



Julian's Curse

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Loving him is dangerous. Leaving him seems impossible. But every passion has a price.

For Lucie Benton, a young editor from San Diego, her love for billionaire playboy Julian Valmont was supposed to be the fairytale ending to her heartache. After a year of healing and rebuilding trust, their passion burns brighter than ever—or so she believes.

Beneath Julian's mesmerizing charm lies a darkness capable of tearing everything apart. Lucie never expected him to reopen the hidden wounds of her past, nor could she have imagined that he would become the architect of her greatest sorrow.

As trust is tested and sacrifices mount, she must decide whether to fight for the love that changed her life—or walk away before it destroys her.

And when old loves resurface, the past and present collide in ways she never saw coming.

Emotional, seductive, and impossible to put down, Julian's Curse is a heart-stopping romance about love's power to heal, the courage to face the truth, and the strength to follow your heart—even when the stakes couldn't be higher.

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I watched Jess clean her desk, shying away from her gaze all the while. I didn't know how Amanda had found out, but she'd fired her minutes ago through an email to the entire office.

Neither I nor Sophie had said anything to our boss, but Misha's omnipresence seemed a viable explanation. It was the first time in my career that I was grateful to him; despite him being a spineless sycophant, he'd taken Sophie's side in this. She had suffered too much over Mark's implied infidelity. Because of Jess's cruel lie, the two of them had broken up for at least a year, a painful period for a fragile heart like hers. And this wasn't an analogy. I'd only recently discovered that Sophie suffered from cardiac arrhythmia, and in her case, it was serious enough to kill her.

Jess finished filling her stationery box, and then began to walk in my direction, her eyes locked on mine. She tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulder, in desire to possibly shake off the entire situation. I'd need to face her, and I dreaded it.

"Lucie," her voice trembled, looking like she was about to begin sobbing. "I'm sorry for what I did." With mascara streaming down her face, she looked almost pitiful. I'd been there a few times myself, though never because I'd attempted a scheme straight out of Mean Girls.

I nodded. "I'm not the one you need to apologize, Jess."

"I tried to text Sophie, but she's not responding," she muttered dejectedly.

Some things were better left be, and this was probably one of them. An apology when she'd already been caught would not have seemed genuine. Besides, I wasn't reading

any true remorse in her energy. She'd probably still date Mark if she could manipulate him into it.

“Would it be okay if I listed you as a work reference?” Her eyebrows shot up hopefully.

I looked away from her raccoon eyes, then let out a breath in frustration. Of course, she had an agenda for this conversation; just another reason to be glad that she was on her way out.

“Jess, I don't think you want to do that. I don't have anything good to say.” I couldn't believe how much I sounded like Amanda Hart, our draconian boss. It gave me a little bit of guilty satisfaction.

“Never mind,” she sulked, then headed toward the door and kicked it in annoyance. The Christmas snow globe that she used to keep on her desk, despite it being summer, fell to the ground with a thud, glass splintering everywhere. The uniformed man working nearby jerked at the sound, then lifted his head to identify the cause.

“Jess?” I called her name one last time, halting her in her tracks. “I'll tell Sophie you said you're sorry. It may be best if you leave her alone, though.” I narrowed my eyes to let her know it was a warning.

I suddenly became conscious of our coworkers watching us, and while a part of me was used to attention at this point, I hadn't been able to tune it out this time around. I glanced at my screen, seeing the office chat now blowing up with supportive emojis. Almost everyone could feel the bitter sting of Sophie's absence. There was nobody to restock office coffee or organize potlucks, and there would be no more work parties at Sophie's lavish Coronado mansion. Most importantly, everyone's best friend disappeared from our routine.

Jess hesitated, her brow furrowed as though she were still wondering what to do about the literal and figurative mess that she was leaving behind, then murmured a brief “thanks” before disappearing through the exit.

Seconds later, more uniformed workers arrived to help with the installation of a camera system and a metal detector, Amanda’s newest security decisions.

I’d become a high maintenance hire, but I also knew that it was not the emotion that Amanda wanted me to feel. When I had started working at Apogee, San Diego’s largest lifestyle magazine, we’d been pulling in an annual revenue of around \$200 million a year. Since then, it had almost tripled with business pouring in, some of it being the result of Julian’s indirect association with the magazine, some part of it hopefully being due to my workaholicism — but there was no way to deny that becoming his girlfriend had skyrocketed my career, whether I liked it or not.

Amanda though, was a force to reckon with as well—she’d nurtured this extra gas pedal and maintained the momentum, while involving a few tech companies in the launch of a new lifestyle app, a savvy business move that crowned Apogee a billion-dollar venture. As a result, my salary had quadrupled, and another raise for me was not out of the realm of possibility. It was starting to feel like nothing was out of the realm of possibility these days.

I no longer had a problem paying for my student loans, groceries, or anything whatsoever – a stark contrast with my first year in San Diego. My professional life felt phenomenal, except for the fact that Sophie had left a void behind. But I had to be joyful for her because she was pursuing a career in real estate, a smart choice for someone with her skillset and background. Argh, real estate had never been the field that I’d been interested in—yet it had shaped my life so much already. And I was learning a lot about it from Julian, enough to understand most of his business jargon, enough to know that it was interesting now to me too, to learn about how exactly he’d built such an empire in it.

I was about to delve back into work when I spotted a twiggy Black female barrel through the glass door. She seemed petite, in comparison to the two suitcases alongside her and the heavy bag she was carrying, making me wonder how she'd transported it all up by herself. Not noticing the glass on the ground, she passed through it, the suitcase making a cracking sound as it rolled over it.

I was about to go help her when she halted in her tracks.

“Lucie, right?” She wiped her forehead. “Thank goodness that I didn't have to go far.”

“Yes, hi, can I direct you somewhere?” I walked toward her to assist with her items.

“Appreciate the hand. I am Kali, the new assistant,” she examined me closely. “Mandy, I mean Amanda, said that I am to report to you.”

Amanda had left for a fashion show in Milan that same morning, and she hadn't given any heads-up about a new hire before she left. But I'd grown accustomed to the fact that working for her often meant flying by the seat of my pants. “Yes, definitely, we were expecting you,” I tried to sound more confident than I felt. As I spoke, my mind quickly ran through the checklist of how I'd approach this unexpected onboarding.

The simplest solution seemed to be seating Kali next to me, so I pointed to Sophie's old desk and offered it to her. At the same time, I silently cursed the fact that Rebecca, our office whiz, had started grad school and was no longer around to help with the usual username and system setup.

“Don't sweat the details,” Kali grinned, sensing my stress as I stumbled through my thoughts. Her easy smile helped to calm some of the panic rising in me, especially since I had no clear plan of what steps to take next.

“This is actually the first time I’m helping a new hire,” I admitted. “Are you friends with Amanda?” I queried, noting that she had called her Mandy. It felt like the perfect way to kick off some light conversation. As an introvert, I still sometimes struggled to avoid being awkward in introductions, but it had definitely gotten easier with practice.

“We went to school together. She’s helping me because I fell on hard times.” She hinted, while she tugged her suitcases toward her new desk. I couldn’t help but wonder if she had come straight from the airport. Kali seemed to shy away from my gaze, and I sensed there was a lot of unspoken pain behind her words. But I didn’t think it was my place to press for more details. Maybe, at some point, she’d share more when she felt ready.

“I also started here when I was also going through a tough period. My career at Apogee turned my life around.” I shared with her, reminiscent of the prior year. “Here,” I handed her my old welcome package. “This stack is a great place to start.”

My phone dinged, and I remembered it was almost three o’clock. I would be running late for my lunch with Julian. Still, I needed to pay attention to Kali now that she’d just arrived.

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“There’s answer keys in the back of it,” I let her know. “I am going to go figure out your new log in, then help you get started on our welcome modules.”

She settled into her seat. “Thanks Lucie. I appreciate you so much.”

“Can I offer you water or coffee?” I asked, hoping we still had a few Keurig cups left. I’d been meaning to figure out how to use our Office Depot account and place an order, but with the launch of the app, I’d found myself juggling more responsibilities than time allowed.

“I drank coffee on my way here, but thank you,” Kali blinked thoughtfully at me. Her deep brown skin and sharp, graceful features caught the light as she spoke, and her dark eyes had an almost perceptive quality, as if she was processing everything in the room. She then nodded toward the uniformed workers setting up the metal detectors. “An unusual precaution for a magazine entrance, isn’t it? We had these at my old school in the Bronx.”

I smiled inwardly. “Is that where you’re from?”

“New York, yeah.” She said with an East Coast accent that I should have recognized before.

“Amanda wants to be careful,” I explained, leaving myself out of it. It occurred to me that Kali had no preconceived notions of me – at least not like most strangers on the street. She didn’t look at me with the same curiosity as the people that knew me from magazines. It was so refreshing that for an instant, I wondered if this was how Julian had felt when he’d first met me. Free to be himself. Free to escape the headlines of

tabloids that oftentimes crushed us both.

“And you?” She turned the conversation to me.

“Seattle. Now southern California is home, though.” I missed Gram, but I could picture myself staying in San Diego for the rest of my life. If I could take care of her somehow. Would she be open to coming here eventually?

“Nothing beats the weather, right?”

“Yeah, it’s a treat to live here.” I hoped it would lift her mood about whatever she was going through. “I’ll be back in a moment with your log in info.” I rushed out to find Greg from our helpdesk team, while I checked my phone again to update Julian on my delay.

Work with me and you’ll never be late for lunch with the boss, he’d already texted.

I felt relieved that he wasn’t upset with me.

I am so sorry. I am unexpectedly helping a new hire here. I’ll see you in twenty minutes. I was almost at Greg’s desk, so I shoved my phone in my pocket. I hoped that Julian wouldn’t feel hurt that I’d almost stood him up, but I’d promised Amanda no leniencies. And everyone else would have postponed their lunch in this situation, so I really had no choice...

“Hi Greg.” I slid into the chair next to his desk. “Can you help me with a username set up?”

Per the items on his table, he’d just finished a lunch of Pad Thai, and was now washing it down with a mega sized orange soda. His nursing schoolbooks took up all the rest of the space, leading me to believe that he’d been studying on his lunch

break. Or maybe around it too.

“Sure, Lucie. What’s her name?” He rotated his chair toward me, then grinned at me like I’d become a welcome distraction.

“Kali,” I frowned at the lack of info I’d given him. “Will we be able to find her in the system based on just that?”

He gave me a smug smile. “Sure, let me check. We should be able to figure this out.” He loaded our CRM, while I sat and waited. Greg was always willing to help me because I’d saved him from Amanda’s rage on several occasions. I finally relaxed, but not for too long.

My phone vibrated, so I pulled it out of my pocket to check the call, expecting to see Julian’s caller ID. But it wasn’t him this time around.

Bradley? I hadn’t heard from him since he’d left for Hawaii. Last year, we’d almost gotten into a relationship, but then both of us recognized that our hearts belonged to other unavailable people. I’d wanted to give him space to figure things out with his ex-wife, that’s why I hadn’t reached out for months. His mechanic shop had remained closed, and he’d prolonged his trip, so things were possibly going well there.

And there was also another reason — a more selfish one — I didn’t want Julian to feel hurt. We’d been trying to rebuild something that had taken a lot of badgering, and I didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize it. So, I let the call go to voicemail; this wasn’t the right moment for such a personal conversation. I’d call him as soon as I could. Bradley and I shared such a deep connection that we could easily pick up where we left off.

“Here, Lucie.” Greg scribbled Kali’s log in info and shot me a victorious glance.

“I owe you.” I beamed.

“Not that you have to, but if you can get me into one of Sophie’s parties...” He flushed crimson.

I laughed. “Yeah, I know. I miss her too. I think if you’re fine schmoozing with a bunch of top producing agents, I may be able to. She’s only partying in bougie circles these days, so be prepared for a different crowd.”

He made a sour face. “My girlfriend loves her parties, but I don’t know about that. May be too pompous of a gathering for my taste.”

“Hey, you’re going to be a nurse. That’s way more impressive than selling properties,” I encouraged him because he needed to hear that. Taking night classes with our job had to be insane.

Someone cleared their throat behind us. I didn’t need to turn around to know who it was—our connection made it unmistakable. His scent drifted to me, intoxicating as always, a blend of his unique aroma and a rich, woody cologne with a subtle hint of spice. It was the same cologne I’d noticed that morning, lingering in the air after the embrace I’d held onto as long as I could without risking being late for work.

“Hope I am not interrupting,” Julian alerted us of his presence by clearing his throat. He had probably given up on waiting at the restaurant, and I couldn’t blame him for it.

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A bit embarrassed that I'd been so late, I flashed him a warm smile. Even after three months of us newly together, I still felt the need to rub my eyes each time he reappeared. It all felt like a dream. Like I'd gotten drunk, passed out in my apartment, and had dreamt it all up. But if this were the case and I was still dreaming, I'd make the most of its vividness.

He looked salacious without making any effort in his tailored dark suit that hugged his tall frame. It seemed that he'd just gotten his haircut before our date, brushing his thick brown hair to spike up in the middle, shorter on the sides, his usual signature look. "Hi Greg, I didn't mean to eavesdrop on your conversation." My boyfriend's lips curled into a smile that oozed the kind of sex appeal you'd expect from a movie star.

"We weren't just talking about the people in real estate," Greg attempted to save the situation. "More like the type of people that Sophie hangs out with now."

I tried not to laugh at how he was suddenly embarrassed, while Julian's attention darted to me. I'd worn a tightfitting black dress to work and while it was tasteful, it showed off my curves in all the right places. He gave it a predatory glimmer, then kissed me hello. "I didn't think you'd make lunch, so I grabbed you some takeout." He handed me a paper bag from the restaurant. His mouth split in a wicked grin of delight at my surprised look.

"You know what Lucie, I'll go give the info to Kali." Greg grabbed the piece of paper he'd provided to me earlier and left us to it. I didn't even have time to thank him with how fast he'd disappeared to give us a moment.

But we were still in open space, so I'd become painfully aware of the attention that this visit had gotten me. The staff looked unnaturally glued to their screens, and the office seemed too quiet for a day when Amanda was not around.

"Really sorry," I accepted the food with gratitude. My mouth suddenly felt dry because of the buzz that my boyfriend had created. A part of me was surprised there wasn't a line of office staff waiting outside the door just to get his signature.

"Just meant to come by and say I love you," his hand slid to my upper thigh, fingers curving in. It made me feel hot and heavy, as every thought eddied from my head except one. "I love you too."

"Are you okay after yesterday?"

I examined his signature luxurious Breitling, an item that had now become nostalgic to me, then lifted my eyes to meet his. When we were exiting his office, a frantic fan had pushed me into a barrier.

"Yeah, not a single bruise," I assured him. "I am tougher than you think I am."

He still looked concerned. "Lucie, after everything that happened last year, I want to make sure that you are safe. I know passion is pushing you to work here, but it's risky regardless of metal detectors and cameras."

He still carried the guilt of my suffering, but he didn't need to. While one of Julian's business deals had made me a target for a contract killer, it had never been his fault.

My throat tightened. "Amanda knows what she's doing."

He kept his lethal focus on me. If we walked a dangerous line together, so be it. I wouldn't surrender all my freedom. Yes, I'd made concessions, but I refused to live

in total isolation. At my age, I had to have some independence.

“While Tarnakis and Niccolo are both in jail, there’s always going to be the possibility that someone will want to get at me through you.” He half-whispered so nobody could hear him.

