost running and, without looking back, heads toward the stairs to reach the locker room, gather her things, and leave the Mallois hotel as if the devil himself were chasing her.

## Chapter 14

Katherine's pulse still races, and a pleasant tingle spreads through her belly as she watches Jodie disappear. Marjorie García looks first at Jodie and then at her boss, initially with amazement, but that initial surprise quickly transforms into a sinister



smile as her devious mind starts working to take advantage of what she has just witnessed.

"Do you need something, Marjorie?" Katherine asks suddenly, while searching in her purse for the card to open her penthouse door.

"No, Mrs. Taylor, everything is in order," Marjorie responds, entering the elevator the two women have just left.

As soon as Katherine closes her penthouse door, the first thing she does is grab her phone and dial Jodie's number.

"Are you okay?" she asks as soon as the cleaner answers after several rings.

"Yes, I'm sorry I left like that, but I felt very uncomfortable when I saw Marjorie. That woman has it in for me and I just, I didn't know how to react, I'm really sorry."

Katherine sits on one of the stools at her kitchen island.

"Don't apologize, I understand, but listen, Jodie, I don't want what happened to leave us tense like what happened the other afternoon on my terrace," Katherine says, running her fingers through her hair nervously. "I want us to talk about what happened in the elevator."

"Over the phone?" Jodie responds.

The cleaner hears Katherine smile and feels a jolt between her legs.

"No, in person, all I ask is that you don't avoid it and that you're not tense or distant, that makes me nervous."

"I won't," Jodie smiles too, so nervous about what happened and, above all, what she felt, that she just realizes she's walking aimlessly through the streets of New York.

"I hope not," Katherine says just as her doorbell rings. "Listen, I have to go, we'll talk tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure."

When Katherine opens the door, she finds Mike on the other side.

"Your sister sent me to tell you that she and your father are waiting for you at the hotel restaurant for dinner," her trusted man says.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:00 pm*

"She's using you as a messenger now?" Katherine arches an eyebrow.

"She's the boss's sister, I can't refuse," Mike smiles.

When Katherine arrives at the table, she leans down to kiss her father's cheek and does the same with her younger sister before sitting down.

"Where have you been?" the hotel owner asks after signaling one of the waiters to approach.

Her father refills her wine glass while Caroline responds.

"I took Dad shopping, I have a meeting tomorrow and I want him to come with me."

"Dad has a thousand suits," Katherine says.

"None of them are new," her sister responds.

"What's the meeting for?" Katherine asks with interest.

"A potential new provider. I'm having problems with the agency that handles cruise reservations. Lately, they're not meeting occupancy goals and I'm getting tired of it. I've been looking for several weeks and this guy's proposal looks good, seems serious. So I'm going to meet with him and if we like it," she says, pointing to herself and her father with a smile, "maybe I'll reach a preliminary agreement to test it with the next cruise."

"If we like it?" Katherine repeats mockingly. "You run one of the most powerful cruise companies in the state, you have an above-average IQ, and you were in college when you should have been in high school. When are you going to stop taking Dad with you to meetings?"

"Katherine, leave your sister alone," her father warns with a smile.

Caroline fixes her gaze on Katherine, but she's not offended at all because she knows it was just a compliment from her sister.

"I plan to keep taking him as long as he wants to come," she says, taking her father's hand, "with that ogre face of his, he commands respect and nobody tries to hit on me," she adds, and Katherine's snort can be heard above her father's laughter.

The rest of dinner proceeds peacefully as the family discusses a possible visit to Ithaca to see the eldest Taylor sister.

"Well, with your permission, I'm going to retire now," Warren Taylor says, "one's getting old and needs rest."

Both sisters stand up to say goodbye to their father, and Katherine gestures to Mike to ask him to take him home.

"Well," Caroline says when the two sisters are alone, "now tell me what happened this morning."

Katherine makes a puzzled face.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about that strange scene you made in your penthouse when the cleaner

came."

Katherine feels a rush of heat.

"What scene? I just asked you to behave."

Caroline's laughter is so sudden that even Katherine ends up joining in.

"Come on, Katherine, that might work with Rachel, but not with me. I've jokingly tried to hit on your lovers a thousand times and you've never cared. And with this girl, who I want to point out I had no idea you had something with, you nearly jumped down my throat..."

"I didn't..."

"Shut up," Caroline requests, "I'm not finished. You were so bothered that I asked her out that you not only forbade me from approaching her but from approaching anyone at the hotel. When have you ever done that? I'll tell you when - never. So you better tell me what's going on between the owner of the Mallois and that cute cleaner."

Katherine closes her eyes and rubs her temples. She's not sure what she should answer, or even if she should, but she needs to release what she has inside that's starting to burn.

"I think I'm falling in love with her," she blurts out.

"Wow!" Caroline exclaims, completely surprised. "Are you serious?"

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm*

"Do you want me to draw you a picture?" Katherine asks, annoyed.

"Sorry, sis, but damn," Caroline smiles, "admit this is huge. Katherine, the ice woman, in love. That's intense, does Rachel know?"

Katherine sighs.

"No, she doesn't, and if I'd known better, I wouldn't have told you either."

"Oh, come on," Caroline takes her hand and wipes the smile from her face, "I'm sorry, I just wasn't expecting it, but tell me more. How did it happen?"

"There's not much to tell," Katherine summarizes what has happened with Jodie since they met. "At first I felt very confused, I thought I just wanted to protect her or whatever, but for the past few days I've been very clear that it's not that, I'm very attracted to her and I can't get her out of my head. And when I kissed her in the elevator," Katherine doesn't even know how to express it, so she just smiles.

"And her?" Caroline asks.

"I don't know, honestly I have no idea what she really thinks about this."

"Then what are you doing here with me?"

"What do you mean?" Katherine asks.

"If you want to know how Jodie feels, you need to go and ask her."

"Now?" Katherine looks at her watch and confirms it's not late.

"Why wait? Stop wasting time with me and go clear things up with her."

"Have I told you I love you?" Katherine says smiling.

"Many times, now go, Mike just got back."

During the ride to Jodie's house, Katherine is nervous while trying to devise a thousand ways to start a conversation that even she doesn't know how to approach. The sound of a notification on her phone pulls her from her thoughts, and when she opens it, she sees it's a message from Caroline in the Taylor sisters' group chat, and she feels like breaking something.

"Katherine is in love!"

The news is accompanied by several emojis including speakers as if it were breaking news, champagne bottles to celebrate, and two women hugging. Flustered, Katherine watches in horror as Rachel is typing, so she locks her phone before seeing what her older sister says.

"Damn it," she mutters, putting the device in her purse.

"Any problem?" Mike asks, looking at her through the rearview mirror.

"Caroline, she's such a blabbermouth."

Mike smiles without commenting and twenty minutes later, stops the car in front of Jodie's door.

"If I haven't come out in an hour, leave," Katherine says before getting out.

"Alright, have a good night," Mike says goodbye, and Katherine narrows her eyes at him.

Jodie is about to go to bed when she hears the doorbell. Her heart speeds up and she feels a certain fear as she approaches because she's not expecting anyone, much less at this hour. With the chain on, she opens the door slightly and her breath catches when through the small opening she sees Katherine Taylor.

"What are you doing here?" she asks in astonishment, while a pleasant tingling spreads through her body, conquering every last corner.

"Can I come in or do I have to explain from the street?" Katherine responds.

"Yes, of course, sorry."

Jodie closes the door, removes the chain from the latch, and opens it completely to let Katherine in. The owner of the Mallois feels her heart flutter when her gaze locks with Jodie's for a few seconds, then, unable to control her curiosity, she looks around after feeling that it's almost as cold inside the house as outside. Jodie wears pajama pants, thick socks, and on top, a sweatshirt that Katherine would only wear in the dead of winter.

"The heating doesn't work," Jodie explains, embarrassed. "If you want, we can go to the kitchen, I have a space heater there and it's where I usually spend time when I'm home, it should still be warm."



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Without a word, Katherine follows her while observing everything she sees as the wooden floor creaks under her feet. Without a doubt, the house needs urgent renovation, both in the walls and ceiling and windows, but it's evident that her employee's current situation doesn't allow for it.

"Sit there, would you like some tea?" Jodie says, closing the kitchen door as soon as they enter.

Katherine feels the warmth of the room immediately.

"It's not necessary, I think I shouldn't have come without warning, you were about to go to bed, weren't you?" Katherine concludes as she watches Jodie turn the heater back on.

"Yes, though not to sleep. At this hour I usually read, but I'm warmer here than on the couch."

"I see," Katherine says, looking at her so intently that Jodie blushes.

"Why did you come?" the cleaner asks, noticing the air becoming electric.

Katherine, who hasn't sat down, takes a step toward her and positions herself right in front, leaving Jodie with very little room to maneuver.

"Earlier I told you on the phone that I wanted us to talk about what happened in the elevator."

The words leave Katherine's mouth like a caress for Jodie, who shivers from head to toe and her core dampens when her boss moistens her lips before continuing to speak.

"But now that I'm here, my mind has gone blank, you cloud my thoughts, Jodie," she adds in a whisper, closing the distance until they're so close that Jodie's hands rest on Katherine's chest.

"I don't think we're going to talk much tonight," Jodie concludes as one of Katherine's hands slides down her neck to sink into her hair.

"No, I don't think so."

This time, the first thing to touch Jodie's lips is Katherine's tongue, which makes its way and enters fiercely into her mouth. Jodie stops breathing and feels vertigo when she grips her waist to keep her balance as Katherine overwhelms her with her body. In less than a second, she has her cornered against the kitchen counter and is kissing her neck. Jodie feels dizzy with each caress and isn't sure she can handle them because the sensations she experiences far exceed everything she had imagined she would feel if Katherine ever touched her.

"Your clothes are in my way," Katherine pants, unleashed, eager to touch Jodie's skin and trace every inch with her tongue.

Suddenly, Jodie stops her.

"I need to go slower," she asks nervously, "it's been a long time since I..."

Katherine blinks a couple of times until she manages to get blood flowing to her brain.

"Of course, sorry. Would you prefer to go to the bedroom?"