“Julian, I am not afraid,” I squeezed his hand gently. The sun glinted through the windows, and I wasn’t willing to let anything ruin my inner peace. I’d just barely found my balance. “I am happy here.” In the corporate world he despised.

He nodded. “I have to go back to the office for a board meeting, but I’ll see you for dinner?”

Lately the two of us had gotten more into home-cooking, and I loved these cozy nights of staying in. “Definitely. Let’s make something French. From my Gram’s cookbook,” I suggested. This was the normalcy of our relationship that I craved the most. “Again, I am sorry for being so late today.”

“No big deal, I just wanted to see you.” He squeezed my hand.

“I am glad you came to find me.”

Visibly content with my answer, he pecked me on the cheek for a goodbye. I never liked seeing Julian walk away, not after he had almost died in a shooting, and not after I’d believed that I’d never see him again. But just like I had to work, he had to keep growing his business. Not because of money, but because of purpose. Entrepreneurial success for him was a fuel to his existence, just like writing at Apogee was a fuel of mine.

Since Greg had volunteered to help Kali, I’d gained some time. Pensive, I carried my lunch into the meeting room and decided to eat it there in solitude. It was the only

place where I could avoid the hard stares that would come after such a visit. It had convenient blinds that I could pull down. After a long day of stop and go, this was the silence that I needed.

I locked the door behind me, knowing from the reservation sheet that nobody would need the room anytime soon. Famished, I opened the paper bag, and alongside my usual lunch order and fresh squeezed lemonade, I found a note written on a napkin.

I can't wait to take off that dress and cherish what's underneath. Love you. Julian.

There wasn't anybody more perfect than him, not for me. I'd never been in a place in my life when everything was this harmonious. So, I ate some of my food and browsed my phone for mindless media. I wanted to relish the sweet moment of doing nothing.

Bored with my newsfeed, I suddenly recalled Bradley's call and realized this quiet moment might be the ideal time to return it. I didn't want to wait too long, especially since I cared about him so much. With that thought, I dialed his number, hoping to hear good news. He answered on the second ring.

"Hey, Lucie."

I'd missed his deep pleasant voice. It felt striking to hear it again.

"How is everything in Hawaii?" First, I felt the urge to explain my recent distance. "I didn't want to bother you while there. I felt that you needed some time for yourself." I half-apologized.

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He'd gone silent, but an answer came eventually.

"No, don't be a stranger. I miss you like hell, especially when I go out to eat sushi." He effortlessly shifted the conversation into a lighthearted one.

Way to tease me. The two of us could crush pounds of sashimi together.

"Overnight me some Zippy's," I joked, my craving for the homestyle restaurant's mac salad still strong from my visit to Honolulu. "And those butter cheese sandwiches they make; they are still in my vivid memory."

I heard a laugh, then the phone connection started to get spotty. He spoke, but I couldn't understand it.

"Bradley, you're cutting off. Maybe try another part of your house?"

There was a fleeting moment of silence like he was walking to a new area.

"No, it's not that. I am in Kauai." Bradley's deep, husky voice rumbled through the phone.

"Wait, you're visiting?" I still had the expectation that he'd be back in San Diego at some point.

"I've decided to move here."

I couldn't help but feel a punch in my gut. I'd wanted him to be closer than that.

Kauai, it was beautiful, known to be the Garden Isle and the greenest of all Hawaiian Islands, but it was also rural and remote. But what led to this decision? He built custom cars for a living and now it seemed like he had no interest in that anymore. It wasn't something he could do on a large scale there.

“What about you and your ex-wife?” I couldn't hold back the question any longer.

He went silent for a moment, his voice dropping lower when he finally responded. It was rich and gravelly, like he was carefully weighing his words. “She's moved on, and I realized that I have too.” The words felt final, but his tone carried an undercurrent of something more—a quiet, unresolved pain.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he replied, his voice steady but still tinged with a trace of exhaustion, “my godfather lives here. He invited me to help with his construction project. He's a retired owner of a successful IT business in California. And I liked it enough to stay. It's home now.”

I wanted to say something encouraging, but it still came as a huge disappointment. After so many changes, this was just another one to get used to. But I couldn't be selfish. If this was right for him, it was right for me.

“I hope you visit me in time. What about your shop? Are you selling it then?”

“I'll have a couple guys run it for now, then we'll see.” He left it open-ended.

I guessed there was always a chance he'd reconsider.

“You know, Valentina keeps asking me when the hot Hawaiian guy will come back,” I teased him with a half-truth. She'd used a way raunchier term to inquire about

Bradley. My best girlfriend from college, a former model, had relocated to California to start a now successful clothing brand called Poshbabe Boutique, and never looked back.

“Tell her she can come here and keep me company anytime,” he responded, his voice low and inviting, a familiar warmth in the way he said it. His tone made it sound like he was grinning, even though I couldn’t see him.

It seemed like a serious offer, especially since Bradley wasn’t one to joke around. Hardly anyone ever turned down Valentina, unless she wasn’t their type. At least he wasn’t so heartsick as to dwell on it—thankfully, that was a relief. His casual response gave me the sense that he was finding a way to move forward, not weighed down by the past, and that was something I hadn’t expected.

“How are you and Julian?” He switched subjects.

It had to be hard for him to even ask this. The two of them never got along—or, better said, they’d been subtle enemies, each avoiding the other whenever possible, never comfortable in the same space. Aside from their conflicting lifestyle values, they often had opposing opinions about what was best for me. “I am happy,” I assured him. Certain that he hadn’t been reading any tabloids, this seemed like enough to share.

“But?” He prodded, his tone light but insistent, as if he knew there was more to the story.

I didn’t know if this was something I wanted to get into with him. He still didn’t trust that Julian’s intentions had been sincere, and even if he did, he certainly didn’t believe the relationship was good for me. But now that I’d mentioned it, I knew I’d have to explain myself.

“Well, you’ll laugh,” I started, trying to keep it light. “We’ve had the best three months of our lives, so I’m trying hard not to look for something negative in a great situation. Not after everything I’ve been through. But this happiness just feels unfamiliar compared to what I remember of us.”

I hesitated, realizing how much of it came down to trusting this new sense of peace, a feeling I hadn’t been able to connect with before. Would it last? Was I overanalyzing again?

“Dark thinking?” he asked, but I couldn’t miss the hint of sarcasm in his tone.

“Julian used to be depressed about his family much of the time, but now it’s changed. I haven’t seen him down at all. He seems more confident, and his mood has been great too.”

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I didn't know if he heard me because my words echoed back at me. Confident. Confident resonated in my ear; then the high pitch noise in the speaker became unbearable. Shoot, they really didn't have much reception in Kauai; not where he was.

But Bradley was still there. "Lucie?" I heard him say my name. "I am calling on Wi-Fi, sorry if it's cutting out."

"I went off on a tangent anyway. Once a good friend in college told me that I was the type of person that would create a problem if there wasn't one. Maybe that's what I am doing here." I talked myself out of any worries.

As I sipped on my lemonade, I felt a sudden burn at the corner of my lips. It was that familiar sting, the one I'd been battling for months now. I'd been dealing with a minor case of angular cheilitis ever since February, and it was starting to wear on me. My dentist had brushed off the tiny cracks at the corners of my mouth, blaming the dry climate or possibly a vitamin deficiency. I'd been trying to fix it by ordering more vitamins, but nothing seemed to work. The irritation was still there, stubbornly clinging on despite my efforts.

"I think you have a remarkable intuition." He retorted. "I am driving now to Princeville, and I'll lose signal. But Lucie, don't be a stranger, as I said before."

He cared. And I was so glad it was still the case.

"I'll be in touch more often." I promised.

The call dropped unexpectedly, and I wasn't sure if he'd hung up or if he'd simply lost connection. Still, our conversation lingered in my mind, like a promise of friendship, and I liked that.

The burning now became so uncomfortable that I postponed eating the rest of my lunch and went to look for the lip balm instead. As I walked back toward Kali, I felt tense for no reason. I dismissed it as occasional anxiety and decided to focus on helping her with the set up.

She'd already been waiting for me, with a huge grin on her face. "Lucie, who is the gorgeous businessman who'd just came to see you? Boyfriend?"

I felt a sudden flash of heat in my cheeks because this was a loaded question. "I consider myself lucky to call him that," I smiled.

Kali searched my face for clues, then she decided not to question me more. The curious crowd around us would eventually bring her all the answers she needed, I was certain.

I eagerly awaited the end of a hectic day at the office. As one of the last to leave, I gathered my belongings and headed towards the parking garage elevator. The sense of accomplishment from wrapping up a productive day and looking forward to an evening with Julian filled me with joy. My dark mood had vanished, now clearly stemming from past experiences, not from actual events.

Following my usual routine, I descended to the lowest underground level where a security guard had been waiting for me. After exchanging greetings, I assured him all was well and began walking towards my car. Once inside my Land Rover, I promptly locked the doors and scrolled through my phone to choose music for the short drive home. My new car felt like a tank, in comparison to my Miata, but I'd long since admitted that there was no other way for me to get on the road safely without a more

substantial vehicle. After Niccolo's attempt to kill me, I could appreciate being surrounded by this much steel, and sheltered from a stranger's aim by bulletproof windows.

I'd exit the building through a maintenance exit as per usual—a tactic yet undiscovered by the paparazzi—As soon as I backed out of my parking spot, my new bodyguard Will Flenigan followed me in an Audi A8.

I lost myself in the lyrics of The Weeknd, still my most-played artist, but was quickly pulled back to reality by an incoming call.

“Hey, Sophie,” I answered it with a sense of warm anticipation.

“Lu, I figured by now you'd be off work,” she subtly reminded me that I took corporate life to an extreme.

“Trying to make a living, you know how it goes,” I reminded her that I still had pride. “My new car purchase is draining my bank account.” I was determined never to become a kept woman, even if it meant struggling with an unhealthy work-life balance.

“Julian must be going crazy, when you're at the office 70 hours a week,” she nudged. “Amanda won't give you a break, will she?”

“Ever since the launch of the app, I've been buried in assignments,” I shared with her “It's rare for anyone to top Julian's workaholism but I am managing.”

I could hear her sigh on the other side of the line. “Lucie, keep in mind that taking regular time off is good for the soul. Amanda is also taking advantage of your situation, I hope you realize that.”

In that sense she was probably right. Why wouldn't she, though? She was a savvy businesswoman. She didn't build an empire by not pursuing every avenue of growth.

"Sometimes it feels like work is my only escape." I justified my decisions.

"Has the press been hounding you?"

Their attention had been relentless, like a thorn in the glossy rose Julian had gifted me as a symbol of our love.

"Yeah, we're dealing with it the best we can. But maybe I wish that it wasn't this intense. The other day a photographer rented the apartment across the street from us, then tried to climb on the roof of the building to get a better shot."

"But he didn't succeed at getting good pics?" She tried to cheer me up. "I've seen nothing of that sort online."

It still felt surreal that when checking on me, my friends could just google my name.

"Yeah. With the way the place is designed, there's no way to see anything through the windows." Julian and I had just moved in together a month ago. It seemed like a natural progression of our relationship, given that we couldn't imagine most evenings apart anymore, but it also felt that he'd had another practical motive. He still felt guilty over everything that happened and vowed to ensure my safety, so this arrangement gave him a lot more control over it.

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After we had talked about where we wanted to live, Julian chose to invest in an apartment building on Cortez Hill. We had both fallen in love with the neighborhood the year before when I'd rented a nearby studio.

Nestled just north of the Gaslamp Quarter, Cortez Hill rose as one of the highest points in downtown San Diego, offering a tranquil, almost secretive charm, yet still within reach of the city's pulse. My favorite corner of it was the historic Cortez Hill building, which I often likened to a white castle perched on a hill. The red flickering sign atop the Cortez Hill Hotel, with its nostalgic hum, became an iconic presence in the neighborhood—and now, from our three-story haven, I gazed directly at it. Our apartment was spacious, yet intimate, a reflection of our lives together. We had adorned it with treasures discovered at Goodwill, each piece a quiet, cherished reminder of who we were—simple, grounded, and in love. I never saw the need for luxury shops or extravagant spending, and to my relief, Julian understood.

“Anyway, I am calling you to invite you to a dinner this Saturday at our new place with Mark.” Sophie unexpectedly announced that they'd just moved in together.

“What? You moved out of your parents' place?”

“Yeah, we're taking that next step.” She sounded so happy that it spread to me. I couldn't believe how much our life had changed in a year. I'd moved to San Diego, heartbroken, recovering from the nightmare of James. She'd been nursing her own heartbreak because of Mark's presumed infidelity. Now we'd both found what we presumed to be the loves of our lives.

“Can't wait to see it,” I stepped on the break to wait for the metal gate to open. One

more security guard had been waiting at the maintenance exit to scan my vehicle and ensure I was ready to go. He peeked into the vehicle while I gestured our secret code.

I pondered whether I should tell her about Jess, then decided not to bring it up yet. I saw no use in reminding her of past hurts.

“How is your dad handling the move?” Mr. Dickens was protective of Sophie especially because she had a heart condition. Coincidentally, he was also Julian’s financial advisor, a fact that made us even more interconnected as girlfriends.

“He’s crushed. But Mark’s really made an impression on him.” She boasted.

“I bet.” Mark epitomized the ideal man, seemingly without any flaws. He had a close-knit family, had graduated from Stanford, earned enough to support a large family, and even shared membership at the same golf club as Mr. Dickens. He was also good-looking, but not overly good-looking, so it was easier on Sophie who loved him. She truly couldn’t have found anyone whom her parents would adore more.

In stark contrast to Mark, my alpha male boyfriend was a positively different story. Julian skipped expensive education that he didn’t find necessary for success. He was living proof that degrees weren’t a prerequisite to becoming a successful real estate investor. He’d never had a traditional upbringing, both of his parents being societal outcasts. His childhood had been filled with grief and hardship, with little relief from the abuse of his foster parents. Perhaps to make up for the struggle, nature blessed him with wicked good looks and charisma.

“Lucie, I gotta go because I need to run comps for an anxious client. It’s always nice catching up, though, and I hope to see you both at my place!” She sounded apologetic, but I could understand the hectic schedule.

“Text me the details of your new address,” I reminded her as I approached home.

“I will. Most importantly, be safe out there,” she sounded as serious as death and taxes.

“Always,” I tried to sound confident because I didn’t want to worry her. Truth was – it felt like I had little control over any safety at all. And I still needed to build my mental resilience after the prior year which had really shaken up any sense of stability. “Good luck, Sophie,” I ended the call. Determined not to let fear cripple me, I cranked up the music. Music had always been my refuge, a force that sharpened my focus and gave me the strength to face whatever came next.

I arrived home to an unforgettable image. Julian seemed deeply engrossed in preparing our elaborate dinner. He’d been trying to make things right between us, so a fresh bouquet of colorful sunflowers awaited me.

“Baby!” he exclaimed as he heard me turn the corner to the second floor of our apartment. “How was the rest of your day at work?” He asked caringly.

I greeted him with a soft affection, my voice warm as I made my way toward the kitchen. His signature scent wrapped around me, filling my nostrils and immediately reviving the dull senses left worn out from a long day at work. I couldn’t help but sneak a glance at him through my eyelashes, still in awe of the fact that he was here, with me. It was almost impossible to comprehend how I’d gotten so damn lucky. I would never be able to say it enough.

But despite my amazement, there was a part of me that understood it perfectly. Julian’s mind often felt like an extension of mine, how similar we were in our thinking. Yet, someone like him would normally be so far out of my reach had there not been for his decision to create an anonymous dating profile. He was a billionaire who’d chosen an unconventional path to get to know a woman—through being pen-pals first. His reason? To escape a life filled with scandals and heartbreak. Without the weight of his name or wealth, he could finally find something real in a world that

often felt lonely and calculated. In my opinion, he'd executed on it perfectly.

“Eventful, but I couldn't wait to be home,” I murmured into his ear, then planted a kiss on his scruffy cheek, enough to leave me craving more.

At the same moment, we both blurted out Missed you, then shared a smile over the serendipity of saying the same words. It happened to us way too often, a reassurance that we truly had a powerful mind connection. The magic had always been there, even when we first exchanged hellos online. From that, I realized that love, to some extent, had to be an energetic connection. There was likely much in this world we had yet to grasp about the spiritual realm.

He pulled me closer to his body, his hands now salaciously traveling down my derriere.

“Hmm,” Julian licked his soft perfectly shaped lips. “This dress looks hot on you.”

As much as I appreciate the compliment, I needed food first. “What are you making?” I queried, still looking at him with adoration. “Sorry again I am late for the second time today.” I frowned in the direction of a large clock mounted on the wall. Julian collected clocks, a quirky fact I'd learned about him as soon as we moved in. Each clock in the house seemed like a miniature masterpiece, adorned with intricate designs and elaborate details.

He let go of our passionate embrace to tend to the stove. “The recipe is called Boeuf Bourguignon,” he butchered the French term, then poured me a glass of red from the open bottle on the counter while giving the pot a final stir. “If you want to correct my clumsy pronunciation, I may have to take you on this table,” he flirted heavily, referring to my ability to speak French in a native accent.

My cheeks flushed. Being bilingual in French had never served a better purpose than

now. Well, maybe except for my work trip to Paris. I'd enjoyed going back to the city representing Apogee.

"Well, I'll spare you the torture," I responded with playfulness. "Per the aroma in here, it's going to be amazing, and it would be a shame if the food ended on the ground," I teased him with images of us getting naughty.

"Later," he kissed my forehead, then proceeded to serve us each a bowl.

My stomach growled as I sat down with Julian to enjoy the homemade meal. Although he had only recently taken up cooking, Julian had become a remarkably fast learner. I couldn't help but feel proud—he was quickly becoming a better chef than I was, despite me only having shown him the basics. Though he was also a workaholic, it wasn't unusual for him to be done with work sooner than I was these days, and he was most certainly doing this out of care for me. We said a brief gratitude prayer and then eagerly dug into the food. I had introduced us to this ritual not because I felt a higher power was holding me accountable, but because it was a meaningful reminder to appreciate all that we had.

"Did you have a busy day at the office?" I queried, as my mouth exploded with flavor. "Julian this is delicious. I knew Gram had great things in her cookbook, but you outdid the way I remember it." It had been a while since Gram made the recipe, not since Grandpa's passing.

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“Thanks, Lucie,” he looked pleased. “By the way, the Dubai project is almost finished, I couldn’t wait to tell you,” his eyes gleamed as he finally answered my question. For many months now, Julian’s investment company had been working on an expansive resort, complete with branded hotel apartments, luxury penthouses, a premium yacht club, and several villas near the marina.

“You remember Adrianna?” His tone made the question feel heavier than usual.

I cleared my throat, a subconscious reaction that revealed my discomfort. I hadn’t expected him to bring up her, someone who had made me jealous in the past. “I do.” I tried to ignore the fact that the food now tasted suddenly bland. The newspapers had once speculated about a relationship between Julian and her, while he had kept me as his secret. Although we had dismissed those rumors as mere tabloid fodder, they had still caused me considerable pain.

“I’d like you to come with me and meet her.” He proposed. “We’ll be flying out Tuesday if you’re up for a trip.”

With each sip of wine, I felt my tension ease, the warmth spreading through me. “Julian, Amanda wouldn’t want me to leave, not with the release of our new issue just around the corner. She’s also been at the office less and less lately.” Amanda Hart, my boss and a formidable publishing icon, had been prioritizing her personal time more and more. Did this mean she was confident having me run things? I had a hunch there was more to it, but would need to be patient to find out.

“I don’t want the tabloids to make you nervous,” Julian threaded lightly. “I think if you and Adrianna could become friends, it would put you at ease. She’s been

instrumental in promoting the project, and I can't avoid being seen with her, Lucie."

The two of them seemed like close friends.

Now, I felt a pang of guilt. I never wanted him to feel he couldn't interact professionally with women just because it might hurt my feelings. "I trust you, Julian," I brushed off his concerns. "And honestly, you can't win with the press. If they take pictures of all of us, they might just write that we've had a threesome. Imagine the scandal that would create."

He chuckled hard. "Would you ever consider a threesome?"

I tossed my napkin his way, feeling a bit silly. Instead of bringing the mood down, it only sparked his playful side. He rose from his seat, and suddenly, food was the furthest thing from our minds. Julian was easy on the eyes, and the proximity to him filled me with lust. I was already a bit tipsy, with an insatiable appetite now focused entirely on my tall, dark, and dangerously charming boyfriend. I had no intention of sharing him with anyone else. I was too loyal and too egoistic, and I expected the same from him.

"I want you right here on this table." He used an authoritative tone.

I could appreciate it, but only in the context of sex. I got up, pressing my derriere against his groin.

Briskly, he turned me around and lifted me on the tablecloth area that wasn't covered with plates. His lips sank into my neck until his teeth would most certainly leave a hickey. As if he needed to mark me when the whole world already knew I was his anyway.

"I want all the dishes to break to remind you of the first time you came," he breathed

till it sent a pleasant tingle down my spine.

I recalled the moment clearly. We were aboard his yacht, *Trading Yesterday*, when a delicate vase—one he'd collected from Italy—suddenly cracked. Our connection had been intense, consuming us entirely, until it all came to a halt in the chaos of a bathroom. There, amidst the wild urgency of our kiss, Julian gave me an experience I'd never known before—one that left me breathless, forever altering the way I saw intimacy. Those days... I was still so innocent, not yet the woman who delighted in buying provocative outfits from sex shops to cater to Julian's more lustful desires.

"I'll always remember," I brushed my fingers through his thick brown hair.

"My goal is to remind you every day," he gazed into my eyes with a look that made me melt.

I gulped some more wine. The more drunk I'd become, the more I would let myself go. Sex with him always felt like a freefall, the thrill never wore off, and I'd explore all the animalistic desires we had without a sense of decorum.

"God, I love you," he groaned, admiring every inch of me. His hand slid up my dress, his fingers teasing me in my most delicate areas. I moaned and bent my back, then spread my legs wider so he could feel me deeper. I panted, my mind only focused on the intense pleasure, as he continued to press at my lips in a steady rhythm. We stayed in these motions for a minute, but I still felt unfulfilled and mad with need. Recognizing this, he leaned me fully on the table, while skillfully removing the measly underwear fabric that covered almost nothing anyway.

"Baby girl," he whispered as his tongue circled my lips, my legs now resting on his shoulders. The mix of my sky-high heels and nudity on a table made me feel like I'd taken things too far in a private dance at a club—except I was in Louboutins, and this was definitely not a transactional relationship. I wanted Julian to enjoy every part of

me, to get lost in my curves, to feel like he owned me. Except he didn't, I'd always be an independent soul, and he'd gravitate toward me because of it. But I wanted him to live out all his fantasies, to never feel dissatisfied.

I reached for the zipper of his dress pants; while he rammed his hard cock into me. All the dishes fell to the floor as he slid me further on the table, my body undulating in rapture, the familiar tickle building up. I didn't want it to be over yet. "Slowly," I whispered.

He immediately adjusted his pace. We reached a sweet moment of a hug. He filled me with soft thrusts, while I cherished each and every single one of them. In his arms, I felt an energy that was both exhilarating and comforting, a sense of being fully present and alive in a way I'd never experienced with anyone.

"Sit," I encouraged him as I loosened up his tie and climbed into his lap. I wanted to ride him until my breasts ached and my body was out of breath. Until he had enough of bouncing my undoubtedly large butt with his hands. Until we've both given what we had to each other. And it was never enough, so we'd need to do it over and over again. 'Til death would us part. The only question really was –given our track record–what kind of death.

I woke up and immediately glanced at my phone to check the time. 2:23 AM. The blue light felt harsh against my eyes in the surrounding darkness. Noticing that Julian wasn't beside me, I went to the kitchen to fetch some water and simultaneously search for him. It was an easy feat, even in our three-story apartment. As soon as I reached the top floor, I spotted his tall silhouette on the balcony. He seemed deep in thought while he observed the now empty pool that we could never visit because it was a public space. Still, it added a nice ambiance to the place to have a view of something as ordinary as a community facility.

I slid the glass door open, peeking outside. The summer air felt balmy, gently

wrapping around me with a warm and soothing embrace. “Can’t sleep?”

He glanced up at me, surprised that was even there. We’d had quite a few drinks so I myself wasn’t sure why I’d gotten up so easily.

“Sleeping has not been the same since Niccolo. I don’t think I’ll find peace until he and Tarnakis are not in this world, Lucie.” He growled.

Jail was good enough for me. “Don’t worry.” I retorted. His gentle soul had to be so afraid to wish for someone’s passing.

I leaned into him, feeling the weight of the past year settle between us. It had taken its toll on both of us, while the shadows of our shared experiences loomed large.

Julian’s business partner, Tarnakis had owned a yacht-building company teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. Julian saw a promising investment, bought the company, and sold it off in pieces, including some shares to his Arab partners. But, Tarnakis’s wife couldn’t cope with the loss of their fortune and took her own life in the final days of the deal. With little left to lose, he’d directed his fury at Julian, vowing revenge. So, for a while, I had been an unwitting target of a contract killer, the thought still sending chills down my spine. I had survived a serious car crash by sheer miracle—probably thanks to the roll bar my ex-boyfriend had installed in my old Miata, my beloved car that I now had to retire in a parking garage. It felt like the end of an era, a symbol of everything I had endured and lost.

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“We can’t give him the pleasure of scaring us forever, Julian.” I declared resolutely. “Don’t let fear grow larger than your faith.” Sometimes I liked clichés.

The quiet of the night continued to surround us, except for the occasional barking of a few dogs who were just as common on Cortez Hill as people. Oliver had ensured that the apartments facing the inner circle of the apartment complex remained vacant. Except, for the ones where our security guards lived. There was no other way to keep us from the prying eyes of someone who could exploit us for money.

“Come here.” He extended his arm to make space for me.

I ambled toward him, then sat on one side of his lap. “I appreciate all you do to protect our life here.” Moving downtown to Cortez Hill had been our dream, and despite the organization that it took, it had been worth it. I knew it was ultimately just a matter of time until we’d end up in an isolated mansion in the suburbs, but we both loved the city so much that plans were postponed.

“What do you ultimately want to do with your career, Lucie?” He raised a pertinent question.

It was now even more clear to me why he couldn’t sleep. He was in constant worry about me balancing my public presence and my ordinary corporate job. I was trying to cling to an oxymoron for as long as possible, holding onto the illusion that my life with him hadn’t completely dismantled my identity.

“Maybe someday I want to run my own publishing business,” I said, opening my heart to him. It had been a secret dream of mine. While Apogee was quite influential in

the fashion world—not as much as magazines like *Vogue*, but still significant—our specialty remained content that empowered women. I liked the subject matter enough to excel at my job, but I had other interests. Sorting through manuscripts to discover the occasional gem that would truly resonate with readers seemed like a fulfilling way to spend my life. A fulfilling way to put my English major to its best use.

“Why not start on that dream now?” He encouraged me.

How could I explain to him that I felt a certain loyalty to Amanda? I didn’t feel like this was the time to leave her yet. I’d promised her to stay at my job, and I wasn’t about to break it. Julian would not understand this type of commitment because he answered to no one.

“A year, give me a year to decide.” But I understood his reasons for being so protective of me. It was within reason too. What I was doing was perhaps risky. Every day I put myself in front of people that we knew little about.

His hand caressed my thigh, then slipped back into my nightie. I rested my back against his hard chest as we both watched the lights of Cortez flicker in front of us. I was glad that he’d managed to let me stay in their proximity, my one sense of normalcy amidst the absolute lack of privacy descending on us everywhere.

The light trickled in, and it was most likely around seven in the morning. Julian was nowhere to be found, while it was safe to assume that he’d left for a business meeting in another time zone. I’d always admired his drive, which was part of the countless reasons why I’d been so attracted to him. I couldn’t be with someone who wandered and had no goals in life.

I allowed myself a few moments of sweet reverie when I heard my phone vibrate. My eyebrows furrowed once I snatched it to check the incoming message. The person interested in me the most this morning was my father. We hadn’t spoken in more than

a year.

Hey, I read your article in Apogee. Great job with it, it started off a bit slow but you have potential.

Was it meant to be a compliment? What a strange way to open a conversation with the daughter that he'd once abandoned because of a career choice. I was sure that my dad heard of my success, which possibly prompted his renewed curiosity in me. Maybe some part of him still felt the family connection between us, but it wasn't the unconditional love that parents usually had for their kids. He'd damned me when I hadn't been fulfilling expectations, then accepted me when I suddenly did. I'd take my time to respond, if ever at all.

I dragged myself out of bed to our espresso machine. Coffee had always been the liquid of accomplishment in my life. I usually started the day with a strong black coffee, no sugar, so today was no different. The first sip hit just right, warming me from the inside out.

"Alexa, play my favorite Spotify podcast," I exclaimed loud enough so the microphone on the other side of the room could detect my voice. The Alexa had been a great gift from Julian, just one of the many thoughtful things he'd done for me in the recent months.

"Good morning, Lucie, your favorite podcast Soundwaves. Episode 8 is the newest one out. Would you like to play it?" Alexa's robotic voice double-checked.

"Absolutely," I replied, excited to see who was coming up next. My best friend Valentina had gotten me hooked after we listened to a Machine Gun Kelly interview together. I might have a respectable job now, but deep down, I'd always carry a bit of that emo spirit. For me, it was tied to feeling alive, and perhaps to being an artist in my own way. I looked forward to hearing what band was on.

“Welcome, music lovers, to another exciting episode of “Soundwaves”! I’m your host, Danny, and today we’re diving into a world where classical elegance meets pop pizzazz. Buckle up, because we’re about to introduce you to a musical sensation that’s taking the world by storm. Ladies and gentlemen, meet the one and only Keynote Legends!”

I wasn’t familiar with the band, but the upbeat, catchy intro with its piano riffs caught my attention, so I decided to stay and see what they had to offer.

“That was just a taste of what’s in store from these incredibly talented performers. Keynote Legends is not your average piano boy group. They’ve redefined what it means to merge classical piano with contemporary pop, and trust me, you’re going to want to hear all about them.” The host began with an introduction.

I wondered if they were similar to the Piano Guys, the group I often played when I was trying to get inspired while writing my articles. Their music always had a way of clearing my mind, helping me focus on the words that needed to flow onto the page.

“So, who are these virtuosos? Let’s break it down. Keynote Legends is a dynamic quartet of young pianists, each bringing their own unique flair and style to the table. With their exceptional piano skills and charismatic stage presence, they’ve captivated audiences worldwide.”

I decided to refill my mug, savoring the slow morning while continuing to overdose on caffeine. Thankfully, I didn’t have to be at the office until 9AM, so I had plenty of time for self-care today.

“Joining us is one of the members of Keynote Legends, the talented and charming James Stone! Welcome to the show!” The intro music started, and my heart skipped a beat, almost sending my cup flying out of my hand. No way could it be...