Jodie nods and takes her hand to guide her to her room. Along the way she feels stupid, she's very aroused and eager for Katherine Taylor to devour her whole and shouldn't have problems having sex in the kitchen, but she's gone too long without sex and wanting Katherine Taylor to let everything happen so quickly. Once in the bedroom, Katherine has to concentrate hard not to get carried away by desire and be more measured. It's not her style, but she understands Jodie and wants to please her, so the hotel owner undresses her very slowly while distributing kisses over her body and lets Jodie guide her mouth to her sex to allow her to lick it. At that moment, Katherine doesn't hold back and Jodie comes so quickly that it frightens her.

"I'm sorry," she says blushing, still between pants, "it's just that so long without..."

"Fucking?" Katherine completes between her legs, with a crooked smile that sends a jolt through Jodie. "Relax, I promise I'll go slower now, you have no idea how good you taste," she assures, before plunging her tongue back between her folds.

## Chapter 15

When Jodie Sinclair opens her eyes, the first thing she feels is a slight soreness between her legs. It's been a long time since she's been intimate with a woman, and although Katherine was gentle and respected her pace, her body has responded to the lack of practice. She moves carefully, and when she turns her head, she observes the blonde who made love to her during the night, more beautiful than ever. She sits cross-legged on the bed, holding her inseparable tablet, wearing a worn-out sweatshirt that Jodie recognizes as her own. Her completely tousled hair gives her such a sexy air that the cleaner wants to pounce on her like a panther in heat, and when Katherine notices she's awake, watching her, Jodie's core decides to act on its own and moistens without her being able to help it.

"Good morning," Katherine says, and a telling smile appears on her face.

"Good morning, did you sleep well?" Jodie responds, moistening her lips.

Katherine's smile widens as she puts the tablet aside to move closer to Jodie. The kiss is nothing more than a greeting between two lovers who see each other again after a night of passion that felt more like affection than lust.

"Very well," says the owner of the Mallois hotel. "I thought I'd have trouble falling asleep, but honestly, I don't even remember when I dozed off."

Jodie smiles and lets her gaze wander over her companion's face. Today, Katherine Taylor seems more beautiful than ever.

"Sorry I took your sweatshirt, but I got up to use the bathroom and was a bit cold," Katherine says when Jodie caresses her neck and then runs her hand over the fabric.

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm*

"Don't worry, there are days when you need to bundle up with the broken heating, the house gets freezing," she responds with a hint of embarrassment that doesn't go unnoticed by Katherine.

"It's okay, I like the cold," she answers to help her, but the cleaner breaks into a loud laugh.

Jodie shakes her head. She loves this version of Katherine, the one who does what's necessary to make her feel comfortable, but this time not even the seriousness in her voice can mask the lie. The cleaner kisses her again, this time running her tongue through her mouth and burying a hand in her blonde hair.

"I can't linger," Jodie groans while Katherine kisses her neck, "I have to go to the hotel, it's getting late."

Katherine leaves a soft bite and then a small kiss before pulling away from her.

"It's not necessary. I've arranged everything so you don't have a shift this morning. I want us to talk, and that conversation is very important to me."

"But, Marjorie..."

"Don't worry about her," Katherine responds with authority. "She already saw us in the elevator, but what happens between you and me isn't her problem."

Jodie isn't entirely convinced, but decides to give herself a break. She's been suffocating in her situation for so long and wants, for once, to think about herself and

enjoy, plus, this conversation with Katherine Taylor is too important to her.

"Then let's have breakfast first and talk after," the cleaner answers and gets out of bed.

Katherine has to exercise all the self-control she can muster when she sees Jodie's naked body. She can clearly see that mole under her left breast that she licked many times the night before. Her ass drives her crazy and her feet destabilize her; if it were up to her, she would have devoured them shamelessly. It's one of her biggest fetishes, and Jodie's are perfect. The girl gets dressed and leaves the room after telling the businesswoman she'll wait for her in the kitchen.

A few minutes later, Jodie, who's preparing scrambled eggs, hears Katherine finish a call and walk to the kitchen. Now it's the cleaner's turn to gather strength not to pounce on the hotel owner, who's wearing only the sweatshirt and walking with bare legs as she approaches.

"Everything okay?" she asks, trying to divert her attention to something else.

Katherine lets out a snort and shakes her head.

"We have an event in one of the Taylor group's private venues, and it seems the head chef and one of his assistants went out last night after service and ate at a bar. They ended up with severe food poisoning in the hospital. I just got notified and have no room to maneuver to find someone else, the assistant who didn't go with them can't handle the work alone," Katherine explains, so nervous that Jodie barely recognizes her. It's the first time she's seen this tough woman in such a state.

Jodie approaches her and after giving her a chaste kiss, takes her face in both hands and connects her gaze with the blonde's.

"I can help you if you let me."

Katherine, still overwhelmed by the situation, struggles to understand what Jodie is saying.

"I was the cook at The Rustic Fork; it's really what I've always done. I studied culinary arts and, after being an assistant for years in the family restaurant, I became the head chef. That stuffed turkey your father loves so much, I prepared it during the last years it was open."

The Mallois hotel owner raises her eyebrows, completely impressed by what she hears. She realizes they had never talked about her past in depth, and the little she knew about her was that her parents owned the famous Fork in New York. At any other time, Katherine would hesitate to accept, she's a businesswoman and when it comes to business, she makes decisions with her head and not moved by anything else, but there are two things at this moment that push her to let Jodie help her; the need not to fail those who hired the private venue and her desire to get to know the real Jodie Sinclair.

"I'll call Mike to bring me some clothes and pick us up here to take us to the venue," Katherine says and grabs her phone. Jodie takes her hand.

"Breakfast first, it'll be quick, we can't leave on empty stomachs."

Katherine smiles and can't help feeling a flutter in her chest that scares and delights her in equal measure.

"Damn," Katherine mutters ten minutes later, standing under a shower whose water won't stay warm and alternates between freezing and scalding streams.

"Are you okay?" Jodie's muffled voice comes from outside.

"Yes," Katherine lies and finishes rinsing her face to get out of there.

"Here, Mike's outside waiting," says Jodie, handing her a suit and a medium-sized bag.

"He was quick," Katherine responds as she starts to dress.

"Well, you took your time," Jodie concludes after devouring her with her eyes.

The two women hurry, and when they're ready, they leave the house to find the bodyguard right at the door. They get into the car, and Katherine immerses herself in several phone conversations that occupy the entire journey to the private venue. Jodie hasn't been able to ask her much more, and now nerves are eating her alive. She couldn't help telling Katherine she'd handle the event's food, but now she fears it might be too much and she'll fail the woman who drives her crazy.



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When they arrive at the place, Katherine is still on the phone and doesn't hang up until they enter the venue, decorated in a discrete but elegant manner. When they pass to the kitchen area, a boy dressed in white with long hair tied in a ponytail organizes some vegetables on the table with a concentrated expression, but as soon as he hears the click of Katherine's heels, he raises his head and observes the two women.

"Hi, I'm Donald," the young man says, approaching them and extending a hand to greet Katherine. "You must be Mrs. Taylor."

"And this is Jodie Sinclair," Katherine responds after shaking Donald's hand.

"If you tell me what you had planned, Donald, we'll get started with the food right away. By my calculations," Jodie looks at her watch, "we only have four hours to get the service out."

Katherine has to disguise her smile of genuine pleasure. She had noticed some nervousness in Jodie, but it has completely disappeared to let in this woman who she now knows is a force to be reckoned with.

"I'll be back at lunchtime," she whispers, and the blonde leaves because she needs to go to the Magnolis to check on the final touches that remain.

Time flies for Jodie, she feels in her element, comfortable giving orders in the kitchen and head-deep in cooking. Donald has served as her right hand, and between the two of them, they've managed to finish cooking the menu that consisted of various appetizers and a main course. Fortunately, the service was for a small group because otherwise, it would have been impossible for the two people to handle it. A group of

waiters comes in and out of the kitchen with plates for the diners until they're only waiting for the present guests to finish their desserts and finally clear everything.

"Chef, they're asking for you in the vault," a waitress tells Jodie, and seeing her confused face, the girl hurries to explain. "It's an office back there."

Jodie nods and thanks her. She dries her hands with a cloth and walks nervously to the place, uncertain of what she'll find. As soon as she knocks twice on the door and enters, her eyes light up; Katherine Taylor is seated and in front of her are two empty plates and a wine glass.

"Come here," the Mallois owner asks, and Jodie obeys.

"I didn't know you'd arrived."

"A while ago, but you were finishing up some plates and I didn't want to disturb you," Katherine answers and gestures for Jodie to sit on her lap. "Congratulations, chef, the food was exquisite and from what I've heard, the diners think the same."

Katherine kisses her, so slowly that Jodie feels she might melt on her lap. There's no sexuality in the kiss, there's pride and an affection that seems inexplicable, but it's there and impossible to ignore.

"I'd like us to have the conversation in my penthouse, what do you think?" Katherine asks when the kiss ends and runs her thumb over Jodie's lip to wipe away the traces of saliva she left.

"Yes, but I need to finish the service," Jodie answers, looking into her eyes, "until we're done here I can't leave."

Katherine nods, unable to reproach her anything, she's equally responsible with her

work.

"I'll tell Mike to pick you up when you let me know."

## Chapter 16

"Mind if I sit up front?" Jodie asks Mike as she exits the private room.

He looks at her with surprise at first but immediately nods.

"Not at all, sit wherever you want."

The driver closes the back door and opens the passenger's side. Jodie can't get used to this gesture, but no matter how many times she asks him not to do it, Mike is so accustomed that he does it out of habit.

Jodie's knee starts bouncing as soon as the vehicle moves, jerking frantically while she twists her purse between her fingers, searching for a calmness she can't find. While she was in the kitchen, she didn't have time to think, she escaped like she hadn't in a long time, but now that the moment has come to have that conversation with Katherine that today's circumstances have kept postponing, she's a bundle of nerves.

"Is something wrong?" Mike decides to ask, stressed by all the compulsive movement.

Jodie stops her knee and hands to look at him for a long moment.

"Will this stay between us?" she asks, and Mike can't help but let out an amused laugh.

"If you mean Katherine, I won't tell her, unless you confess you're planning to kill her; in that case, I'll open the door and throw you out of the moving car."