“Thanks for having me, Alex! I’m thrilled to be here and excited to chat about Keynote Legends and our journey so far,” responded a familiar voice that used to cut through me like a knife at the lowest points of my existence.

“Absolutely! So, let’s start from the beginning. How did Keynote Legends come together? What sparked the idea of forming a piano boy band?”

I moved over to the Alexa, determined not to miss a single word. The last I’d heard, James had gotten into Juilliard, so his newfound success was only a partial surprise. I had always believed he was destined for greatness, but it stung to realize he needed to reach that height without me. It felt as though I had to carry his burdens, sacrificing parts of myself, for him to become who he was meant to be.

“Well, it all started with a shared passion for piano and a desire to push the boundaries of what people expect from piano music. We were all friends from different musical backgrounds, and we realized that blending our styles could create something truly unique. We wanted to bring the elegance of classical piano into the modern pop scene in a way that feels fresh and exciting.” He explained, his voice filled with excitement, as if the memory of their beginnings still sparked a fire in him.

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This probably wasn't healthy for me—hearing his voice again. Yet, I couldn't help but feel a strange sense of relief, knowing he was still conquering his demons. Where there had once been love, there would always be a trace of it, lingering like a soft echo in the background of my heart.

“It's such a unique concept! Your debut album, *Rhythms of Elegance*, has been getting rave reviews. Can you tell us a bit about the creative process behind it?” The host continued the interview, pulling me in like a Netflix binge.

“Absolutely! *Rhythms of Elegance* was a result of utmost creativity. We spent countless hours in the studio experimenting with different sounds and arrangements.”

Next, the podcast played a sample of his song. The melody instantly made me nostalgic—it felt quintessentially James: deep, sensitive, but almost mathematical.

“Our goal was to create a fusion that respects classical traditions while embracing contemporary trends. We worked with some amazing producers and songwriters who really understood our vision, and the result is an album that we're incredibly proud of.”

I contemplated turning off the podcast, but I couldn't bring myself to stop listening. James, after all, had been the one I'd imagined someday marrying. My longest relationship had ended in tragedy, but I'd somehow resurrected myself next to Julian, trying to move forward. Then, at some point, I realized Julian was the one—the person who made me feel whole again, in a way I hadn't known I needed.

“And it shows! Each track on the album has its own distinct vibe while still staying

true to the Keynote Legends sound. What can fans expect from your live performances?”

James breathed into the microphone with an attractive, yet quite high-pitched voice for a male. “Our live shows are where we really get to connect with the audience. We love to interact with our fans and make each performance a memorable experience. Expect a high-energy show with lots of surprises—whether it’s a classical piece with a modern twist or a crowd favorite that gets everyone singing along, we aim to keep things fresh!”

The host immediately reacted: “That sounds amazing! Can you share any upcoming projects or plans that Keynote Legends has in the works?”

“Definitely! We’re currently working on some new music that we can’t wait to share. We’ve also got a tour planned for this summer, which we’re super excited about. We’re always looking for new ways to innovate and keep our fans engaged, so stay tuned for some exciting announcements! There’s always plenty of inspiration in our band to write songs,” he assured everyone.

I really had no idea he’d gotten this successful. With his looks and talent, he certainly had a good shot at becoming the next teen girl idol. It seemed like he’d actually become that.

“Your band is often compared to a modern, darker version of *NSYNC. What’s your take on that? I have to ask.”

There was a brief laugh before the response came, cool and composed. “I think labels are for the fans to define. We just make the music we feel. Personally, I am not fond of comparisons.”

“Great answer.” The host continued. “Can’t help to ask, but what’s your biggest

inspiration in making music now, James?”

He had always been the type to speak carefully, so I knew that whatever he'd say would be a blend of meaningful and witty. I didn't know him well enough to predict the answer anymore.

“Well, most artists get their inspiration from real life. For me, my biggest inspiration comes from a relationship with a girl.” His voice was steady, almost casual, but there was a hint of vulnerability buried beneath his words.

He'd always been quite the romantic, so it didn't surprise me. Was he going to talk about Andrea, the girl he'd left me for? Was Valentina right that she'd turn into a regret? Andrea had been the girl with whom he'd cheated on me, well, we'd been almost broken up, our fights only increasing in intensity, but still, at no point had he said it was over for us.

“Yes indeed, love is a great inspiration. Is she currently your girlfriend?” The host needled him. Most artists weren't open to sharing their private lives, so I anticipated a brick wall there.

“No, she's a girl who, unfortunately, slipped away,” James confessed to his audience. “I became reckless, and in doing so, I hurt her in ways I can never take back. My life has never been the same since she walked out of it.”

Shit. This had nothing to do with Andrea. There was no way that she'd ever leave him. She stuck to James like chewing gum on the sole of a shoe.

“Sorry to hear that,” the host offered some sympathy. “It's certainly inspired beautiful music, though. “Anything else you'd like to share on this topic of inspiration?”

“Not quite.” James left the audience with an enticing mystery, hanging in the air like

a secret just out of reach. If he was even somewhat famous, his fans would be desperate to uncover the identity of his elusive muse.

I swallowed hard. Could it be that I was the girl he was talking about?

“Well, before we wrap it up, would you like to share with us details about your next album in the making?”

“At the moment it’s looking like next year, but we can’t work under pressure so fans got to stay tuned. They can, however, look forward to a spectacular collection of songs. We plan to isolate ourselves in the desert to let creativity flow.” He guaranteed an extraordinary outcome.

“Fantastic! We’ll be eagerly awaiting your next move. Thank you so much for joining us today, James It’s been a pleasure getting to know more about Keynote Legends. And to all our listeners out there, if you haven’t checked out Keynote Legends yet, do yourself a favor and give them a listen. You can find them on all streaming platforms and be sure to follow them on social media for the latest updates. This has been “Soundwaves,” and we’ll catch you next time with more incredible music and stories. Until then, keep the music alive!

As usual, the artist on the podcast played a piece of music at the end. The tune of the piano filled the room, soft and haunting, because just when I thought it couldn’t get any worse, it confirmed my worst fear. It was a longer, slightly altered version of the piece James had composed for me while I was studying abroad in France.

Any other day I would have been so happy to learn that I was still the girl he treasured in his life. But Julian wouldn’t be pleased to hear this news reaching the public. If only they knew the girl in that interview was Lucie Benton—then the press would have a field day. And just like that, the world would know everything they weren’t supposed to.

“This exceeds my wildest expectations,”Valentina stirred the pot of my boiling emotions. “How dare he bring you up in an interview like this.” She sounded protective and fierce. Even over the phone, it was clear that the male population could still get her fired up like nothing else. Maybe that’s why she was on a perpetual mission to crush their hearts and move onto her next boyfriend flavor of the month.

“It came at the worst time,” I sighed while fishing for my house keys. I needed the fresh air, so I’d decided to walk to the office unlike most days. Bundled up in a sturdy coat with a cap, I left our apartment complex through the main gate. Will gave me a disapproving look, then hurried into the garage to be able to drive near me at turtle speed.

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“I guess you were right that Andrea wasn’t his happy ending in the end.” I couldn’t help but get a guilty satisfaction out of it, because I still cared if James ended up with someone who wasn’t such a bad influence.

“It’s obvious that he’s talking about you,” she seemed to be on the same page with me that the romance James described as his main inspiration was our college relationship. She had been my roommate for most of the time, witnessing each unfortunate milestone of our eventual downfall. After all my doubts, James managed to earn my trust, only to shatter me in the end in ways that first love never should.

“You have to share with this Julian, Lucie, before the media finds out who the mystery girl is first.” She warned, her voice softening nevertheless.

“You want me to tell him that my ex is now a piano rockstar—if that’s even the right term—and that he claims I’m his inspiration? I don’t think it will go well, Val, please don’t make me.” I furrowed my eyebrows. Julian wouldn’t like this one bit, and I could already picture how he’d react.

“When was the last time you spoke with James anyway?” Val pondered.

I looked back and it was still the day that we’d reunited with Julian. “5th December last year,” I knew the date exactly because it matched the date of a psychic prediction. The one that we’d get back together with Julian. Just thinking of him made me feel better. We’d weather this storm too, I just didn’t want to add this to his plate right before his grand opening in Dubai.

“Lu, you have a great memory.”

“Same day as the rest of my life started,” I hoped she’d know I was referring to the day that I’d officially become Julian’s girlfriend again. Either she understood, or she didn’t question why I remembered the exact date.

“What about talking this out with Oliver? Maybe he can do some damage control?”

It wasn’t a terrible suggestion, but I still cringed at the idea of having to explain everything to Julian’s security guard, who seemed far too serious to be dealing with an untethered love interest from my past. But it was his job to attend to Julian’s best interests and even play the role of PR at times. And I was sure he had people on his team who could figure out a way to silence James.

“Another option is to talk it out with James. I’m sure if you tell him how you feel, he’ll back off, Lucie,” Val suggested. “James wasn’t heartless, and it seems like he’s trying to make up for what he did to you.”

It surprised me that she gave him some credit, but it was also a fair assessment of his character.

“Yeah, it’s come to that,” I concluded. “I’ll call today, assuming I can still get through on his old phone number.” I sighed. “He seems to have quite a following.”

“Let me know how it goes.”

“Most definitely...” My voice cracked. The thought of discussing an old love that had turned toxic made my stomach burn. By the end of it all, James had not only spiraled into addiction but had crossed a few unforgivable lines with me—lines I’d rather not remember. I couldn’t help but sulk at the bitter irony of it all.

I heard a thud as seemingly, Val was moving boxes. “Babe, sorry, I got to run, I am about to meet with the leasing company for our second shop,” she excused herself.

“Good luck, I can’t wait to visit it!” I cheered her on. Lately, a lot of my new wardrobe had come from Val’s designs—I wanted to support her, and thankfully, I now had the funds to do it.

“Speak soon, love!” she ended the call. “And keep me posted.”

“Yeah,” my mood deflated like a punctured balloon, the thought of reaching out to an ex twisting my gut. Exes, they had a way of slipping back into your life—bringing with them a flood of old wounds, old dreams, forgotten pieces of you that never quite healed.

The only reason I felt I could bring myself to do it was because this wasn’t about me—it was for Julian.

It was Christmas time in Seattle, and I’d decided to stay on campus for the holidays. The snow became so heavy that people could hardly walk on the street, but I still made my way to the corner of 8th and Lemon Avenue where you lived. You’d gone home for the holidays to the East Coast, where your big family, including your six sisters gathered for festivities.

At first, there was nothing unusual about the green house I’d come to visit to feed the few fish in your apartment. But for me, the place had become a graveyard to mourn our relationship. Memories of us hit me all once, and I was certain that what drew me to come here was to relive the option to be with you. Aside from just feeding the fish that you cared only enough about to keep them alive.

Freshman year was not my best year. I’d spent much of it on the toilet, facing my eating disorder, and abusing laxatives because they made me feel skinnier. I knew right from wrong, and how the abuse affected my body, but I didn’t value my life enough to do something about it. In some ways, the cramping that I felt as a result of using them, was better than having to face the uncomfortable fullness of my

emotions.

On the outside, I looked strong and intact. Every morning, I went for my routine run, then did my fitness exercises, which shaped my body into perfection and drew the ogling looks of boys in college. And even though I didn't date any of them, their attention filled me with a feeling of relevancy. I put on my heavy make-up to hide any imperfections, my green eyes lined with dark mascara being the most prominent feature on my face, then headed to work at the school dining hall, serving food to other classmates, then cleaning up when everyone left. But I didn't feel less than them. I liked my Cinderella-like job, it reminded me that I could indeed get through the life lesson that my father was trying to put me through.

I approached the door of your apartment building and opened it with the keys you left with me. As I walked in, a familiar smell hit me. The corridor had a distinct air quality, and it wasn't like anything else I'd ever smelled. Maybe it was the combination of sullen carpeting and the mix of people who walked through with their pets. But it wasn't an off-putting smell at all, just different. After years of studying French literature, I finally understood Proust's passage about the madeleine. How a simple taste or smell could transport you—flooding you with memories you hadn't thought of in years. It wasn't the scent itself that did it, but the feeling it evoked. It pulled me back, made me realize just how much of you was in this place.

I got into your apartment as soon as possible because even in my coat I was freezing in this extreme weather. I quickly located the fish tank and tipped a portion of the feeding mix into the aquarium.

The few betta fish gathered on top of the water, their vibrant colors shimmering under the soft light. One fish, with a striking royal blue hue, seemed especially curious, swimming closer as if it appreciated my presence greatly. I leaned in, mesmerized by the delicate movements of its fins.

I looked around, wondering if maybe I could borrow an item of clothing as I'd underestimated the cold. Soon enough, I spotted a pink-purple-striped scarf on the ground. You'd wear something like this because you were so flashy, but even for your taste, this scarf was perhaps too girly. Without giving it further thought, I decided to wrap it around my neck to save myself from getting sick by coming here. I left the lights on for the fish, then couldn't stand another minute in your apartment where we'd almost made love listening to the Last Broadcast by Doves. Plagued by flashbacks, I needed to get out as soon as possible out of this graveyard of what could have been.

Next, I sat on the steps outside, because I wanted to relive the moment that I'd always regret. It was all still so vivid in my memory. The pavement was hot from the summer heat. In the night, you still chose to wear your leather jacket and aviator glasses, maybe because recently, we'd almost watched Top Gun, except I was too timid to show up to join you for a movie night. I liked to spend my evenings alone, in self-loathing.

"Lucie, will you date me?" You asked, your voice steady but laced with a hint of vulnerability.

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I felt my breath catch, a rush of warmth flooding my cheeks as I looked into your eyes—eyes that sparkled with hope and sincerity. Still, I focused too much on the reputation that traveled with you. The girls went in and out of your life like a weekly carton of milk. And most likely, so would I. I wouldn't be able to stand the pain of it. These days, I called my own losses before they happened.

I was holding onto my innocence dearly, afraid that if we went that far with someone like you, it would break me. You smelled of cigarettes and alcohol, but strangely enough, it wasn't repulsive. Instead, I found myself drawn to it, intrigued by your smarts and poise for life.

But the closer we got, the more I felt that tug of fear. After experiencing my dad's drinking, I couldn't get myself to touch alcohol, while you were always drunk at this time of the day. So, it was the thing that put me off but also made me interested in you at the same time. I was pretty sure there was a psychological theory about this. If only I could balance you out, I could maybe heal something that was deeply wrong within me.

It may have been a bore to drag around a girl who was sober at college parties, yet for you, it was worthwhile to stick around. The more I refused to fit in, the more you seemed determined to spend time with me. I could see the way your friends rolled their eyes or whispered behind my back, their contempt echoing through the crowded room. But you always set them straight, defending my conservative ways with a fierce loyalty that warmed my heart. I didn't show it, but I'd never forget the genuineness of you.

Even when the group of eager, pretty blondes clamored for your attention, vying for a

ride in your Discovery, you still found a way to include me. As the only brunette in that sea of golden hair, I felt out of place, yet somehow, I'd captured your interest the most. You'd glance my way, those warm eyes holding mine for just a moment longer as if to say that I was more than just the odd one out.

But I was here now. Alone without you in the dead of the winter. It was right here on this step where I'd said the words that caused me to be here alone in the first place.

"I can't date you, James." I'd let fear creep in. It was self-preservation instinct for sure. It was also everything that was wrong with me in one reply.

As a result of this, something changed on your end. A dark curtain fell over your eyes – and that's when I saw it with clarity, you really liked me. And I'd blown it.

The scarf was most certainly another girl's scarf. You went back to living the life you knew the best. You called it the Good Life because of the Wheezer song, and in that, I was the punk bitter and alone and you were trying to warn me against being like that. Now you had to prove a point to me. And I was too stubborn to do anything about it, to tell you how much I still cared.

Kali's fingers danced across the keyboard, a steady rhythm that mirrored the hum of the office. The palpable tension in the air signaled that Amanda, our stern boss, returned. But unlike my early days at Apogee, I wasn't as intimidated by her anymore. If anything, I felt a sense of relief knowing that she was back overseeing the office.

"You doing okay so far?" I queried as I skimmed her screen glowing with charts and data, a reminder of the relentless pace that we all had to embrace while working long corporate hours, a fact that Julian often pointed out with disgruntlement.

"Everything is great," she lifted her head and smiled. "I am loving it here so far."

Seeing someone else at Sophie's desk still tugged at my heart. I struggled with change, even though I knew it was ultimately for the best. Kali had a warm personality so I hoped we would eventually become good friends too. I slid into my desk, ready to tackle the newest opinion column for our daily app.

"Happy Friday," Misha, our office sycophant, twirled in with the charisma of a can of soda. "It took a while, but we're finally here." He puffed his chest.

"Happy Friday," I managed to sound excited, even though the sight of him annoyed me. And yes, I adored Fridays, especially since they usually meant a late dinner date with Julian, but I wasn't counting down the days of the week with despair from Monday to Wednesday either.

"So, I heard your boyfriend is opening up the Dubai resort this week," Misha teased.

Kali's eyes flicked toward me with curiosity, clearly anticipating his usual verbal diarrhea. She seemed to have already learned the ropes from her own encounters with him.

He straightened his back, jutting his chin out. "Lucie, I have a deal to propose."

Begrudgingly, I narrowed my eyes. I understood that Amanda kept him close to gather information for her about office staff—a secret just between us—but it was definitely not a preference of mine. In my opinion, she would have been better off investing in an eavesdropping system. "What's that, Misha?"

"I'd like to take a few pictures with Julian for my social media, if possible. I think it might impress the girls, you know." He turned beetroot red.

Kali nearly spit out her tea, while trying to hide a chuckle at his vanished bravado.

“What’s the second part of the deal?” Skepticism crept into my voice. What could he possibly offer me in return?

“I have information.” He cleared his throat. “Something in regards to Jess and Sophie.”

I was done with the drama. I exhaled sharply. “Misha, we’ve closed the chapter with Jess recently. And I am not going to ask Julian for pics with you, that’s absurd. Why don’t you try to impress girls by becoming an upstanding citizen instead?” I raised my eyebrows. It was a warning not to push my buttons. “Maybe try not to park in disabled spots without a pass.” I was now beginning to sound like Sophie who had never gotten along with Misha. Had he been pestering her like this for years?

Kali glued her eyes to the screen, but her mouth stayed twisted in a mischievous grin.

“Miss Benton, my office,” a smooth voice sliced through the air. With the faintest sound of her light steps, Amanda strode in like a puma on the prowl. Her eyes swept the room, sharp and calculating, as she glided toward us. I couldn’t help but wonder if she’d overheard Misha’s little bargain, but it seemed unlikely. If she had, she would’ve shot him a deadly glance by now.

“Coming!” I leaped to my feet, eager to escape the awkward conversation.

“Chou chou of the office,” a nearby coworker whispered in a condescending tone.

And I couldn’t blame them for this nickname. At times, Amanda’s fascination with me felt almost morally wrong. Yes, I’d worked hard for it, and perhaps was great at my job, but the spotlight of Julian’s publicity had taken my career to new heights, pushing it into overdrive. Still, they only saw the success—none of them saw the struggle that came with it.

I followed Amanda intently, drawn in by the way her smooth, long ponytail swayed with each step, its rhythmic motion a testament to her poise. Soon, we reached her office, which felt more like a museum dedicated to her achievements. Displayed prominently were her Doctorates in Business and Literature, along with several prestigious accolades, including magazine covers like Vogue, National Magazine Awards, and the Harvard Humanitarian Award. Harper, her Bengali cat with striking leopard-like markings, immediately scampered over to greet me. According to Amanda, Harper usually retreated to the closet when visitors arrived, yet somehow, every time I came, we seemed to connect effortlessly, and she welcomed me with a warmth that defied her usual aloofness.

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“How was the time I was away?” She jumped straight into conversation.

“Everything’s fine. Kali’s set,” I left out the app glitch that had almost shut us down and the all-nighter I’d pulled. It had been a hellish week.

“I am glad to hear that,” she assumed her seat, while inviting me to do the same. “Kali’s had a tough life, so I appreciate any support you can give her. I know it’s not something I need to ask, since it’s just in your nature to be kind.”

I gave it a subtle nod.

“Her role here is to be an assistant, and I’d like you to monitor her tasks and use her help whenever necessary. Her strengths are digital platforms so utilize her for all key features needed.”

“Thanks, Amanda.” I definitely needed the extra help.

“What specific needs do you have at the moment?” She jumped straight to business.

“Managing subscriptions, we’ve unfortunately received customer feedback that there are glitches with the free trial. I’d also like to see more interactive content, maybe that’s something Kali can project manage.”

“Offline access, I want to be sure we have that available as well.” Amanda petted Harper who was now walking across the desk. “Our user engagement is impressive. We’ve been analyzing the data this morning, and you’ve really outdone the projections we had for this.” She looked visibly delighted. “I had a nice time in Italy

and I didn't even need to think about my business."

"I guess I have a good sphere of influence." Staying humble was important to me in my industry where relevance didn't last unless you continued to succeed.

"Not just that, but yes, your relationship with Julian certainly makes a difference," she fixed me with a pointed, amused gaze. "But you know my opinion on men, we must keep on keeping on without them. We don't want him to take credit for your accomplishments either. It's not the case that you are successful because of him."

I understood what she was trying to say.

"There's something else I wanted to discuss with you, and I think this might be the perfect opportunity to give your sense of independence a boost." Her tone shifted to one of greater gravity, surpassing its usual weight.

I swallowed. I didn't need another task on my plate. Even with a new assistant, I'd still be underwater at this point in time.

"I'm selling Apogee," she announced, delivering the news like a shockwave.

What did this mean for us? Would we lose our jobs? Damn, I hadn't seen this coming.

Amanda didn't wait for my reaction to continue. "I'm taking Apogee public through an IPO with Hart Media," she explained, her tone resolute. "We'll bring in investors to raise capital and expand. It's a big move, but it will be the right one for the company's future. At the moment, I am considering retirement, Lucie," she elaborated.

I tried to hide any worry, not to put her off with my weakness. I'd definitely be able

to find a new job with my references, but Apogee had become a source of joy. It also offered much-needed stability in the otherwise harsh and lonely realm of fame alongside my billionaire crush. Not that I wanted to wallow in self-pity, but dating someone like Julian—someone with that kind of power—was far from the fairy tale most women probably envisioned. Apogee helped soften some of the loneliness that came with it.

“Retirement?” I fluttered my eyes. After losing Sophie, losing Amanda would be another hard transition.

“Once the investment bank determines the number and cost of shares, I’d like you to consider buying in,” she suggested confidently. “It’s not a goodbye, Lucie. By no means.”

Buying in? I hardly had about \$20,000 in the bank. And I was still paying for school loans.

“Amanda, there’s no way for me to come up with the funds. And I really don’t have any family to ask for help.” I sloped my eyes. “I mean, I cannot ask Julian.”

She shot me a meaningful yet cryptic glance. “I wasn’t expecting that you’d have the money now,” she fiddled with a folder in front of her. “Consider getting creative with how you obtain it. An IPO takes about six months. One of the reasons why I’ve also been away is that the preparation for it takes time.”

I slightly relaxed. At least there wasn’t a current threat to my current job security. I’d have some time to figure things out.

“I plan to retain control through A shares, which will have superior voting rights,” she continued. “I’d like you to secure enough shares so that, between the two of us, we own all of them. I’m confident that in just a few years, you’ll see a substantial

return on your investment. With the influx of investor capital, the possibilities are limitless.”

Maybe her “retirement” wasn’t going to be a complete exit after all. It sounded more like a shift in how she’d retain control, just from a distance. But I wondered how I fit into this vision.

“So, it’s not just Apogee you’re going public with?” I queried nervously.

She narrowed her gaze, likely amused by my naïveté. “No, Lucie, Hart Media is an umbrella brand. This magazine is my most successful venture, but I also own a publishing house with multiple divisions. Few people know, for instance, that I own Hart & Quill Press. I’ll send you the full list of brands today for you to check out. But Hart & Quill is the one I think you’d be most interested in per your application to work for me.”

She remembered something I’d written over a year ago? I’d read a few books published by them but had no idea the publishing house was under Amanda’s ownership. Just recently, I’d talked to Julian about my dream of working in publishing. Now, Amanda had managed to spark my curiosity—or maybe just dangle a dream in front of me that seemed completely out of reach.

“Do you plan to stay CEO?” An urgent desire to envision the future led me to ask this personal question. She was also somewhat of a workaholic and control freak, neither one of these two characteristics conducive to retirement.

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“Yes, Lucie, but I would prefer at this point to become more of a face of the business,” she shared with me. “I am planning to relocate to New York, at least half of each year. I want to be more around my son too.”

I finally understood. This was about her family.

“He and his wife are expecting a baby in the fall,” she beamed. “But please keep this private, as I prefer when the media stays out of my personal life.”

It finally clicked—she was about to become a grandmother. She’d had her son when she was young.

“I want my business to be a legacy.” She declared passionately, running a hand through Harper’s coat. “Jayden, however, he’s not interested in publishing.”

Her son was a renowned surgeon.

“Yet, I’ve built an empire that I want to monetize and watch flourish. Still, I don’t believe board members, investors, and most shareholders should dictate how my company is run. Their only role should be to secure more funds for additional ventures,” she explained further.

“What do you estimate the cost of the A shares to be?” I cleared my throat. I’d only worked for her close to two years now, so it seemed preposterous to even be considering me for anything else but maybe middle management.

She leaned back slightly, considering my question. “Well, if we look at the

company's current valuation, I'd estimate it to be more than 1 billion. You'd need around 13 million to retain ownership of at least twenty percent of A shares, the minimum requirement to be in a leadership role. Those are, of course, estimates, and it's still dependent on the investment bank pricing. If it ends up being more, I'll work with you. And as a bonus, you can have Hart & Quillfull A share ownership."

She was giving me six months to make 13 million dollars? Merde, I cursed out silently in French, because my Gram's language was always best used to express intense emotions. I glanced at Amanda, trying to mask my unease. She'd made an utterly impossible proposal unless I'd want to be a "kept" woman, a notion that she utterly despised herself.

"If I can't come up with the sum, would you consider keeping all A shares?" I pondered out loud. If she wanted to retain control over the business, she didn't need my help.

She stood up, gazing at the skyline that framed San Diego's Coronado Bridge. For a moment, she closed her eyes, allowing the distant sounds of the city to wrap around her like a well-known comfort. The sun hung low in the sky, casting a warm glow that made her look almost regal.

"This isn't just about business, my dear Lucie. It's about recognizing potential," her voice carried a weight of conviction. "You've shown me what you're capable of, and I want you to have a stake in this company, to truly be a part of its future. I know this may require some effort on your part, but I believe you have what it takes to step up. And to answer your question, yes, I fully intend to keep all A-shares unless you can secure the funds. But I see you as a strong business partner, not just an employee. At least think about this opportunity. You can't be a high officer unless you own twenty percent."

High officer? I'd been at Apogee for barely two years, so the thought of being placed

anywhere beyond middle management felt completely out of the question.

“Here,” she said, handing me a stack of papers. “I don’t want to overwhelm you, Lucie,” she added, her tone almost apologetic. “For now, I’d like you to apply to a few of these MBA programs. I don’t care where you go, as long as it’s accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. Apogee is covering the cost as part of your position here. Please have Kali take on as much of your workload as possible, so you can make time for this.”

MBA? I walked in expecting just another assignment, and now she wanted me to pursue a degree. But there was no time to process it. She was my boss. Or was she becoming more? I lost my mom a long time ago and never had anyone to truly guide me—until Amanda came along. As a powerful Black woman, she had become the support I never knew I needed.

“I’ll give it all some thought!” I blurted out, trying to hide the sadness that was starting to creep in. I knew earning a degree was doable, but finding the extra money to buy into her business was another matter entirely. I wanted to keep the conversation going, to learn more about her vision, but instead, she gestured toward the exit and dove back into her packed schedule.

She’d left me reeling, the shock of her words echoing in my mind like a thunderclap, shaking me to my core. It wasn’t just what she’d proposed—it was the way she said it, as if she had the ability to bend reality itself with a single glance. She wielded her power like a master sculptor, shaping trends and carving outpaths for others to follow, her decisions leaving a mark on the literary world that felt as heavy as history itself. And yet, there I was, caught in the wake of her influence, trying to make sense of a future that had just been thrust upon me. The weight of her expectations settled on my shoulders, and I could almost feel the pressure of the decision she had laid out for me. My mind raced, torn between the opportunity she was offering and the daunting reality of what it might take to grasp it.

I decided to take a long walk home. The cool evening air brushed against my skin, a welcome contrast to the whirly uncomfortable feelings that had built up inside me. I could suddenly feel the burden of the day's anxieties begin to melt, replaced by a sense of clarity. I could either choose to stagnate or embrace the opportunities ahead.

You okay baby? Julian texted when I was a few minutes from home, his security guard tailing me closely. He could be quite intuitive, knowing when something was off with me. Over time, we'd developed a remarkable connection, leading me to believe even the most far-fetched stories about love relationships. With that, Sophie had recently made me a believer in the twin flame theory, a concept from New Age spiritualism. It suggested that twin flames reflected each other's unresolved issues, fears, and insecurities—leading to intense challenges and profound growth. When I met Julian, I definitely felt pushed to confront parts of myself I had long avoided or hid.

Be safe out there, he followed up.

I hated the fact that I'd now had two secrets to keep away from him. I didn't want to tell him about the 13 million, because I knew he was used to throwing his money at problems and I didn't want him to do that. It's an investment and you can pay me back, I knew what he'd say. But this was entirely about me making my way in the world. Then I also remembered. I'd forgotten to deal with James, another issue that I'd have to face soon without Julian's knowledge, if possible.

I am. I just needed some time to myself, walking through the city. Work's been hectic, and you know I can be a bit of an introvert sometimes. Just trying to gather my thoughts after a busy day. I messaged candidly. The lights of El Cortez flickered, as they often did, with a few of the neon letters stubbornly refusing to shine, casting an uneven glow over the street.

I made a reservation for us at Mister A's. We got the whole deck for ourselves. Julian

offered.

Mister A's was an elegant French eatery on Fifth Avenue, just a few blocks from where we lived. Perched atop the Manchester Building, it featured a stunning 180-degree view of the San Diego skyline. There was no other place I'd rather be on a Friday night than at that exact location.

Thrilled! He possibly had to rent the whole restaurant to make such an evening happen, so I would hurry home to make the most out of it.

I only needed to shoot a quick message to Sophie, because there was nobody else I'd rather consult about things on my mind than her. I felt that a conversation with her would help me see some solutions. Sophie's schedule booked up fast, and it most certainly had to be something in the morning, as in the afternoon, she was usually doing open houses for her listings.