The joke makes Jodie laugh and manages to relax her enough to feel comfortable explaining to her boss's right-hand man and now lover the reason for her nervousness.

"Let's say I'm about to have a very important conversation with her, and I'm very nervous because I don't know how it's going to go."

Mike glances at her sideways while nodding. Serious.

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"I don't know what it's about and you don't have to tell me, but I wouldn't worry, it'll be fine," he assures with such conviction that Jodie wishes she could believe him.

"Why are you so sure?"

"I don't know, but Katherine is one of the best people I know, I find it hard to imagine anything going wrong when you're around her."

Jodie smiles and remains hypnotized for a few seconds.

"Can I ask how long you've known her?" the cleaner asks with interest.

"Since adolescence, she was the only friend I had in that fancy school."

Jodie raises her eyebrows, not understanding, and Mike smiles.

"I got into an elite school on a sports scholarship, the same one Katherine attended. As you can imagine, a neighborhood kid like me stuck out completely in a place like that, but not to her. The first day I bumped into her in a hallway and almost knocked her down. One of her friends wanted to confront me, suggesting I did it on purpose and encouraging others to pick a fight with me," Mike smiles at the memory. "You should have seen her, she pushed him so hard that he was the one who ended up on the floor. I don't remember the words she said because I was stunned seeing her defending me, and after that, we just became very good friends and still are today."

"Wow," Jodie says, surprised.

Mike looks at her for just a moment and winks, and somehow, she senses that he knows exactly what the conversation will be about and that what he's trying to make clear is that if she's worried about the class difference between her and Katherine, she can relax.

"Good luck," Mike tells her when Jodie gets out of the car.

She returns a sincere smile before closing the door and enters the Mallois hotel trying to contain her nerves.

She decides not to use her card when she reaches the penthouse door, she's not working and it seems like an invasion of Katherine's privacy who, when she opens the door, dressed again in comfortable and casual clothes, makes Jodie tremble from head to toe. The two women stand face to face for a few seconds, looking at each other without knowing how they should greet each other, until Katherine takes control of the situation and stretches out an arm to take Jodie's hand, pull her in and press her against her body.

"I really dislike awkward situations," she says before kissing her, while pushing the door to close it.

"Me too," Jodie responds when they break the kiss.

"Great, then let's avoid them once and for all, okay?" she says and points to the terrace. "I imagine you're tired and hungry. I had dinner sent up here, we can talk while we eat."

Jodie's stomach suddenly growls, but when she follows Katherine to the terrace and finds the table with a couple of candles and a bottle of champagne that clearly indicate that the owner intends for the evening to extend until it ends in her bed, something clicks in Jodie's head and she blurts out what she's thinking without having

time to filter it.

"Is something wrong?" Katherine asks, turning to Jodie when she stops abruptly.

"I've been in love with you for two years," she fires point-blank and Katherine's blue eyes intensify when she hears her.

Jodie's heart pounds like a hammer against her chest, but she's already said it and doesn't plan to take it back because she's launched.

"I'm telling you because if what you expect from us is something like what you have with Annie, it's better if we forget what happened and I go home before this becomes more awkward, because I don't want that, Katherine."

Katherine is speechless, so impacted by what she's just heard that, despite being a businesswoman used to handling all kinds of situations, in this one she's gone blank.

Jodie keeps looking at her feeling her ears buzzing louder and louder, after a confession like this, there are only two possible answers Katherine can give her, and given her silence, Jodie is clear about her decision and suddenly feels something like a stone falling on her head and sinking her into the ground until she disappears.

"I figured as much," she says, pressing her lips together. "See you tomorrow."

Jodie turns around ready to leave, but before taking a step, Katherine grabs her arm and stops her.

"Wait..."

Jodie turns and finds the Mallois owner pinching the bridge of her nose for a moment.

"Don't go, Jodie," she asks after sighing deeply. "I guess I didn't react the way you would have liked, but I wasn't expecting such a confession. Give me a break, okay? Stay and have dinner with me, let's relax and when we're both calmer, we'll talk about this, what do you say?"

Katherine's fingers intertwine with Jodie's in a casual, involuntary gesture. And Jodie nods.

Dinner proceeds with a tranquility that neither would have expected after the tense moment they just experienced. Katherine has asked her to talk about her day as a cook and Jodie feels in another world doing so, one she hasn't returned to in a long time and that makes her eyesshine in a way that hypnotizes Katherine even more. She talks about everything she's done and not just that, she also gives some advice on what could have been improved in that kitchen to be more efficient, plus a ton of menu ideas for events of that type.



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"I know it hurts you to talk about your family and I'd be lying if I said I haven't asked around and heard some rumors about why you closed the restaurant, but I'd like you to tell me yourself, Jodie," Katherine says, fixing that blue gaze on her that the cleaner is sure she could get lost in forever.

And Jodie tells her, absorbed, as if the story wasn't about her and had happened to someone else. And Katherine listens, attentive, observing every movement of her lover, every change of expression on her face and especially that way of losing shine in her gaze when she talks about the subject.

"I'm sorry all that happened to you, Jodie, especially to you," Katherine says.

Jodie makes a grimace trying to smile, but doesn't succeed.

"You know what's the worst part of it all?" Jodie asks. Katherine shakes her head. "That sometimes I feel like a horrible person because I have the feeling that what I miss most from that time is being able to cook every day for indecent amounts of people, not my brother or my father, but the kitchen, and I don't know what that makes me."

"Human, I suppose," says Katherine, who gets up and drags her chair to sit next to her. "You're passionate about cooking, it helps you escape and now you can't do it. It's normal that that's what you need most, and it doesn't mean you love your father or brother any less, it's just that the kitchen was more fun than them."

Katherine winks at her and the flutter Jodie feels in her chest makes everything around her stop, cutting off her breath. The cleaner leans forward softly and seeks the

hotel owner's lips. The kiss is soft and short, but it's loaded with something that makes Katherine shiver, something intense that has warmed her heart and not her groin as usually happens, and she doesn't want to stop feeling that.

"Let's go inside, it's cold out here," she suggests and stands up, extending a hand to Jodie.

She invites her to sit on the couch after closing the terrace door and sits next to her after preparing two glasses of white wine.

"I like you a lot, Jodie," Katherine fires, who has no intention of beating around the bush. "From the beginning there was something about you that caught my attention and I had trouble identifying what it was, but now I'm very clear about it and if you agree, I want to try it."

Jodie is perplexed, pinching her leg to make sure she's not dreaming.

"I'm not going to swear eternal love because I'm more about living in the present, but what I feel for you keeps growing and I'm not going to ignore it. I know you said you've been in love with me for two years," Katherine pauses, still processing that information, "but that doesn't give you an advantage because you don't really know me, and I don't know you either, so if you'd like, we can start there, going slow to get to know each other better."

"And Annie?" Jodie asks before giving an answer.

Katherine tilts one of those smiles that melt hearts.

"What about her?" she decides to tease a bit.

"You know what I mean, if you want us to try something, it won't be while you and

she, you know..."

Jodie didn't want to be crude and Katherine won't be either, although she'd like to because sometimes using that kind of language seems like a seduction game to her.

"Forget about Annie, from now on it's just you and me," declares the Mallois owner. "Let's get to know each other and see where this thing we feel leads us. Deal?"

"Deal," Jodie accepts, trying not to show her euphoria. "I suppose I should leave now, it's late," she says looking at her watch.

Katherine raises an eyebrow.

"Wouldn't you prefer to stay here tonight?" she asks in a seductive tone that Jodie can't resist.

The cleaner stands up and stops in front of Katherine, looking at her fixedly until, as her only response, she sits on top of her, straddling her.

## Chapter 17

This time, Katherine Taylor is the one who feels a tingling in her legs when she wakes up. The night before, they spent several hours on the couch doing everything, and although Jodie still controls the rhythm, what happened in that penthouse could be classified as great sex. The housekeeper took control this time, and Katherine experiences uncontrollable spasms throughout her body just remembering it. The businesswoman fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow, and now she allows herself a few minutes with her eyes closed to remember how Jodie slept beside her with a peaceful expression and her hair spread across the pillow. A movement on the mattress makes Katherine turn her head to find her lover's naked back as she sits up, seemingly ready to leave the bed, but she doesn't allow it and, in a quick movement,

hugs her tightly and pulls her close.

"Where do you think you're going?" asks the Mallois Hotel owner, kissing her face and neck.

Jodie laughs, and that melody drives Katherine wild.

"I have a shift at the hotel," the housekeeper manages to say while enjoying her lover's kisses.

"Better stay here with me," Katherine whispers and moves to straddle Jodie's body, "and let's enjoy the morning together."

The blonde plunges her wet tongue into Jodie's mouth, and for a few seconds, they tangle in a frenzied kiss, accompanied by their nervous hands. Jodie Sinclair feels like never before, and she still finds it hard to believe that this woman she's been in love with for years is there beside her, asking her to stay in bed. The night before, she decided to show her how much she liked her and especially the built-up desire she had to devour her completely, and apparently it worked, because Katherine Taylor moans—and a lot—when something drives her crazy.

"I have to go to work and you know it," Jodie replies, breathless and with a trembling voice.

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"I'm the hotel owner and I'm giving you the day off," Katherine responds and leans in to bite her lover's lips.

Jodie feels Katherine's teeth exert a paralyzing pressure on her lower lip, and she can barely control a howl of pleasure rising from her throat. She manages to pull away, and Katherine frowns at her.

"No way, Katherine Taylor. It's my job and I intend to do it. Now, let me get up, I don't want to be late," the housekeeper settles the matter, and the businesswoman melts—one of the things she likes most is the girl's determination.

The Mallois Hotel owner doesn't say anything, but before moving away, she looks at Jodie with affection, caresses her face, and gives her a chaste but meaningful kiss that makes the housekeeper close her eyes to savor the sensation.

Half an hour later, Jodie Sinclair enters the first room she needs to clean. The seventh floor of the Mallois Hotel is one of the largest, and the girl has more than ten rooms on her work sheet that not only require changing sheets and towels but also floor and bathroom disinfection. A noise startles her suddenly, and when she turns around, she finds Marjorie García's gaze fixed on her.

"Take care of rooms twenty-one and twenty-four as well," Marjorie says while running her fingers over a table checking if it's clean.

Jodie fills her lungs with air.

"I have ten rooms on this floor, and if I have to clean two more, I'll need one of my

colleagues to..."

"You're alone, I'm not giving you anyone else to finish a job that one person can do," Marjorie spits out, pacing around the room in military mode. "And you better hurry with this one, the guests requested early check-in."

Without saying anything else, the head of housekeeping leaves the room, leaving Jodie wanting to grab her by the hair and drag her across the floor. Since the housekeeper started at the hotel, Marjorie García has always been harder on her than on the others. At first, she endured everything and followed orders without complaint, but as time passes, she tolerates her less and less and fears that at some point she won't be able to control herself and will get into a pointless argument that could cost her job.

"I thought you weren't eating here today," Sarah says, about to put a piece of steak in her mouth.

"I just finished a few minutes ago, I had to clean twelve of the large rooms, I'm exhausted," Jodie replies, sitting down and opening a sandwich she bought at the cafeteria.

"What a bitch," Sarah blurts out, raising her voice more than she intended, referring to Marjorie.

"She knows Katherine and I are together and..."

"What?" Sarah reacts, "what do you mean you're together? And you just drop it like that, so casually."

Jodie laughs; no matter how many times she repeats it, she can hardly believe she's dating Katherine Taylor. She decides to tell her everything that's happened in the last

few days, and her friend keeps her mouth open throughout the story until she understands that Marjorie García is having some kind of fit because the hotel owner and the housekeeper seem to be having an affair.

"I'm really happy for you, Jodie, truly. You've suffered a lot and you deserve a break," Sarah replies and takes her friend's hand affectionately. "As for Marjorie, ignore her. You know how she is, and now that she's finding out about you two, she's having a tantrum that won't last long. She's not stupid and knows it's not in her best interest to make an enemy of the boss or mess with her girlfriend."

"We're not girlfriends," Jodie responds, although she'd love it if they were, she can't lie.

"You know what I mean," Sarah tells her. "Try to be patient, ignore her, and you'll see she'll soon forget about you."

The two housekeepers say goodbye after finishing lunch, and Jodie heads up to the penthouse to start her afternoon shift. As the elevator goes up, the girl feels exultant, and unlike most times when she prayed for Katherine not to be in her home, this time she does so hoping to find her there and be able to see her.

When Jodie takes out her card and accesses the penthouse, Katherine's gaze locks onto her, making the housekeeper stop in her tracks to avoid stumbling. She hopes this sensation isn't eternal because if it is, she won't live long—her body won't handle it.

"Hello, beautiful girl," Katherine greets her, rising from that war-zone desk she has in the penthouse.

"Hi," Jodie smiles and latches onto her lips as soon as she's in front of her.

"How was your morning?" asks the businesswoman as soon as they break the kiss and walk to the kitchen.

Jodie hesitates, wanting to tell her the truth but unsure if they're at that stage yet. Besides, Katherine is still her boss.

"Good, and yours?" she decides to answer briefly.

Katherine knows her well enough to notice something isn't right.

"Did something happen?" the blonde asks.

"No, nothing," Jodie says without looking at her while opening the dishwasher to put in the dirty plates, but also to avoid her lover's inquisitive gaze.

Katherine knows Jodie isn't telling the truth. Something in her body screams that she's hiding something. She takes a plate from her hand and turns her around.



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"Look at me," Katherine demands, but softens her expression. "Tell me if something happened, please."

Jodie can't resist that gesture. She runs her hand over her neck before speaking.

"I had a somewhat unpleasant encounter with Marjorie, nothing to worry about," Jodie clarifies as soon as she notices Katherine's change in expression. "She's still being herself, and today I handled almost all the rooms on the seventh floor alone."

Katherine raises her eyebrows.

"The seventh floor? But those rooms are immense, the largest in the hotel," she inquires with a harsh tone of voice.

"I know, maybe there were some absences today," she tries to defuse the tension. Now Jodie isn't so sure telling Katherine what happened was the right thing.

"We have enough staff to cover absences if we have them, I can tell you from memory the number of employees we have contracted by service, and I assure you it's not necessary for one person to handle so many rooms."

Katherine's brain is boiling, and she again has that feeling of loss of control because in another situation, she would talk to her director, Lamir Kumar, to supervisewhat happened and would handle it through disciplinary action if necessary, but right now, the Mallois owner wants to leave her penthouse and personally remove Marjorie García from her hotel.

Jodie observes how the blue of Katherine's eyes turns opaque and an angry energy floats around her body.

"Don't worry, it was nothing," Jodie says, pressing against her boss and lover's body while holding her face in her hands.

Katherine loses herself in that momentary caress but reacts quickly.

"I'll go talk to her," the middle Taylor decides, "she can't..."

Jodie raises her hand to let her speak.

"This is something I have to resolve myself, Katherine. If I see it's getting out of control, I'll file a complaint with management myself," she says firmly.

Katherine is about to tell her that sleeping with the boss has its benefits, but fortunately, her phone interrupts that radical thought, and the businesswoman answers the call.

"Yes, we'll be down in five minutes," Katherine tells her caller. "Come on, we need to go to the Magnolis," she asks Jodie, "Mike is waiting downstairs, we're meeting with the construction manager."

Jodie finishes loading the remaining glasses into the dishwasher, starts it, and after changing, follows her boss to the elevator. Katherine, with her powerful bearing, crosses her hotel, attracting all eyes as usual, but now, being accompanied by another woman as strong as her makes the people around them unable to stop staring.

After traveling several miles, they arrive at the Magnolis Hotel and meet with Joshua Stanley, the renovation manager who has finally finished.

"Mrs. Taylor, welcome," the man says politely. "Your team has supervised every corner of the hotel and given their approval. We just need yours to consider my work complete."

The two women take their time and tour each floor of the new hotel. Almost two hours later, they meet again with Joshua, who is now with Mike, in the lobby.

"Thank you very much, Joshua," Katherine extends her hand to shake the man's, "although you took longer than expected, the result is what I was hoping for."

Joshua smiles with satisfaction; it's no secret that Katherine Taylor is a very demanding woman.

"Jodie, I need you to confirm with the cleaning team that they can start tomorrow and stick to the work sheet you sent them," Katherine requests, and Jodie already has the phone to her ear relaying her boss's order.

They leave the new hotel and Katherine, although happy, rarely celebrates these things, only at the inauguration or appropriate event; that's why she's surprised by Jodie's reaction when they reach the car.

"Congratulations, honey," she says sweetly and grabs her by the waist, "the hotel looks spectacular, it'll be the second best in New York."

Jodie kisses her tenderly and hugs her tighter. Katherine feels dizzy; she feels like she's on cloud nine.

"I can't take you out to lunch, but we can go to your penthouse and I'll cook whatever you want," Jodie says smiling, but sad she can't take her girl to a restaurant as she deserves.

Katherine's heart is beating so fast she feels her chest might burst open at any moment. She's dated dozens of women throughout her life, but none has filled her soul as much as Jodie does in the short time they've known each other.

"You and I are going to dinner wherever you want," Katherine says with darkened eyes. "I don't want you to cook tonight, but as soon as we get back to the penthouse, you'll be my dessert."

## Chapter 18

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When Jodie opens her eyes that morning, the first thing she sees is Katherine's figure standing in front of the closet. She's facing away, and Jodie catches a glimpse of her bare skin before she slips on her shirt. She shivers and smiles, still adjusting to these new feelings.

"Did I wake you?" Katherine asks as she turns around.

Jodie shakes her head from side to side and smiles, then tries to stretch but feels every muscle in her body ache, transforming her expression into a grimace that makes Katherine smile.

"You're out of practice. Maybe we should make this a nightly routine so you can get used to it sooner," she says while finishing getting dressed, with that smile that always throws Jodie off balance.

"You'll use any excuse," Jodie quips, and when she tries to get up, she lets herself fall back as if something heavy had dropped on top of her.

Katherine can't help but let out a sudden, hearty laugh that sounds heavenly to Jodie.

"What are you doing today?" Katherine asks, sitting on the bed next to Jodie before giving her a soft kiss on the lips.

Jodie has the day off and had planned to do countless things she'd been putting off, but she feels exhausted. She sighs and takes a moment to study Katherine's features. Jodie feels a deep sense of peace when she's with her, a sensation she can't quite place, but it only happens when Katherine is near.

"I wanted to do many things, but I'm too tired. I think I'll have breakfast with you and, if you don't mind, I'll take advantage of your hospitality and stay here a bit longer after you leave. When my legs can hold me up again," she exaggerates dramatically, making Katherine laugh, "I'll go home. I need to do a deep clean and check my mailbox - I'm sure there's some unpaid bill waiting for me," she adds, rolling her eyes.

"You can stay here as long as you want. How about I make you breakfast?" Katherine asks.

Jodie raises her eyebrows, and Katherine frowns.

"What? You don't think I can make you eggs and bacon?" she asks, offended.

"Of course," Jodie mocks, "but you look so stunning in that suit that I don't want you to get it dirty. Besides, eggs and bacon are too plain, let me make something special."

Jodie gets up, wearing just her underwear, and Katherine twists the sheets between her fingers to calm her sudden urge.

The chef puts on a sweatshirt she finds in Katherine's closet and walks barefoot to the kitchen. Katherine wants to make some calls while she prepares breakfast, but those bare legs and messy hair seem like a provocation that won't let her concentrate.

"Go put some clothes on," she orders suddenly, and Jodie turns around, leaving the refrigerator door open.

"What did you say?"

"Put some clothes on or I swear I'll take off what little you're wearing and take you right here on the marble," Katherine says, her blue eyes so darkened that they appear

black to Jodie.

Jodie's heart races, leaving her frozen in place. She narrows her eyes, and her lips part slowly before moistening them with her tongue as she decides she won't get dressed.

"Then you'll have to follow through," she says, and Katherine wastes no time getting to her, placing her hands on her backside and lifting her until Jodie sits on the marble counter.

This time, Katherine doesn't waste time, and Jodie doesn't want her to. She moves Jodie's underwear aside and enters her without difficulty, because Jodie is ready, and Katherine's fingers move inside her as if they were part of her. Jodie gasps before claiming Katherine's mouth, which receives her eagerly while moving rhythmically and steadily inside her, causing such an explosion of pleasure that Jodie collapses against her in an embrace and needs more than three minutes to recover.