Wanna grab brunch this Saturday, maybe after Pure Barre? I keyed while I approached our apartment. Ever since she'd started going out with Mark and working as a realtor, we'd both built a separate social life with our partners. I'd need to work harder to maintain our friendship as strong as before, but I would.

Lu, I'm in! she replied instantly. I could almost envision her goldfish mouth and over-the-top reaction when I'd tell her about Amanda's outrageous proposal. Her dramatic reactions were just one of the many things I missed when not seeing her daily at work anymore. But I'd been adjusting to her absence. As long as she was still around, I'd deal.

Julian and I strolled hand in hand along Fifth Avenue. Thrilled that he was in the mood for an evening walk, I nestled up beside him in a half-embrace.

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“Friday feels good,” I remarked while looking forward to our elegant dinner. It was our last weekend before his trip to Dubai, so I intended to savor every moment of looking at Julian’s stunning face from every angle. I still couldn’t believe he was mine, and I doubted that sentiment would ever change. Yet, in some inexplicable way, it also felt completely natural, like I’d always belonged next to him. On one side, he was the unattainable billionaire on the covers of magazines, on the other side he was my best friend, seeking a sense of normalcy like everyone else.

“Have you thought about taking a couple of days off? Maybe we could go on a trip when I get back, Lucie.” He teased me with the idea of a vacation. “You mentioned you’d want to visit Tahiti.” He looked particularly suave today in his designer Versace coat, expertly tailored to his frame, complete with matching gloves.

I sighed. “I don’t think I can justify the time off, Julian. Amanda just threw a new request my way—she wants me to complete an MBA on top of everything. In a year.” I exhaled sharply.

It felt odd to mention this to him, especially since he had never even finished college. Everything he’d achieved in real estate was entirely self-taught. Yet here he was, one of the wealthiest people in California and the CEO of multiple companies. Most people with prestigious degrees couldn’t match his business acumen or compete with his understanding of transactions. Julian probably hired people with MBAs to do work for him, the work he didn’t want to do himself. He didn’t necessarily have a disdain for degrees; he just didn’t care to get them.

“Amanda’s very good at keeping you away from me,” he smirked. “But Lucie, if it’s what you want to do... What school have you decided on?”

“I’ve been going through the brochures Amanda gave me. I think I’ve settled on LSU, Louisiana State University. They are accredited with the certification that Amanda wants, yet they have flexibility. Classes start in two weeks if I get accepted. All online, of course. They don’t require the GMAT, which will save me some time too.”

“Anything I can do to support you?” He squeezed my hand. We exchanged glances and I suddenly began to feel guilty for not volunteering the second part of my conversation with Amanda. “There’s something else,” I croaked. “But you have to promise me you won’t try to solve it for me.” I paused in my tracks and gazed into his sincere eyes.

The lights of the city twinkled around us and it was a comfortable evening for our stroll. Downtown, even the area of Bankers Hill, those have been streets that felt like home now. I used to wander them alone, perhaps on my bicycle, now I walked them hand in hand with the love of my life. At least I presumed he was. So, I decided that I should tell him what was bothering me, not to feel so alone with it. Julian deserved to be in the know too.

“Amanda is selling Apogee. She’s offered me to buy in. To become a partner.”

I expected him to immediately try to put a bandage over my bleeding wound.

“And you want to get there on your own.” He finished my train of thought. “Why you were hesitant to tell me first place.” He analyzed correctly.

“It just wouldn’t feel right, Julian, to borrow money from you. I am sorry, I hope you understand that I couldn’t accept it.”

“How much?” He gave me an inquisitive glance.

“Around \$13 million. It’s twenty percent of A shares, the minimum requirement for Apogee’s future business executives.” I sighed. “Basically, way more than I have in my bank account.” I tried not to sound depressed. “Way more than that’s realistic for me to earn in a year when I need it.”

He offered a slight smile at my desperate joke. “I’m glad you told me, Lucie.”

“You know better than anyone what it feels like to be self-made. To get there on your own.”

He nodded in understanding. “You don’t want to mix work and pleasure, but you’re willing to embrace all the challenges that come with being with me. If I can help make a dream come true for you, it’s the least I can do. But I am not going to press.”

“I believe I’ll find a way to whatever is meant for me.” It was important for me to maintain a sense of independence. “Not to lose my life’s purpose.”

“That’s why I love you, Lucie. You’re innocent.” He held the door open for me as we approached the restaurant’s elevator.

“And hungry,” I murmured, as I glued my eyes on the menu displayed in a standing frame nearby.

“Just don’t tell Rose that Mister’s Mac and Cheese beats hers,” Julian quickly changed subjects. “I’ve been looking forward to ordering it all day.” Despite everything I’d dropped on him earlier, he seemed to be in a cheerful mood.

I chuckled. “I disagree. Nothing’s better than Rose’s cooking.” It was refreshing to have opposing opinions on something.

The elevator door slid shut with a softwhirr, and he pivoted to face me. “It turns me

on when we argue anyway.” My back pressed against the wall as he pulled me into an intense, unexpected kiss. I couldn’t focus on anything but the sudden rush, his hands climbing up my thighs, hiking up my skirt. I ran my fingers through his hair while he grabbed my ass and propped me against the railing. “Fuck, this feels good,” he groaned. His scent delivered a slice of heaven to my nostrils.

The mutual understanding between us that this would be over before it started made the entire experience even more fun. How quickly could we look put together again? I slid down the railing and adjusted my skirt right before the elevator door opened with a ring.

While wiping his lips, he grabbed my hand once again, and then headed toward the receptionist.

I was fairly certain the staff had picked up on the telltale signs of a couple who’d just shared a brief make-out session. Usually, though, Oliver, Julian’s head of security, made sure all the necessary documents were signed to keep anyone from as much as peeping about what they’d witnessed. A fact that would indisputably work in our favor.

Our waitress hurried over, flashing us a welcoming smile and inviting us to follow her next.

“Truffle fries, we have to get those,” Julian exclaimed as she ushered us to our table on the outside deck. The view of San Diego from the 12th floor was breathtaking, enough to make us feel like we were literally on top of the world. We could see the entire downtown and Little Italy, along with the harbor. And as expected, there were no other people there. The entire place was ours for the night.

To my surprise, he had adorned the entire deck with an array of crimson roses, their vibrant colors creating a stunning contrast against the backdrop of the city. Each

bouquet was carefully arranged, filling the air with a sweet fragrance that mingled with the breeze.

“So gorgeous,” I took in the decorations in awe. “All for just a date?” He’d really taken this seriously.

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“Would you like a drink?” an older waiter, dressed in a stylish French waitstaff uniform interrupted us, drawing my attention away from the beautiful surprise. He had a distinguished air about him, with silvering hair neatly combed back and a neatly trimmed mustache that added to his refined appearance. His calm, steady movements reflected years of experience, and the warmth in his eyes suggested a genuine desire to make his guests feel welcome.

“Please, a glass of Malbec,” I quickly decided. Julian followed suit by choosing another red wine from the list. I couldn’t help but feel like he was trying hard for everything to be perfect. We shared perfectionistic tendencies, except I’d lately been embracing more of authenticity. They weren’t necessarily mutually exclusive, though. Perfect authenticity turned easily into art, as my mom used to say.

The waiter jotted down a few notes and then vanished into the back. The candle on the table flickered gently in the cool air.

“Thank you,” I looked at Julian, while he helped me in my seat. “The setting is absolutely gorgeous,” I remarked, taking in the elegance of the surroundings.

“It’s nothing, Lucie.” His eyes shone like molten silver, but there was something different about them today—an unusual confidence. I liked it, and attributed it to his recent new Lamborghini purchase. The custom white Aventador had been his childhood dream, a seemingly impossible wish for a little boy growing up in scarcity and abuse, turning into reality. He had to turn into a billionaire to finally justify such an expense without guilt. It was a milestone, and I felt honored to be part of it.

“It’s more than just a car. It’s part of my story.” He’d said to me earlier.

I knew the tales behind his scars. Yeah, it was most definitely the new car, I thought.

“Are you excited for Dubai?” I asked, eager to fuel the flame of his success. The resort was about to become a monumental return on his investment.

“Not as excited as I should be because you’re not coming.” He flashed me a brilliant smile. It would always be my favorite feature of his. It reached his eyes, which sparkled with genuine warmth. Aside from his communication skills, I’d identified it as the one reason why he’d gotten so ahead in life.

But he didn’t need to remind me. Days apart could feel like weeks apart at a time.

“You know what they say. Absence makes the heart grow fonder...” I reminded him of this well-worn cliché.

“My heart grows fonder when you’re in my bed,” he objected.

I narrowed my gaze. “How about we make up for it all tonight?” I suggested playfully.

“Let’s not sleep then,” he sent me a mischievous grin.

A blush crept up my cheeks. Could our passionate relationship be any better? No, it couldn’t. It transcended anything I’d ever felt or experienced with anyone. He leaned in closer, his lips just inches from mine, making my breath catch. But then, as if caught by some sudden thought, he straightened and gave me a knowing look. “Will you excuse me?” Julian suddenly stood up.

“Go ahead,” I nodded, figuring he probably needed to use the bathroom after our long walk. He gave me a lingering smile before heading off, his departure leaving a quiet space between us. I let my thoughts wander before the waitress showed up with our

two glasses of wine. I didn't wait for Julian to return before taking a sip. A warm glow spread through me, much like a wave of relief. Everything seemed less of a problem on the 12th floor of Mister A's, while I was on a fabulous date with the best-looking man alive, it wasn't just my tipsy opinion either. Sober Esquire had backed me up on this one, declaring him a heartthrob in one of their polls. It was the one time I actually agreed with a superficial survey like that.

I took my phone out to snap a photo of the stunning view, then noticed I'd received a new message.

What did James say? It was Val. She typically didn't care much about this kind of stuff, so it surprised me that she was so invested. My phone dinged as she sent a link. James Stone Hints at Mystery Ex-Girlfriend Behind His Latest Music, the headline read.

Not yet, work was cray today. I typed. I found out Amanda is selling her company.

You better act fast baby girl, before this gets out of control. She seemed so focused on James that she didn't even comment on the fact I was about to potentially lose my job.

Okay, maybe the 12th floor couldn't save me from everything. Unless I planned to toss my phone over the edge. I might have considered it, but then I remembered how it also fed my dopamine addiction. Like everyone else my age, I couldn't stay away from my phone for too long.

"Everything okay?" Julian reappeared, seemingly noticing my sudden frustration.

"Yeah, everything's perfect," I convinced us both, determined not to let the memory of an ex ruin our special day. "I'm just trying to decide on something from the menu." I pulled the booklet closer. "I'm tempted to order a steak with you," knowing

full well what he'd choose. However, among my New Year's resolutions, still lingering in the back of my mind, was to eat less red meat. I felt guilty for the animals and the planet, so I decided I'd exercise some restraint this time.

I quickly scanned the menu for fish options, but most were cooked, except for an appetizer called Bluefin Tuna Tiradito. It was an easy first choice; I always gravitated toward raw fish when I had the chance. "You know I'll have the Tuna appetizer as the main," I concluded the decision-making process. "And yes, let's do a side of truffle fries."

The waiter returned just in time to overhear our conversation and take our order.

What a contrast to my diet a year ago, when I was on a tight budget and could barely afford anything beyond simple meals from Grocery Outlet. I'd never stop being grateful for my change of luck. I'd made some bold decisions to get to where I was now, but still, I couldn't take any of it for granted.

"I'll go with the ribeye," Julian thanked the waitress while she grabbed both of our menus. "Medium done, please."

It was a balmy night, so we didn't even need the heat lamps around us. Still, they brought a pleasant warmth to the experience.

"Maybe instead of going to Tahiti, Lucie, we could take a weekend trip to visit your Gram." He proposed. "I'd love to see more of your home again."

I grinned. "You know you can always convince me to join you on a trip like that."

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“Great, I’ll tell Oliver to schedule it.” He proceeded to send the message right away.

I finally decided to snap the picture I’d been meaning to take. The skyline at this time of day was stunning, with the city shimmering in the distance. Julian had truly crafted an extraordinary life for us in every way. We’d made countless memories together, from our first date nights in the hidden bars of the Gaslamp District to the moment he bought me the rose he transformed into a glazed forever rose. Then there were the times spent on the water aboard his yacht, *Trading Yesterday*. It was still possible to see the yacht all the way from Mister A’s.

Suddenly, a wave of melancholy washed over me. I was his girl now, and I had everything. But if he ever decided I wasn’t the one, would I ever be able to find myself again? This thought crept in perhaps too often. Deep down, I feared loss and loneliness—after losing my mom unexpectedly and then also finding out about James and Andrea— I still struggled to believe in happy endings. Without him noticing, I studied Julian’s features. He could easily have been an actor if he weren’t so analytical; for this reason, business suited him perfectly. He could be cold and emotionless when he needed to be, but this didn’t mean that privately, he often didn’t fall apart—sometimes in my arms too. I loved that we were so vulnerable with each other. With how much our past hurt us, and with how it turned us into the independent people we’d become.

He tugged at my protective instincts. He’d never had the things in life that most people took for granted—a mom and dad, for starters. I felt an urge to fill that void, no matter how impossible of a task it was. He’d filled that void for me to some extent. I wasn’t looking into the past as much.

He raised his eyes from his phone. As if he knew I was overthinking again.

“Done deal. Oliver said we leave in two weeks. I’m going to miss you in the meantime. You know what would make me feel better?”

“I have a pretty good idea what it may be,” I was certain it involved our mind-blowing sex, perhaps my lips wrapped around... I hid myself behind the dessert menu, trying to contain the heat rising in my cheeks. Could we just for once not talk about making out?

“Marry me.”

I flinched so fast that the menu slipped from my hands and fell onto the table with a soft thud. Julian was now, visibly on his knees, looking up at me with a mix of mischief and sincerity. The bustling restaurant faded into a blur as I focused solely on him, his hopeful gaze locked onto mine.

I hadn’t realized that this entire evening had been an elaborate plan to propose. The choice of venue was so like Julian—to combine everything we adored. Nothing overboard, nothing foreign. Just us, wrapped in the familiarity of our favorite restaurant, overlooking the city views that we cherished, and utter privacy for me to decide on a response, without the pressure of an outside audience.

My heart pounded in my chest when I noticed he naturally had a box. He opened the box, revealing the ring inside. It was beyond stunning, catching the soft light of the restaurant and sparkling with a brilliance that spoke volumes about the seriousness of his question.

But I was too lost in the thought of what this offer represented —commitment, adventure, and a future intertwined. Kids, would we have kids? I was 25, perhaps it wasn’t something he’d want in the near future, I hoped. Not that I didn’t want to

become the mother of his children someday.

“There will never be anyone else but you. Will you marry me, Lucie?” His voice wavered with a hint of nervous vulnerability. My wide eyes probably made him doubt my response, but honestly, I was just trying to slow everything down.

I’d seen it coming, just not in this moment. He’d done his research, had carefully mapped out our dreams for the future to make sure they aligned. Not unexpectedly, happy tears clung to my lashes, blurring the edges of the world around us. “Absolutely yes,” I exclaimed, kneeling next to him, holding his hands around the ring box. Before I could fully process it, his lips crashed into mine, soft and urgent. “I love you,” he whispered against my mouth.

Husband and wife. We’d become family to each other, forging a bond that was stronger than the curses our families had faced. We melted into an embrace, without anyone walking in on us, the staff well aware that he’d want it that way.