"Much better," Katherine concludes satisfied when Jodie pulls back and looks into her eyes.

The housekeeper feels drained and wonders how she'll manage to make breakfast without falling over, but the sound of her phone interrupts her thoughts, and she has no choice but to get down from the counter to answer the call. Katherine takes the opportunity to wash her hands while Jodie answers, but she hurries over when she sees how her lover's expression changes and the color drains from her face.

"What do you mean she fell? Wasn't anyone with her?" she asks anxiously.

Katherine approaches and, although she can't hear what the person on the other end is saying, she can tell from Jodie's responses that her mother has had some kind of incident at the nursing home. When she finally hangs up, the Mallois owner has to take the phone from her hand because Jodie is shaking.

"What's wrong, honey? Is your mother okay?"

"Yes, I think so," she says in such a low voice that Katherine almost has to read her lips. "She fell in the shower and they had to take her to the emergency room because she hit her head. They gave her four stitches and now she's back at the facility," she explains with a distant look. "I need to go see her, and also talk to those incompetents to find out why there wasn't anyone with her while she was showering."

Jodie starts moving so erratically that Katherine stops her.

"I'll go with you."

"You can't, you have things to do," Jodie says nervously.



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"Things that can wait. You're more important. Take a quick shower and get dressed, I'll tell Mike to get the car ready."

Jodie doesn't argue, not only grateful that Katherine is coming with her but also that she's making the decisions right now, because she's so nervous that if Katherine hadn't reminded her she wasn't dressed, she would have left the penthouse in underwear and a sweatshirt.

An hour later they're walking through the nursing home's door. Jodie greets the staff and, despite being outside visiting hours, they let her see her mother given the circumstances. She doesn't know if it's because of the hit to her head or pure coincidence, but again, her mother recognizes her.

"Are you okay? How did it happen? You must have been terrified," she fires off, crouching in front of her.

Katherine observes from the doorway, not daring to enter, but Amanda's restless eyes fix on her immediately.

"Who is she?" she asks her daughter, and Jodie feels her cheeks suddenly burning.

She doesn't know how to introduce her, and she doesn't want to give too many explanations to avoid creating confusion in that already deteriorated mind, but Katherine saves her from the awkward moment and steps forward.

"I'm Katherine, I'm your daughter's friend," she says and extends her hand in greeting.

Amanda shakes it and smiles kindly before looking at Jodie, who remains frozen.

"This is the first time you've brought a friend," Amanda says, trying to draw Jodie out, who looks at the floor hoping a hole will open and swallow her.

"I'll bring her more often, Mom, though I hope it won't be because you've fallen. You really scared me."

Amanda nods, satisfied because there's something about this Katherine that she likes.

After spending some time in the room, they finally leave and Jodie walks furiously toward reception demanding to speak with the director, who is called immediately.

"Calm down," Katherine asks her in a soft whisper that partially achieves its effect, as Jodie sighs and leans against her while they wait.

"When it's about asking for money, he doesn't take this long to appear," Jodie mutters, making Katherine laugh.

The man appears after a few minutes and they follow him to an office, where he relates what happened.

"Apparently she slipped in the shower, fortunately it wasn't serious. She pressed the alert button and a caregiver came in right away," he explains calmly.

"What I don't understand is why she was showering alone, aren't the caregivers supposed to be there for that? To help them?" Jodie protests, though maintaining her composure.

The man clears his throat visibly uncomfortable before responding.

"What?" Jodie frowns.

"You see, Mrs. Sinclair, you pay a basic fee that only includes lodging, meals, and basic care assistance. The truth is your mother is at a point where, due to her illness, she should be assisted with many other things, like showering, helping her dress, accompanying her when she goes to the garden for walks..."

Jodie opens her mouth but can't say anything.

"You should consider upgrading to the intermediate care level, which is what she needs."

Silence settles in the office like a heavy slab. Jodie can't process what she's hearing, if she already has problems paying the basic fee, how will she pay the intermediate one? Not to mention this is the first she's heard about these different levels, or the shame she feels for not being able to care for her mother as she deserves.

"Thank you for everything, we'll discuss it and make a decision and let you know as soon as possible," Katherine intervenes, taking Jodie by the arm to get her out of the building before she faints.

Once outside, she takes her hand and leads her directly to the car.

"Where are we going?" Jodie asks, feeling like a doll in Katherine's hands.

"To eat at a place I know. You'll like it, it's very quiet," the businesswoman states.

Jodie doesn't protest, she needs these minutes in the car during the journey to think, and especially to process what has happened.

Katherine hasn't lied about the place being quiet, basically because it's a private room

in one of New York's most expensive restaurants, where they're completely alone. For a moment, Jodie feels uncomfortable enjoying these luxuries while her mother is poorly cared for in the only facility she can afford to pay for, but she knows Katherine's intention in bringing her here isn't to show off everything she can afford, but to provide a quiet space for her to calm down, one just for them.

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"We have a foundation," Katherine says, swirling the wine in her glass, "actually, as a business group, we have several," she clarifies at Jodie's puzzled look.

"I see," says the housekeeper without understanding why she's bringing up this topic, Katherine smiles.

"As I was saying," she insists, piercing her with that blue gaze, "we have several foundations, but I want to tell you about one in particular, because it collaborates with various institutions for elderly care, like your mother's."

"I see," Jodie repeats.

"No, honey," Katherine smiles, "I don't think you do. What I'm getting at is that thanks to this, I have many contacts and it would take just one phone call to get a place for your mother in one of the best facilities, not where she is now. Don't misunderstand me, Jodie, I'm not saying they don't do their job and try their best within their possibilities, but your mother could be much better cared for than she is there, and of course, attended to twenty-four hours a day."

Jodie nods and makes a face.

"I appreciate it, but I can't afford it, I don't even know how I'll manage to increase the fee at this one. You'll have to let me work more hours at the hotel."

Katherine twists her expression, annoyed.

"You're not going to work more hours, Jodie, not at the hotel or anywhere else, I

won't allow that."

Jodie tenses, nobody is going to forbid her anything, no matter how much she likes them and makes her sigh.

"I explained myself poorly," Katherine rectifies when she sees her expression change. "I'm just saying that in mentioning this, I didn't mean for you to pay anything, I'll do it, I'll pay for your mother's facility, and before you protest and curse," she says and points at her.

Jodie stays still, deciding whether to yell at her or laugh.

"I know all the financial problems you have and I've never intervened, nor will I unless you ask me to. Don't consider this as something I'm doing as a favor to you, it's something I want you to let me do for myself."

"For yourself? I don't understand."

"My mother died suddenly, Jodie, without me having the chance to do anything for her, to feel like I'd tried everything. I couldn't help her, and I can't do anything about your mother's illness, but I can improve her conditions, let me do that."

Jodie looks at her, thoughtful.

"There are things I don't have, Jodie, like patience, but money isn't a problem. Let me invest it in something important. One phone call, honey, I pick up the phone and tomorrow your mother could be in an apartment-style facility with so many comforts and assistance that you'll want to move in with her, though I won't allow that."

Jodie can't contain her laugh at that comment and nods.

"Alright, make that call."

"That's my girl," Katherine nods, twisting her smile while taking out her phone.

## Chapter 19

Jodie Sinclair groans when she checks her task sheet and notices, with disgust, that she has an impossible workload for a single person once again. This time it's sixteen rooms, and she knows she won't finish her shift at the usual time. Today, Jodie feels irritable; she spent the night at her place and barely slept. She struggled to fall asleep because she missed Katherine Taylor's warm body next to her. This morning, she spilled coffee on herself, and at the station, the subway left right in front of her face. Now she arrives at the hotel and finds such a heavy workload, debating whether to confront Marjorie or skip wasting time and grab her cart to start the room tour. She opts for the latter and in less than ten minutes is changing the first set of sheets.

"Want to have lunch together?" Sarah asks, running into her colleague in one of the hallways.

Jodie shakes her head while grabbing a tower of towels from her cart.

"No time today, I still have half the work left and look at the time," she explains with an angry expression, "I'll be late to the penthouse."

Sarah presses her lips together. She was the first to advise Jodie to be patient, but now she thinks the head of housekeeping is going too far.

"It's time to complain, Jodie," the other cleaner says, standing in front of her. "It's fine that you want to keep your job, but this is too much."

"I know, but..." Jodie runs her hand over her face and sighs. "I don't want it to look

like I'm taking advantage now that I'm dating Katherine."

Sarah frowns and turns her neck to check they're alone.

"Before you started dating Ms. Taylor, Marjorie already had it in for you, but now it seems that fact has increased her annoyance," she says in a low voice. "It's not taking advantage, it's standing up for your rights."



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Jodie says nothing, makes a face with her lips, and Sarah understands the conversation is over, so she says goodbye to her friend and pushes her cart to continue working.

More than an hour late, the cleaner walks through the penthouse door, and Katherine's eyes light up when she sees her, but she's had such a busy morning that the Mallois Hotel owner hadn't realized how late it was.

"Hi," the blonde says while getting up to approach Jodie. "Did something happen?"

Jodie forgets how tired she is when she feels Katherine's soft lips and that hand she's placed on her waist to pull her closer.

"No," the cleaner whispers with her gaze fixed on Katherine's lips. "Sorry I'm late."

The middle Taylor sister smiles because she loves Jodie's expression after kissing her, always mesmerized.

"Can I sit for a few minutes?" asks the cleaner, who needs a break.

Katherine finds this all very strange.

"You don't have to ask, you know that," she says and leads the cleaner straight to the sofa. "But you need to tell me what happened."

Again, Jodie's indecision regarding Marjorie surfaces. Her mind splits in two when she thinks of Katherine as her boss, but also as the woman she shares sheets with. If

the blonde weren't the owner of the hotel where she works, Jodie wouldn't hesitate to tell her girlfriend everything that's happening with the witch she has for a supervisor.

"Honey..." Katherine calls her, and Jodie reacts to that term of endearment.

"I had more work than usual today," she explains, expelling air through her nose. "That's why I'm late, I had to finish everything before coming here."