“Can we go back to the start?” Sophie pleaded, swirling the straw in her boba tea with the same intensity she displayed while watching *The Bachelor*. The tapioca pearls danced in the cup, mirroring her restless energy. As always, she looked incredible, her blonde hair styled in glamorous waves reminiscent of stars from the ‘50s. The soft curls framed her face beautifully, echoing the iconic look of Jayne Mansfield. Her vintage floral dress accentuated her curves, which drew the ogling looks of the male audience around us. We’d chosen a small Bankers Hill coffee shop, then tugged ourselves away in a corner to have a conversation.

“It was a simple, yet perfect proposal,” I explained, recalling Julian’s plan to ask me at Mister A’s. “He really managed to catch me off guard, which I think was the point—choosing a setting that didn’t give it away ahead of time,” I speculated. Part of me had known it was coming, but I hadn’t expected Julian to decide so quickly. But I liked the fact that he was as certain about us as I was. It made the moment feel real,

like we were both moving forward without hesitation.

“Show me your hand again,” she commanded, urging me to extend it in front of her.

I gladly obeyed, knowing that upsetting Sophie could trigger her heart condition. But beyond that, sharing the ring with one of my dearest friends filled me with genuine joy. In that moment, there was no one else I could have imagined sharing my excitement with, especially since we’d decided to wait until later to tell my Gram in person.

“Oh my god, I can’t believe he chose a round diamond! It means eternal love, unity, and perfection.” Her eyes glistened at the sight of Julian’s choice. “When is the wedding?” Her eyes lit up with anticipation.

“You know, we haven’t honestly talked about it yet. I don’t think either one of us is in a rush. And I haven’t even told you that Amanda wants me to finish an MBA in 10 months. So, definitely not before that.” I still needed to finish my application for the program.

She rolled her eyes. “Wow, Amanda is really throwing some challenges your way. What’s her game with this?”

I had to admit, my boss certainly knew how to keep things interesting. It was part of Amanda’s allure.

“We all know she likes you a lot,” Sophie notes. “She likes Julian, too. After all, he’s added value to her empire.” She pouted slightly as we waited for our hot drinks to arrive. “It might not be anything malicious, but at times it really feels like they’re competing over you—two megalomaniac magnates with colossal egos. I know I’m being blunt, especially since you’re marrying one of them, but you already recognize that Julian is the T. rex of real estate.”

Did Julian have the reputation of being ruthless in business? “What makes you say that Sophie?” By this point, she understood his real estate strategies far better than I did.

“Well, for one, he controls a huge portion of the investor market, uses the most aggressive strategy anyone’s ever seen, and his mere presence has the power to intimidate even the most seasoned agents,” she listed, outlining his strengths.

“I suppose that’s a fair summary.” Still, in my humble view, Julian was mostly just a punk still trying to figure out how to grow up. I didn’t know him from this side, though, except for the way his decisions seemed to turn into money almost overnight.

“And let’s be real,” Sophie continued. “Amanda’s ultimate goal in life is to be more famous than Oprah Winfrey. That’s not going to happen, by the way. It’s only natural that the two of them both want the majority of your time.”

I cackled. “I get your point. It’s just that I have an interest in what Amanda has to offer.” I didn’t like the idea of starting over, not if I could grow with my current position. I was now preparing to tell her the rest.

“Yeah,” Sophie winced. “But can we at least start wedding planning?” She eagerly jumped into the preparations.

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I didn't have a mom or a sister, so having her help meant a lot. "Yes. First things first. Will you be my maid of honor?" I'd need to have two at a minimum since Valentina had reserved that spot years ago. I was also quite certain that she'd be the one designing our bridesmaid dresses.

"Absolutely," she beamed. "What color theme are you thinking for the ceremony?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "No idea. We want to do something small and private. Neither one of us has too many family members to invite." I briefly remembered the text from my dad. Should I let him know that I got engaged? He'd find out eventually from the news anyway. Whether we would invite him was doubtful.

"Julian and I want to tell my Gram in person, so we are not telling the media as of now. Not until he comes back from Dubai." The least we could do is announce it while coming for a visit. That way Gram could feel special.

Meanwhile, I knew I could trust Sophie to keep our secret, and that was just one of the many reasons I felt so close to her. She never had a hidden agenda; her genuine kindness meant she was always focused on the happiness of those around her. Perhaps her guilt over her father's wealth and her privileged life fueled her desire to be a source of light for others.

"Makes sense," she eyed me curiosity. "Now what's the thing you wanted to talk about today?"

"How do you know there's more?"

She narrowed her gaze. “I can tell by your demeanor. You’re nervous about something, and it’s not the fact you’re getting married. And it’s not the MBA either.”

“Amanda is selling her business.” I blurted out. “The whole Hart Media, which is an umbrella company of several brands that she’d founded.”

She gasped in shock. This was the dramatic reaction I’d been expecting. “To who? Another private person?” She guessed next.

“Not quite. She’s going public with the company. The timeline for the whole IPO is a little less than a year from now.”

Sophie crossed her arms with an air of concern. “So, there’s going to be restructuring, and maybe new management. Are you thinking of finding a new job? I am sorry, Lucie.” She frowned. “You’re definitely going through a ton of changes lately. Good and bad.” She winked. “Mostly good.”

I shook my head. “It gets weirder than that.”

Her eyes widened. “Okay?”

“She’s wanting to maintain ownership of all A-shares, with the exception of making an offer to me, to buy a portion of these. The investment company requires that any executive officer owns at least twenty percent. Amanda is hoping she can remain the face of the company but have someone else, perhaps myself, be there daily.”

I had her full attention now. “Lucie, where does Amanda think you’ll get the funds? She knows better than to expect these to come from Julian.” She sounded somewhat dismissive.

“I honestly don’t think she knows how I could come up with the finances for it. I’m

pretty sure she'd discourage me from asking him, though." Amanda could be considered somewhat of a feminist. She would never ask a man for money. "But she is concerned that if she leaves Apogee, the business will change for the worse. Jayden, her son, doesn't want to take it over."

"Julian is going to be your husband. It wouldn't be out of line to have him invest with you." She reminded me. "Lucie, I grew up in a wealthy family. Thanks to my dad's influence, I am now growing a six-figure real estate business. Do you think I'd be a top producer in my brokerage without it? Within two months? Life is about taking advantage of your unfair advantage." She said with a conviction.

"I know what you mean, but this is different."

"How so?" She puckered her eyebrows. "You're used to struggle? You haven't exactly been dealt the best cards. Maybe the universe is trying to give back some karma, by making sure your hubby is able to help you achieve your goals." She was now referring to the fact that I lost my mom early on, and that my father was an egoistic self-absorbed man.

It was a sweet thought, and perhaps she even had a point. "Because it's everything I've ever wanted. To be an executive at a large publishing business. But if I take money from him to get there, it's never going to feel like an accomplishment."

She shook her head vigorously. "Realistically, how could you obtain money to buy into a billion-dollar business."

"Yeah, I know. It's around \$13 million. Twenty percent of A shares."

She frowned. "You know, the other day I had the flu, so I was watching Land Before Time. Not the original movie, the kids' series on YouTube."

I wasn't sure where she was going with this, but I was curious and eager to hear the story she was about to share.

“I clicked on it out of pure nostalgia. It was sort of silly.”

Now it made sense how she'd come up with the T. rex analogy earlier. “I love the original movie but never saw the series.” I chuckled.

“Well, you know Littlefoot, right? He had to prove he could be a leader by crossing a volcano river. He thought he was about to fail the test because he couldn't find a safe way across. But his grandfather reassured him that he had actually passed since the challenge was impossible otherwise, and surviving was the real achievement. This situation feels similar. Amanda is setting you up for disappointment. She knows you can't get the money without asking the one person you really don't want to approach.”

“I think Amanda believes I have a shot at it, Sophie.” I objected. “She's beyond ambitious in her own life.”

“Maybe, if you'd be willing to monetize your relationship.”

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I sighed. “I know this may sound impossible, but I am not entirely giving up on hope to make the money myself. And if it doesn’t work out, I assume Amanda will retain ownership of all A-shares, and perhaps still give me a position equal to the one I have now.” I knew the vision of myself owning a publishing business would nibble at me, though. Furthermore, Julian’s life goals had a way of spreading inspiration. Maybe a part of me wanted to show that I could rise to his level.

“There is something else?” She sent me a look of disbelief.

I was starting to worry that this was too much news in one day for her. I could never forgive myself if I was the reason why she fell ill with her heart problems.

“It’s really a minor issue—probably not worth mentioning. How about we grab some ice cream afterward and take a stroll in Balboa Park?” I suggested, shifting the topic.

The waitress finally brought out my strong coffee. It would help with the headache from having too many celebratory drinks.

“Your coffee could keep an elephant awake for days,” Sophie remarked as she watched me swirl my six-shot espresso.

“We pulled an all-nighter yesterday. After our engagement, we headed to a skatepark,” I explained, detailing our shenanigans. “Julian and I just felt like blowing off some steam, you know.” I wide grin spread across my face.

“Skatepark?” She raised her eyebrow. “Julian’s always in a suit, and I’ve never realized he had an edge to him. That’s hot.”

“Yeah, we both used to skateboard when we were younger.” I volunteered. “We wanted to do something memorable together. He’s way better than I am, though, at skating.”

“Wow, Lucie. I am impressed! You’re marrying a skater boy.” She began chanting the lyrics of the old Avril Lavigne song. We were that generation that grew up singing it.

“Overall, I had only two hours of sleep. I didn’t want to cancel on you last minute.” I shot her an amused glance.

“Next time you should. Lack of sleep really changes my mood. I get overwhelmed easily, and I am sure it’s the same for everyone else.”

“I am really glad I am here with you,” I mustered a convincing smile. Talking to Sophie always brought me a sense of comfort.

“Lucie, my heart can handle it.” She assured me. “Whatever it is. Spill the beans.”

“It’s not such a big deal.” The beautiful ring sparkled on my finger, a tangible reminder that it wasn’t all just in my head. I didn’t want to devote more significance to James than he deserved.

“So?” She needled me.

I exhaled sharply. “If you insist.”

“I insist. Don’t treat me like I am made of porcelain. I am a big girl.” She urged, one last time.

I took a sharp breath. “Do you remember my ex, James? I might have mentioned him

when I first moved to San Diego.”

“Of course, I do, he made you miserable. For a while you had heartbreak written all over your face.”

She’d always been observant, though she didn’t need to be in this case. Indeed, I was an open book back in those days, my misery dripping from the lonely energy I gave off. My break-up with James had been the most excruciating experience of my life, aside from losing my mom. At one point, he’d given me a sense of security, so when it slipped away, I had to figure out my life anew. In a new city, with no friends or family. It was then that Nathan convinced me to date online.

“He quit drinking. He got accepted into Juilliard, to play the piano. That was the last I heard of him until a podcast this week.”

She shot me a puzzling look. “Podcast?”

“James is in a piano band that’s going viral. They got a major record deal and they’re touring.” I explained.

“But you’re not in love with him anymore, are you?” She looked confused, if not frustrated that James had made an appearance in my life at a time when I’d healed. “They always come back, Lucie. The ex who holds onto the illusion that they can still have a slice of the pie, even though they burnt down the table.”

She was witty when she wanted to be. This itself was a hefty question. I believed that once we loved someone deeply, it wasn’t possible to ever entirely let go. But I loved him from a different perspective. I rooted for his success but had no interest in rekindling our connection to a romantic one. “Sophie, I’ve never been surer about anything in my life that Julian is the one.” I settled her doubt. “We have history, though, and I don’t think that this goes away. James knows me perhaps in ways that

not even Julian does. I worry that what he feels is genuine.”

Sophie looked like she wasn't liking any of it. “You're marrying the love of your life. Why waste time on this? He'll get the message eventually.”

“James told a reporter that his music draws largely inspiration from a relationship gone wrong. Right now, mainstream media is trying to find the woman from his lyrics. Apparently, there are tags on Instagram dedicated to ‘this’ mystery girl. We went to college together, so it's not going to be that hard to trace our relationship.”

She didn't need any more information to grasp it all in full. “Shoot, you're worried they'll exploit it in the news? Those aren't the kind of headlines that Julian will want. He'll kick his ass if he finds out.” She giggled.

“Because of that, I want your opinion. Do you think talking to James is the best way to handle this? I feel like having a conversation with him might resolve things.”

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“Does Julian know at all this is happening?” It seemed like she already knew the answer.

“I haven’t told him because I don’t want it to escalate,” I replied, knowing how quickly Julian could make things more complicated if he got involved.

“You know, I think we should take that walk and get ice cream—preferably chocolate,” she suggested, frowning her brows. “In the meantime, I’ll be your therapist for this situation. I’ll validate your feelings and ask the right questions to help you figure out what you really want. But don’t expect me to give you the next steps, because right now, it doesn’t feel like the right time.”

I laughed. “Oh, Sophie, stop it. You know you already have an opinion you’re dying to share.”

She grinned mischievously. “Of course, I do, but I’m practicing patience. You need to work through this yourself first.” She nudged me lightly. “But just so you know, whatever you decide, I’ve got your back.”

I smiled, feeling a bit of weight lift off my shoulders. “Thanks, Soph. It means more than you know.” With that, we walked out the door, ice cream and answers waiting just around the corner.

Julian left for Dubai that same afternoon, leaving me with our entire three-story apartment to myself. After returning from brunch with Sophie, I decided to indulge in a hot bath, followed by a few episodes of *Emily in Paris*. The lack of sleep had me feeling utterly drained, but I still buzzed with a kind of exhilaration that came with

being newly engaged. I fiddled with my engagement ring, feeling as if I had a trillion dollars on my hand. The diamond was big enough to discourage any suitor from miles away. Still, I would try to make the phone call that I dreaded. In the end, Sophie and I universally agreed that a chat couldn't worsen the situation.

So, I dialed the old number of James Stone. My stomach felt like a bolder, because he could pick up any minute, and I really wasn't sure what he'd say to me.

"Hey," an unfamiliar voice answered.

"It's Lucie, I blurted. Is this James' number?"

An annoyed voice answered. "Look, you're not the first one asking for someone with that name. But I am Derril in Whitefish, Montana. There's no James here." The line dropped. I became almost certain that James had to change his number now that he'd become a celebrity. I'd invested all this time in trying to plan this call, yet completely failed. Fully determined to reach him somehow, I grabbed my laptop. His email address was still saved there, and even though it felt like a long shot, it was a step in the same direction I'd planned. I created a blank email, then pondered the words I'd use.

James, I couldn't reach you at your old number. I caught the interview on Soundwaves, and it's created quite a stir.

I deleted the second part of the sentence.

I can't shake the feeling that a lot of people are curious about who the mystery girl is. I can't help but wonder if you're talking about me. I'm in love with Julian, and since he's such a public figure, this could really get complicated.

I couldn't tell him about the engagement. Not yet.

I hit send, then fell into the sheets, exhausted. Drifting away to sleep, I'd forget problems for a while. I'd forget the part of me that ached for Julian to be home, to feel him next to me when I was emotionally spent. I hoped I'd see him in my dream, but instead, it was, unfortunately, a dreamless afternoon.

I woke up feeling like a new person, even though it was already dark outside. It had to be around 7 o'clock in the evening. Nevertheless, I decided to make myself a weak coffee, with the plan to get to work for at least a few hours. Even though I worked in corporate, I had recently adopted an entrepreneurial schedule. It wasn't so much out of necessity as it was because I was genuinely passionate about what I was doing for a living.