Katherine remains stone-faced. On the outside, her expression is serious, but inside a hurricane takes over, and this time she decides she won't let it slide.

"I'll talk to her," she concludes and stands up.

Jodie also stands up, nervous, and stops her by taking her hand.

"It only happens occasionally and..."

Katherine raises an eyebrow and interrupts her.

"How many rooms did you clean today?" she asks in an icy voice.

"Sixteen," Jodie answers after thinking for a few seconds.

"Have you eaten?" Katherine questions her again without getting upset, but wanting to tear everything down in her path.

"No."

"Then, do you think it's normal for an employee to do almost double the work they should and not even have time to eat? Besides leaving later than their scheduled hours," Katherine inquires, but continues speaking, "because I don't want that in my

hotel, Jodie. I confess, it pisses me off that she's doing this to you, but if it were another employee, I wouldn't allow it either. This is harassment, and it's not the first thing I've heard about Marjorie, Mike has also received some complaints since he started asking questions about her."

Jodie knows Katherine is right and that if she weren't such a controlled woman, she would have already confronted Marjorie without caring about the consequences, but despite being a tough woman, she has always prioritized keeping this job that pays her so well to handle all her debts and responsibilities.

"I'm aware of what's happening, but I don't want to lose my job, Katherine," Jodie explains and sits back on the sofa. "I'll file a formal complaint with the director, not just for me, but for all of us who put up with her and are afraid to speak up for fear of ending up on the street."

Katherine presses the bridge of her nose so hard that a shock of pain shoots through her face. She can't believe this is happening at the Mallois.

"You've already filed the complaint, Jodie, and I'll talk to her myself," she answers with such firmness that the cleaner says nothing. "I need you to go to the Magnolis with Mike, the cleaning service has been there all morning, and I want you to supervise that everything goes according to what I've asked. But first, tell him to stop somewhere you like so you can eat something."

Jodie nods and gets up to approach Katherine. They connect their gazes and lose themselves for a few seconds in the tranquility they feel when they're together. They kiss slowly, and when Jodie breaks the kiss to leave, Katherine pulls her back, hugs her, gives her another kiss, and now lets her go.

As soon as the cleaner leaves the penthouse, Katherine follows a few minutes later with the goal of finding the head of housekeeping. She breathes calmly while walking

through her hotel's corridors, having turned the matter over in her mind and regretting not having stopped the situation earlier.

"Ms. Taylor," Marjorie says with surprise when she sees Katherine enter her small office and close the door behind her. This isn't normal.

Katherine, with deliberation, sits in a chair across from Marjorie.

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"I wanted to settle some issues with you," the hotel owner says and crosses her leg elegantly.

"Yes, of course. Please tell me how I can be useful," Marjorie responds, meekly.

"That would be interesting, it seems it's been a long time since you have been," Katherine replies, leaving Marjorie open-mouthed. "I've received many complaints about you, and I'm not willing to continue tolerating your attitude."

Something in Marjorie's brain activates, and she understands something is about to happen. Whether by pure instinct or not, she plays her riskiest card, willing to do anything to keep her job.

"If you're referring to that girl... Your friend," her voice achieves an ironic tone, "it's clear she's taking advantage of her position, and as you've repeated on several occasions, we're all equal here. She shouldn't have privileges."

Katherine raises her eyebrows to the sky. She can't believe this woman's nerve.

"Jodie Sinclair is the name of that girl you're referring to. It's not that she can't have privileges, it's that you've had your foot on her neck since she arrived at this hotel, and besides her, you also pick on other employees without any reason. That's not the hotel's policy, and since you insist on not following it, you're no longer welcome here."

Marjorie's heart races because her boss is clearly firing her with subtle words, but she won't accept this; what she knows carries weight, or so she thinks.

"And where's that policy and ethics when the hotel owner herself sleeps with one of her employees?" the woman shoots back.

Katherine smiles widely and moves dangerously close to Marjorie. The desk separates them, but that doesn't prevent Jodie Sinclair's supervisor from feeling afraid.

"It's low of you to point that out, but since I assumed you would, I'll clarify it for you. Who I fuck is my problem, not yours," Katherine throws out with crude words and shrugs. "The only thing that should worry you is finding a place that will give you work starting today."

Marjorie turns pale, knowing that at her age it's difficult to get a stable position, especially like the one she had at the Mallois Hotel, where the schedule and pay were excellent, and her position gave her certain power.

"I've been letting many things slide for a while because, honestly, I have no complaints about the service you lead, but you work with people, Marjorie, and in my hotel, there's something called respect and humanity. It's not because you harass Jodie, it's because it seems you've also made it your goal to overwork your staff so much that the girls end up so exhausted they prefer not to continue working here."

"That's not true," Marjorie stands from her chair.

Katherine raises her hand to let her speak.

"It is, and you know it. In the last six months, more cleaners have left than in all the time the hotel has been open. My people have investigated and confirmed they left because of you," Katherine half-lies. Mike has gathered some information, but it was so vague that she wanted to give Marjorie a chance until she insisted on messing with Jodie. "I wish you luck, but I want you out of my hotel. Lamir Kumar will handle

your severance and everything related to your dismissal."

Marjorie stands petrified as she watches Katherine Taylor rise from the chair and leave what until today is her office. The Mallois Hotel owner knows she's done the right thing; no one mistreats her staff in her hotel, but above all, she'll never allow anyone to hurt the girl she's falling in love with.

## Chapter 20

One week later

"I need to fix that damn heating," Jodie grumbles when Katherine, who has just gotten up, zips up the hoodie Jodie lent her all the way to her neck before burying her hands in the pockets.

The Mallois owner moves dangerously close and kisses her neck. They had dinner near Jodie's house last night and stayed over, and while they didn't notice the low temperature between the sheets, the cold hits hard when they get up.

"I can help you with that," Katherine purrs.

"No," Jodie roars like a lioness, and Katherine steps back smiling, raising her hands in surrender. "You're doing enough for my mother."

"We've already discussed this, Jodie."

"I said no," she insists, pointing a threatening finger at her.

Katherine nods and heads to the kitchen to make coffee. She had already made it clear in another conversation that she could help if asked, and she won't pressure her.

"What are you doing today? Do you need me for anything this morning?" Jodie asks, following her to prepare breakfast.

"Not this morning. All I have pending is paperwork and then a meeting with Annie at the bank," Katherine says.

A sudden silence falls over the kitchen. They haven't mentioned Annie since they started dating, this is the first time, and Katherine watches Jodie's reaction from the corner of her eye.

"She's not my favorite person, you know that," Jodie suddenly clarifies, "but I trust you, so you can tell me anything about her and mention her whenever you need to."



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"Alright," Katherine smiles, leaning against the marble counter with a casual air while eating a cookie.

Jodie can't find her more sexy.

"Stop eating, you'll leave half your breakfast later," she says, snatching the package from her hands.

Katherine wants to tear her clothes off, but she contains herself.

"I do need you this afternoon," she says when she finishes chewing. "Yesterday I asked Lamir Kumar to send me the names of the hotel cleaners he thinks would be suitable for Marjorie's position."

Jodie's eyebrows shoot up.

"I thought you were going to hire someone from outside the hotel."

"That was my intention. But a week has passed and according to Lamir, we're not getting good profiles, and it occurred to me that I could look within the hotel to fill the position, after all, you all know better than anyone what needs to be done."

Jodie nods.

"And what do you need from me?"

"Your opinion. You know all the staff, I don't want to rely solely on Lamir's opinion,

and let's be honest, while the man is efficient as a director, I think he lacks judgment with personnel. Otherwise, he would have dealt with Marjorie long ago."

Hours later, Jodie goes down to reception to deliver a couple of items she found in one of the rooms she cleaned when something catches her attention near the elevators. Her eyes immediately drift while a silent alarm activates inside her body without knowing why, until she notices the person waiting in front of one of the elevators: Annie Cohen.

A strange heat begins to flood Jodie, turning into sudden fury. She knows Katherine hasn't left yet because she can see Mike in the hotel lobby, talking distractedly with one of the bellboys. With her pulse racing and a fixed gaze, she watches as Annie enters the elevator and stands still like a statue when the doors close. Then her gaze rises to the numbers right above, and although she's sure she knows which floor she's heading to, she doesn't blink once until she confirms that, indeed, the elevator stops on the top floor, right where Katherine's penthouse is.

Irritated, she climbs the stairs to the third floor, where she knows Sarah is, and not even the physical effort of having climbed in record time manages to diminish her discomfort.

"What are you doing here?" Sarah asks when she notices her colleague's presence.

"Annie is in Katherine's penthouse, she just went in," Jodie pants.

Sarah makes a face while placing Annie in her memory.

"The woman Mrs. Taylor was sleeping with?" she asks, squinting.

"That's the one."

Sarah scratches the tip of her nose.

"But she told you she has nothing with her anymore, you should give her the benefit of the doubt," Sarah opines.

"She also told me she was having a meeting with her at the bank today, not in the penthouse," Jodie counters.

"Aaah," Sarah replies, not knowing what to say.

"I want you to help me keep track of her, I can't be watching all the time and I want to know how long she spends in the penthouse," Jodie asks her.

"Count me in," Sarah joins the mission, raising the disinfectant bottle she has in her hand.

Katherine is about to open her penthouse door to meet Mike in the lobby when the doorbell nearly bursts her eardrum. Despite being inside her home, she instinctively clutches her purse tightly because of the fright, and when it passes, she opens the door.

"Annie," she says surprised, "I thought we were meeting at the bank."

The look of confusion in Katherine's expression causes a small amused laugh from Annie, who approaches and kisses her cheek before passing by her and entering the penthouse.

"Yes, we agreed on that, but since lately we always meet there and haven't had time to talk about anything but business, I thought we could have it here and relax a bit," she says, and pulls out a wine bottle from a bag while showing a seductive smile that Katherine knows very well.

With the bottle in hand and before the Mallois owner can open her mouth, Annie takes two steps toward her and corners her against the wall while her free hand slides down her waist.

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Used to this thing they've done so many times, for a fleeting instant, Katherine feels tempted to let it continue, but sanity immediately returns to her and reminds her that these aren't the lips she wants to feel, nor are these the hands from which she desires caresses despite always having enjoyed sex with Annie Cohen very much.

"Wait, Annie," she says placing her open hand on her chest while turning her face just in time to avoid the kiss the banker was about to give her.

Annie stops dead in her tracks, confused, and takes a step back to allow Katherine to move away from her. She watches her walk while processing what she's heard, trying to guess if she's serious or joking.

Katherine walks in the middle of that awkward silence to the cabinet where she keeps the wine glasses, while thinking about the best way to explain the new situation to Annie, but what comes out is a rather clumsy and dry explanation.

"We can't keep sleeping together."

Annie blinks and lets a few seconds pass.

"Were you serious?" asks the banker, still dumbfounded.

Katherine walks past and leaves the two glasses on the table in front of the sofa.

"Yes, Annie, I'm serious."

"Don't tell me you've got a crush on that maid who's been hanging around here

lately," Annie blurts out with a rather contemptuous tone that greatly bothers Katherine, "because she's cute, Katherine, I won't argue with that, but that woman is..."

"Stop, Annie," Katherine cuts her off so sharply that Annie reaches for her glass and drinks the contents in one gulp, "be very careful with what you're going to say because this is serious."

Annie puts down her empty glass and takes Katherine's, drinks it too while the Mallois owner watches her with some perplexity.

"Sorry, I need to drink to digest this," Annie says.

"Do I need to throw you out of my house?" Katherine asks, not knowing how to take the comment.

Annie shakes her head so hard that the businesswoman fears the banker's perfect bun might come undone.

"No, I'm sorry, I just didn't expect it. We're talking about you and a cleaner, Katherine, understand that it's hard for me," she asks and sits down.

Katherine refills both glasses.

"I understand, as long as you speak about her with respect. Sometimes I feel like you forget where you come from."

Annie's greenish gaze intensifies so much when she raises it to focus on the woman who has been her lover for months that Katherine has the sensation of seeing a green meadow through her.

"I assure you I don't forget, Katherine, I'm very clear about my origins."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that, it was wrong," the hotel owner apologizes.

"No, you should have because you're right," Annie says, surprising Katherine, "it's been so hard for me to enter this world where appearances, power, and money are everything, that sometimes I behave like a tyrant. As if I had more rights than the rest of mortals just for having achieved everything I have coming from such a dysfunctional and poor family that no one gave a dime for me."

Annie reaches for another glass, but Katherine crouches in front of her and stops her when she sees her intention is to empty it in another gulp.

"Drink slowly, this one, enjoy it with me, as friends," she asks putting a hand on her knee.

Annie draws a frustrated grimace that makes Katherine smile, but nods.

"I must admit it sucks that I can't fuck you anymore, but if you like that woman and it's serious, I'm happy for you, really," she finally says.

"I know, thank you."

"What's her name?" she asks when Katherine takes a seat beside her, "it's so I can stop calling her the maid," she jokes raising her glass.

"Jodie, her name is Jodie," Katherine smiles toasting with her friend.

Two hours later and somewhat impaired by the wine, Annie leaves Katherine's penthouse after finishing the meeting. Jodie isn't even spying on her at that moment, but chance makes them cross paths on the main floor. They see each other from afar

and when their gazes connect and Annie notices that wariness in who she now knows is named Jodie, she winks at her with a touch of mischief she can't help and continues walking toward the exit.



### Chapter 21

Jodie can't believe the banker's audacity, and a swarm of thoughts starts buzzing in her head, overwhelming her. Annie Cohen is, without doubt, one of the most striking women Jodie has ever seen, and not because of her looks, but because of the power she radiates. She doesn't need to say a word; her mere existence is enough to have the world at her feet. She's that kind of woman.

"Where are you going?" Sarah asks when Jodie rushes past her.

The cleaner stops dead in her tracks, believing that if she doesn't vomit out what she's thinking, she'll end up in jail this afternoon.

"Annie just left the hotel, and from the gesture she made... I don't know what to think," Jodie laments. "I think they slept together."

Sarah shifts uncomfortably because she thinks it's very possible, considering powerful people believe they have the right to do whatever they want without thinking about the consequences, but she prefers not to voice what crosses her mind.

"Calm down, don't let your anger get the best of you," Sarah advises, looking into her eyes. "Talk to Mrs. Taylor before doing anything."

Jodie wants these dark thoughts to leave her mind, but she struggles to control what's hammering in her brain. She nods mechanically, touches Sarah's shoulder affectionately, and moves forward at a slower pace. As soon as she gets in the elevator and reaches the top floor of the Mallois hotel, she runs as if a forty-pound

rabid dog were chasing her. She pulls out the magnetic card and enters the penthouse, trying to fake a calmness she doesn't feel.

Katherine, who's focused on reviewing some documents at her desk, looks up, removes her glasses, and flashes a smile that could melt Mount Rainier in seconds.

"Hi," says the Mallois hotel owner, staying in her spot while admiring Jodie. She couldn't like the girl more.

"How are you?" the cleaner asks casually, but it's obvious from miles away that something's wrong. Nerves are very hard to hide.

"Did something happen?" Katherine asks and quickly moves toward her girl, fearing something might have happened to her mother.

Jodie looks at her, and that fire that was burning in her chest has now moved down a few inches to settle in her stomach. Katherine looks beautiful in an immaculate white suit, but what Jodie likes most is that she's not in a robe or has wet hair as she thought she'd find her.

"No, no, everything's perfect," a five-year-old would lie better.

Katherine narrows her eyes and fixes them on Jodie. She's not willing to give in; she knows something's up. The cleaner dodges the blue eyes as best she can, but even if she wanted to keep her sanity, it's quite difficult.

"How was the meeting with Annie?" Jodie asks, approaching the subject.

Katherine tilts her head, and her gaze intensifies.

"Fine, as always. We were able to settle several issues about the new hotel that were

giving me headaches."

Silence. Katherine doesn't say anything else—quite intentionally—and Jodie has no choice but to let it out.

"I saw Annie entering the hotel and..." Jodie pauses to breathe. "I saw her leave two hours later. You told me you'd meet her at the bank."

Katherine looks at her sternly while nodding, and Jodie feels she's reached a boundary she shouldn't even touch.

"Are you jealous?" Katherine asks, a smile emerging that infuriates Jodie.

"No, I'm not," the cleaner answers with a furrowed brow, "but I know what was between you two... After being in your penthouse for hours, she walks through the lobby, winks at me, and leaves just like that."

Katherine suppresses a laugh; it's not something that should amuse her, but Annie Cohen can be quite a jerk when she wants to be, even at forty-four, though that doesn't make her lose that mischievous air.

"Come with me," Katherine requests, and they move to the kitchen. In a quick movement, she lifts Jodie onto the marble counter and presses against her. "You don't need to worry about her, we've talked about this. We never had anything serious, what we had was physical, but we both know nothing would work beyond that. Now it's you and me, Jodie."

Jodie hooks onto those features that now feel so much like her own. She knows she reacted in such an immature way out of fear of losing Katherine; she could compete with Annie Cohen's endless legs, but never against her power and money.

"I'm sorry, I..."

Katherine silences her by biting her lips and pulling her closer.

"Let's drop this topic. Remember, honey, it's you and me," Katherine repeats, looking into her eyes.

Jodie nods and hugs the woman who drives her crazy, so much that for the first time in her life, she's set up a surveillance service—low-budget because it was just her and Sarah in their free time—to time how long Katherine's ex-lover stayed in the penthouse. She lets out a sigh and pulls away from her boss.

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"I should start cleaning; I wouldn't want to lose my job," Jodie jokes and tries to get down from the marble counter. Katherine prevents her.

"The penthouse is spotless," says the blonde. "You won't do anything today, I want to discuss something with you. Why don't you put on something comfortable and meet me on the terrace?"

Jodie accepts; besides being exhausted, it's true that Katherine's home doesn't have a speck of dust. Every day she's there, she makes an effort to clean it thoroughly, and her boss has the gratitude to keep it in the same state.

Twenty minutes later, and after a shower, Jodie comes out to the terrace and sits next to Katherine, who hands her a cinnamon tea she's grown to like lately. She takes a sip of the drink and signals Katherine to tell her about this important matter.

"What do you think about Blake Johnson for the position of head of cleaning services?"

Jodie doesn't have to think about it.

"I think she's perfect. When I started at the Mallois, we worked together for several months, she has a lot of experience, she's cordial with colleagues, and above all, she understands everyone's needs. Having her as a direct supervisor was wonderful."

Katherine nods and takes a sip of tea.

"Marjorie proposed changing the service structure, explaining that it wasn't necessary

to have coordinators if she was at the helm and could direct everything," Katherine makes a face. "It was certainly a mistake on my part to accept it."

"If you're thinking about Blake, I think it would be a great choice," Jodie reaffirms, trying to keep Marjorie out of the conversation. That woman gives her the creeps.

"She's passed several of the filters we've considered for the new head of service. Lamir talked to her to know what she thought about a promotion, and she's more than willing. I just needed your opinion to confirm Blake is the right choice. Besides, I like the fact that she's younger than Marjorie, according to her file she just turned thirty-five, maybe that change will also be good among the staff, and they'll feel more comfortable dealing with someone who wasn't born in the Pleistocene."

Jodie smiles amused while imagining Marjorie turned into a dinosaur. But what she likes most is that Katherine involves her in these decisions because it only confirms that what they have is serious. She feels stupid again for acting that way about Annie's visit and opens her mouth to apologize again, but her boss beats her to it.

"Now that this matter is settled, I want to talk about the most important thing," says Katherine and puts her cup on the side table. "The Magnolis hotel needs to start pre-opening next week, which means having all staff hired so they can familiarize themselves with the facilities before the official opening in two months. We already have many contracts closed, and the heads of each service need to be at the hotel in a few days to coordinate everything. I'm missing a head chef, Jodie, and no matter how much I've thought about it, I don't see anyone more suitable than you for that position."

Jodie didn't expect that. Katherine raises her hand to stop her from speaking.

"I know what you're going to tell me, but you're an excellent cook and an incredible boss. I saw you direct a service without prior preparation that day in the private room.

You have great ideas and your dishes are amazing, plus you already have experience. I want you for my hotel because that's your place and because I can't keep bearing to have my girl come to my house to clean instead of to see me. Don't get me wrong," says Katherine to explain herself well, "I don't care what you do for a living, but I'm presenting you with an opportunity that benefits us both, and I think you'll be happier there, in your kitchen."

Jodie's heart has been racing for so long that she would feel she could die of a heart attack if she weren't in the hotel with the most defibrillators in all of New York. It's a mix of happiness, fear, and excitement that makes her head fog up and unable to think clearly. Of course she would be happy in the Magnolis kitchen, being the one directing the service, innovating with dishes, returning to her place. She struggles to speak, and when she does, she lets out the silliest phrase she's said in her life.

"Can I think about it?"

Katherine repeats the gesture from earlier, tilts her head, and focuses her brightest blue on her.

"Do you really need to think about it?" she asks, knowing the answer. Because Jodie is dying to get back to a kitchen, but nerves are betraying her.

Jodie sheds uncertainty for a moment. Those eyes are loaded with spells.

"No, I don't need to think about it. I want to be the head chef of the Magnolis hotel," she says and knows that answer has been worth it. The most beautiful smile in the world spreads before her.

Epilogue

Two months later

"Oh my God, it's so late," Jodie says as they walk along the cobblestone path between the two gardens of the upscale residence where her mother now lives.

They visited her first thing in the morning, and although Amanda didn't recognize her daughter this time, the ordeal wasn't as terrible because she didn't have to go through it alone - Katherine held her hand throughout.

"We have plenty of time," Katherine responds to calm her.

They cross through the enormous entrance gate to the street and find Mike waiting with the back door open. Jodie practically dives inside, startling the chauffeur, who looks at his boss with a puzzled expression.

"Is someone chasing you?" he asks, alert as a hawk, his hand on his gun.

"Just nerves, I guess," Katherine answers with a laugh, "we're opening Magnolis to the public today, and she thinks she's late to the kitchen."

Mike relaxes and gets into the car after his boss.



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"I thought you had everything under control, Jodie," Mike says, using the complete trust he now has with her.

"She does," Katherine jumps in, placing a hand on her thigh. Jodie shivers. "But she's a complete perfectionist, and there's nothing we can do about that."

"And here I was thinking that spending the last three weeks tasting dishes would have helped somehow," Mike comments, looking in the rearview mirror to change lanes.

Jodie smiles and runs her fingers through her hair.

"I know everything's fine, but I can't help being nervous. What I don't understand is how you're so calm when the hotel's been open for hours," she says to Katherine.

"I trust the staff I've hired, just like I trust you. You've spent two months organizing the kitchen staff and creating menus, Jodie, relax."

Jodie wishes she had Katherine's confidence, but she can't afford it because she not only wants everything to go well to prove to herself that she hasn't lost her skilled touch in the kitchen, but she also doesn't want to disappoint Katherine Taylor.

When they arrive at the Magnolis hotel, Katherine greets several people before accompanying Jodie to the kitchen.

"Everything will be fine, honey, see you later," she says and kisses her lips.

Jodie turns and crosses the double doors leading to this battlefield she intends to

conquer, and Katherine heads to the lobby just in time to see her family enter, including her sister Rachel, the eldest Taylor.

"Oh my God," Katherine says, emotional as she embraces her sister, "I didn't think you'd come."

"Since you all won't come to me, I have to come to you," Rachel fires back like a shot that pierces everyone present.

"I promise Jodie and I will visit as soon as we get a break. With the inauguration, we haven't had time for anything," Katherine assures her with an apologetic expression.

"And I will too, as soon as I inaugurate the new cruise ship and sort out some business, promise," Caroline adds.

Their father raises his hands as if it doesn't concern him.

"They won't let me travel unless one of you accompanies me, so either your sisters take me, or you come get me."

"That's right, Dad," Rachel says and moves closer to kiss his cheek, "let's see when this little one stops kidnapping you," she adds, pointing to Caroline, "and I come get you to spend a few weeks with Ashley and me."

"You say 'little one' because I don't have wrinkles?" Caroline throws back, making her older sister's expression tighten.

"I don't have wrinkles, they're expression lines," Rachel huffs, running her fingers over the line that's crossed her forehead for some time. "Seriously, Dad, you and Mom could have used protection - see, even at a certain age, you can make silly mistakes."

Katherine considers raising a shield to stop the darts between her sisters, but laughter prevents her. The three sisters get along well, however, the age gap between Caroline and Rachel - almost twenty years since Rachel has turned fifty and Caroline is barely thirty-one - is so noticeable that they sometimes seek each other out like teenagers. At forty-two, Katherine sits in a more neutral range and knows how to handle them both.

"Can we go eat?" Warren Taylor asks, offering his arm to Katherine, "I'm getting the urge to send them to their rooms."

"Of course," Katherine says, hanging onto her father's arm to walk toward the private dining room where the family will eat, "and as for visiting Rachel, Mike can take you whenever you want."

"Everything really turned out great, Katherine, congratulations," Rachel compliments her as they take their seats.

"It sure did," Caroline agrees, "I hope the inauguration of my next cruise ship goes half as well as this."

"I'm sure it will," their father says.

"Well, when am I going to meet Jodie?" Rachel asks.

"Later, when all the food is served. Right now she's on the verge of a heart attack, and I don't want to pull her from the kitchen," Katherine responds.

The family spends the next hour chatting mostly about the small concert hall Rachel is building in her bar, which has been delayed due to construction. They savor each course while drinking, and when they're having their after-dinner drinks, Katherine calls for Jodie, who appears a few minutes later with cheeks flushed from the kitchen heat.

Katherine's heart races at the sight of her as if it were the first day, and she wonders when this sensation that usually leaves her looking foolish will disappear. She stands up and approaches to kiss her and take her hand, then introduces her to Rachel.

"Finally, I get to meet you," the eldest Taylor says, wrapping her in an affectionate hug that Jodie appreciates.

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"Likewise," Jodie responds, returning the embrace before moving to greet the rest of the family.

"Amazing as always, sister-in-law," Caroline throws out with a look both playful and lustful that infuriates Katherine.

It's not because she's jealous, it's because Caroline does it to mess with her, and she's stupid enough to fall for her sister's provocation every time she and Jodie meet.

"Every time you do that, I want to stab you," Katherine mutters as she sits down.

"Don't hold back on my account," Rachel supports her through a laugh.

Caroline sits and clings to her father's arm like when she was little and her two sisters would respond to her silent provocations, always appearing to be the bad ones, just like now.

"Can we have some peace?" Warren Taylor asks, irritated.

"That's rich," Rachel says, shaking her head, still laughing.

"You know, I always wanted a son?" Warren tells Jodie, "and look, three women, all with their mother's strong personality."

The laughter can be heard from outside the private dining room.

"Well, I have to get back to the kitchen, I need to start on tonight's menu," Jodie says,

saying goodbye to the whole family.

When the chef leaves the kitchen, she's as tired as if she'd been dragging stones all day, but she's very satisfied.

"Where's Katherine?" she asks Mike when she exits the hotel and sees only the chauffeur in front of the car.

He smiles and pulls out a card.

"On the top floor," he says and hands it to her with a smile, pointing to the highest part of the hotel.

Jodie makes a face while accepting it, unable to prevent her pulse from racing with uncertainty. When the elevator doors open on the top floor of the Magnolis hotel, she heads to the door of one of the six suites that occupy the floor. She swipes the card through the reader and the door unlocks with a click very similar to Katherine's penthouse.

"Kate?" she asks as soon as she enters, but receives no response.

All she hears is soft background music, and Jodie follows the path guided by candlelight. There, she finds Katherine standing next to a table camouflaged under a white tablecloth with two cushioned chairs. In the center, there's a small vase with flowers and more candles, plus two glasses that Katherine is filling with her favorite wine.

"What's this?" Jodie asks as she approaches, overwhelmed.

"A special dinner for a beautiful girl," Katherine responds, offering her the glass before kissing her.

Then she puts down her glass and pulls out Jodie's chair, inviting her to sit.

"Should I be worried?" Jodie asks, nervous and overwhelmed.

"Think I'm going to propose?" Katherine teases with a half-smile that melts Jodie.

"I don't know, but the situation could be perfect for it, because it's the hotel's inauguration with a full house and here you are wasting one of the most expensive rooms to prepare this dinner with me."

"Having dinner with you isn't a waste, not here or anywhere," Katherine clarifies, "but maybe I went overboard with the romance, didn't I?" she asks, making an amused face.

"Maybe, but I like it," Jodie admits.

"Great, because I want to propose something to you, and I want you to be receptive," Katherine says, and Jodie furrows her brow.

"Are you trying to influence my answer?" she asks, trying to hold back her laughter.

"I would never do that," Katherine winks at her.

"Okay, tell me what you need to say because I'm getting really nervous," Jodie demands.

"Alright."

Suddenly, Katherine notices cold sweat invading her hands from nerves. Her composure has vanished, and she's surprised to realize that something as common as what she wants to propose to Jodie feels so important and transcendental to her.

"Well, I know we haven't been dating long, Jodie, but we spend almost every night together, most at my penthouse and others at your place, and it seems absurd to keep doing this," she says and suddenly falls silent, searching for words to continue.

Jodie jumps in.

"Are you asking me to live together? Is that it?" she asks, her heart about to jump onto the table.

Katherine focuses her blue eyes on her and nods.

"Yes, exactly that, but at my penthouse, not at your place," she feels the need to clarify.

Jodie bites her lips to contain the laughter threatening to overtake her.

"Are you implying something?" she asks, and air from her laugh escapes through her nose, infecting the hotel owner.

"Let's say I'm tired of taking cold showers," Katherine shoots back, and they both let the fit of laughter possess them until they relax.



"That was a low blow," Jodie finally says.

"Did it work?" Katherine asks.

Jodie stands up and sits on her girlfriend's lap, wrapping her arms around her neck.

"Can I think about it?"

"Come on, honey, really?" Katherine says, and this time it's Jodie's turn to smile.

"No," she says and gives her a chaste, soft kiss on the lips, "actually, I don't have to think about it. I want to live with you."

Katherine's hands slide across her cheeks, and the blue of her eyes darkens when she focuses on her seriously before kissing her, as if the world were about to end and Jodie were the only thing she needs to keep breathing.