I scrolled through my phone, looking for any important messages, when I saw that Rose had checked in to see if I needed anything. She was the caring, now elderly woman who had helped Julian rise to success, then returned to his life after he'd made it big to work for him. But beyond her accomplishments, it was Rose's warmth, wisdom, and unwavering support that truly made her special to me. I admired her more than words could express—her ability to balance strength with kindness, her unspoken love for Julian, and the way she always made me feel like family. Rose wasn't just a mentor to him; she had become a guiding presence in my life too, making it much easier to navigate the complexities of Julian's world with her by my side.

I replied to her shortly, assuring her I'd be fine for the time being but would come visit soon. She always offered to cook for me and spoil me with homemade dinners, but the last thing I wanted to do was eat them alone. Whenever Julian was away, my diet turned into a sushi marathon—the one food that disgusted him. I had to find a silver lining in the distance between us; otherwise, I would have temporarily lost my mind.

I continued scrolling through my messages, but my heart raced when I saw that James

had already replied. Just seeing his name in the subject line sent a rush of dark emotions flooding back. Almost overwhelmed with fear, I clicked open the new message.

Dear Lucie,

First and foremost, I hope you're doing well. It brings me joy to see you happy. It was never my intention to draw any attention to you. I'll handle the mystery girl situation in a way that won't affect you anymore. You have my strongest promise on that.

Few things I want to tell you—I still feel awful about the things that happened between us. It really sank in when I sobered up.

Remember the night of our worst argument? I was so desperate to prove to you that you were wrong. I felt too proud to admit that I'd become an addict, that I'd destroyed everything we'd built over the years. I was angry at myself, and that anger came out in ways that hurt you. To my despair, I lost the greatest girl alive.

About Andrea—I know this may not matter now, but we never slept together. It's for some reason important to me that you know this. If it ever seemed that way, it's because she was a crutch for me at one point. She helped me escape the feeling of worthlessness. I tried to like her. Deep down, I knew that the sooner we cut our losses, the easier it would be for both of us. She's also helped herself to my phone on numerous occasions, which, unfortunately, probably hurt you further. But I deserved all that. You didn't deserve to be in the middle of that.

I'm always going to put you first moving forward. The old me would want to get you back and beg you on my knees to give us a chance. I am not going to do that, though. I've seen the pictures of you and him, and I can't un-see that you've found something deep with someone else but me. It would be selfish of me to insert myself into that.

Congratulations on your success in the publishing industry. I truly believe that our breakup led you to where you needed to be, and I hold that close to my heart. I'll never forget you, and once in a while, my music will celebrate that. I've gotten on top of the world because of you. Take care of yourself. I'll be here if you ever need me.

Love, James

By the time I was through, I began to feel immense relief at his response. He'd fix this awkward situation, with no further worry that the media would turn it into a frenzy. And it seemed that I'd been wrong with my assumptions about us in general.

He hadn't slept with Andrea in the end? I wouldn't wait long to respond, wanting to acknowledge his resolution. Thank you, James. Apology accepted. I'm happy for all your success in life. Thanks for taking care of this. I hit send, feeling no need for anything more. I had no intention of prolonging the conversation. Doing anything behind Julian's back made me feel consumed with guilt, even if it was just damage control.

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What I really needed to do now was dive into Pinterest for some ideas for my special day. Or Sophie would soon remind me that I was slacking off on the planning. I wasn't a "girly girl" like her, but I would hold these preparations close to my heart. Getting married was a huge step, one I hoped to take only once in my lifetime.

Miss you already, I typed quickly to Julian, fully aware that he was probably unreachable, somewhere over the Arabian Sea.

I rolled over in our bed, deciding to slow down instead of sticking to my original plan of pushing through. Self-care was important sometimes. I'd been running on empty, and maybe today was the day I didn't force myself to keep working. I placed an indulgent order on UberEats using Amanda's corporate card, confident she wouldn't mind—especially with all the overtime I'd been putting in. Then, I hit play on another episode of *Emily in Paris*. It made the apartment feel less empty, and at least there was a girl on screen dealing with more relationship drama than I had. While I clearly liked Alphie, I couldn't shake the feeling that Raphael was the intense, karmic connection that just wouldn't let go of Emily's heart.

Maybe this was the balance I needed—a day where the world didn't demand my attention and I didn't demand perfection from myself.

Valentina arrived in San Diego the next day, Sunday. We'd had a girls' day planned for quite some time. And it couldn't have come at a better moment because Julian had just popped the question.

The sleek lines of her Porsche glinted in the afternoon sun, a stark contrast to the weathered Subaru she used to drive. As she stepped out, her confidence radiated, and

I couldn't help but admire how far she'd come after leaving the modeling industry. Her brand now had a couple of stores scattered throughout LA, one in Silver Lake with an artsy, eclectic feel, while the newer one in West Hollywood showcased a sleek, modern design. But what really grew fast was her online store, which quickly gained traction thanks to her savvy social media strategy.

She immediately adored the engagement ring, but I could still feel her underlying skepticism about marriage itself. It was a vibe that even her most convincing façade couldn't conceal.

“You don't have to pretend to believe in the whole marriage thing,” I pointed out with a grin. “Just keep quiet when they ask if anyone has objections at the wedding.” I nudged her playfully.

“No way Lucie, you and Julian are a great match. Trust me, I'll be the one sobbing the most. Damn, you're getting married!”

My Puerto Rican best friend was as wild as they come—a stunning tall brunette with a wiry yet strong frame since the gym was her second permanent address. Early mornings and late nights blurred into a routine that fueled her passion for fitness. She chose to wear her rich, sun-kissed hair loose, went for a natural look without makeup, yet still radiated supermodel beauty. Because of that, boys lined up like an assembly line, eager to offer anything just for a chance to win her attention. But no one ever got close enough to earn more than a casual label. It often made me wonder if she even believed in monogamy at all. And it was even more complicated than that, because she liked to date girls too. Monogamy for her meant that she'd have to give up an entire gender.

“I am thrilled to design the bridesmaid dresses, Lucie.” She mused. “Do you want to go with something edgy? Or are you thinking classic beauty? I think you and Julian are rebellious spirits enough to consider the first option. Yet, he loves his tuxedos. A

Twilight style wedding would fit you two the best I think.”

“Are you talking about the part with all the werewolf haters, or the wardrobe choices?” I chuckled. We’d at one point succumbed to the guilty pleasure of paranormal romance, like most girls in our teenage years.

“Both,” she flipped her hair dramatically. “I am however particularly focused on the wardrobe part.”

I’d expected her to be happy to become the designer for my special day. “Well, that just means you’re officially part of the wedding dress crew. Unless the thought makes you vomit, obviously.”

She pulled a goofy face, sticking her tongue out. “I’m not that cynical, am I?”

I made a doubtful expression. “Has anyone recently gotten your interest? For longer than a few weeks?” I raised my eyebrow. I felt like I already knew the answer. “I am thinking your new cat.” I deadpanned. Val had adopted a rescue to feel less lonely in her studio apartment.

She scratched her head. “Actually...”

It sounded promising. “I’m all ears, Val. By the way, can I make you a cappuccino?” I offered, knowing it was too early for a margarita, her absolute staple.

“Yes, please.”

I moved toward the espresso machine, determined to craft the perfect cappuccino, just like a professional barista. As I steamed the milk, I glanced back at her. She looked like she had something on her mind, something that made her nervous.

“Everything okay?” I asked, noticing the sudden shift in her energy. She cleared her throat as I handed her a mug, doctored to her usual specifications.

“I’ve been messaging with Bradley for a few months now. At first, it started as just a few exchanges, mostly about you.” She turned crimson, glancing down as if the floor might swallow her up.

Then, it hit me—a sudden eureka moment. How had I not seen it before? The two of them had always shared a genuine connection. “He reached out a few times just to see how I was. I am definitely digging his humor and street smarts.” She spoke slowly, then bit her lip in hesitation. “We’re only friends now, but he’s invited me to come visit him in Kauai. So, I am wondering if there could be more in the end.”

“Are you going to go?” I gave her a serious look. “You won’t know until you two spend time in person, right?”

“There’s just one problem.” She frowned.

I immediately assumed she was referring to our past history. “If this has something to do with what happened between us, Val, you don’t have to worry about it. We have a mutual understanding—both of us had someone we couldn’t let go of at the time. We kissed only once, and it was...” I meant to say meaningless, but it wasn’t entirely true. There was no real reason for us to stop seeing each other except for Julian’s return. Julian had broken up with me to keep me out of trouble, and I’d thought he’d cheated. In that moment, I’d tried to move on, and had gotten closer to Bradley. It wasn’t a mistake, but it was a connection that couldn’t continue once I realized how much Julian had sacrificed—and how madly I still loved him.

Val looked tortured. “Well, the girl he mentioned—the ex-wife he went to see—she took her own life just before he got home last Christmas.” Her face turned somber, the weight of the words settling between us.

My heart dropped into my stomach at the realization that he'd kept this a secret. I'd thought Bradley needed space, but he had been dealing with an immense loss instead. "Shit, I had no idea." I felt unbearably selfish now for not being there for him when he probably needed me most. "Since December, I didn't want to confuse him, so I've stayed away. We've only spoken once, and he didn't even mention it." In fact, he might have lied to avoid worrying me.

"Yeah, Lucie. I think he gets it. I don't think he's the type to hold anything against you," she quickly assured me.

"What exactly happened?" I asked, feeling my mood sink in a way I didn't think was possible, especially now that I was newly engaged to the love of my life.

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“She was a tattoo artist. Apparently renowned in Hawaii. She struggled with depression and maybe fell into an addiction or two. She ended it before he could even see her again—days before he returned home. That’s the part that sucks the most.”

I let out a sigh. He had always painted their relationship as entirely his fault, but it seemed his ex-wife wasn’t blameless either. While he had worked on himself, she appeared to be trapped in the same patterns that had led to their divorce. Bradley had often mentioned that he tended to love the wrong people, and now it all clicked into place.

I began to feel an all-consuming pain for him. Was this why he’d moved to an isolated island? To put himself in purgatory for not showing up sooner? I didn’t believe we could save someone who wanted to die. Maybe we could delay it for a while, but only professional help could truly make a difference. He needed to know it wasn’t his fault, but would it even matter? Grief was grief.

“I’ve been trying not to be too much,” Val shrugged. “So, we just talk through messages. But the deeper we get into our conversations, the more I realize I’m a bit hung up on him.”

I completely understood what she meant.

“I don’t know if this makes sense, Lucie. It almost feels like the tables have turned. He’s looking for a good time with me. Nothing with commitment. Yet, I don’t know if, with him, it’s going to be that easy to stick to it.”

Shell-shocked didn’t even begin to cover it. She never spoke like this.

Bradley was someone, though, who could effortlessly inspire a change of heart. He was mixed race, with striking Asian features inherited from his mother—sharp, handsome eyes that sparkled with kindness. He had a strong, chiseled jaw inherited from his father, and his deep voice, combined with his undeniable masculinity, turned heads wherever he went. He usually kept his black hair short, styled in a military cut, though he'd recently mentioned that he preferred to keep it longer.

As Hawaii's past marathon champion, he had a lean, athletic physique quite impossible to achieve without incredible genes. Like Valentina pointed out, he was street-smart, having grown up as a troubled teenager who often found himself in risky situations. When we talked about it during a drive, I learned that he had a bad-boy side he'd left behind—a part of his past that added depth to his character. It was intriguing to see how he had transformed, channeling those experiences into something positive. What made him even more attractive was his deep love for his home, his family, and the legacy of his island. He had attended Kamehameha, a prestigious school reserved for those with true Hawaiian heritage. Bradley possessed the rare heart of a warrior and protector, marked by unwavering loyalty. Essentially, he was the perfect boyfriend.

“Give it time,” I tried to offer something encouraging. But I knew Bradley well enough to know that what happened with his ex-wife had to weigh on him like a demon.

“He mentioned that he isn't looking for love right now.” She shared. “But I don't think it means he wouldn't hook up with me.”

She'd built quite a reputation for herself as the girl who never wanted more than just a casual fling. Now, that wasn't working in her favor. Bradley likely thought they were both on the same page. Given the kind of guy he was, he wouldn't want to hurt a woman, so this arrangement was probably convenient for him. But I kept my mouth shut, hoping that it wasn't so for Valentina's sake.

“I met Julian at a time when I wasn’t ready to date either,” I reminded her.

“It feels like he’s in a dark place and I want to respect that,” she explained.

I didn’t doubt that he was in a dark place, and the worst part was that I worried I contributed to the reasons why. I’d led him on for quite some time, only to decide in the end that I wasn’t ready to fall in love again. What we had between us was incredibly real, a fact that still somewhat haunted me.

To make matters worse, deep down, I knew Bradley never believed my relationship with Julian would last. While he understood my reasons for being with him, he couldn’t bring himself to support it. His silence felt like more than just respect for my choices; it felt like a statement. I couldn’t shake the feeling that he was waiting for me to learn my lesson. The thought of Valentina finding herself in the middle of such a mess was something I couldn’t bear.

“Val, why don’t you take it one step at a time? Trust that the universe will deliver exactly what you need,” I suggested cautiously.

“Yeah, Lucie. I hate the idea that he could be exactly what I need right now—someone so different that he pulls me out of my head. But I think about him ALL the time, and it’s driving me insane.” A pained look marred her gorgeous face.

“Have you thought about telling him that you’re not looking for just a fling?” Honesty was usually the best policy in relationships.

“No, I’m worried he’ll lose interest, and I really don’t want that,” she winced. “But for now, let’s check out some catalogs, okay? It would make me so happy to sort through designs and start sketching.” She quickly shifted the topic. “I’m thinking something sleek, but with a bit of drama—maybe a high-low hemline or some intricate lace detail. Something unexpected that will make a statement without being

over the top.” She spoke with the kind of passion and confidence I’d expect from a seasoned designer.

It felt a bit early to dive into wedding planning after such a deep conversation, but I didn’t want to dampen her excitement. “Yeah, of course. I’ve got the whole morning reserved for us. Let me make you another cappuccino.”

Not talking about Bradley was probably for the best for both of us. His name had a way of pulling us both into uncomfortable spaces, bringing up old wounds and unspoken feelings. We both needed a break from the weight of that conversation, especially now. With everything else going on, it felt better to focus on something light, something we could enjoy without the emotional baggage. It was easier to let the silence settle than to stir up what might come rushing back.

I wasn’t entirely sure what it meant for me—perhaps a blend of quiet acceptance that he’d always be my second choice, and a lingering grief knowing that our friendship would always be overshadowed by the unspoken truth that there was more between us than either of us could ever fully acknowledge.

Julian gazed out at the Dubai skyline from the 54th floor of his hotel room, the vibrant city unfolding before him like a shimmering tapestry of modern architecture and sprawling desert. The sun dipped low, casting a golden hue over the towering skyscrapers. Each building seemed to tell a story, showcasing the ambition and innovation that characterized this influential center of the oil industry. Tomorrow, they would reveal a project he had been developing for months—an investment poised to become a major milestone in his career. But in spite of his recent success, there was much more beneath the surface. The accolades and admiration he received often concealed the struggles and sacrifices that accompanied his rise.

As part of the front desk staff’s usual practice, they recommended that he invite some company to his hotel room for the evening. They even offered to arrange it, knowing

that he'd taken advantage of this in the past.

“No thanks, I am content.” He swiftly declined the offer. He wanted nothing more than for Lucie to be here, to share these moments of triumph with her only. No matter how much he tried to convince himself that she was simply passionate about her career, it felt like she needed far more time away from him than he could emotionally bear. But for her sake, he was willing to bear anything emotionally.

I miss you already, Lucie had written earlier, and a warmth spread through him re-reading her text. The words cut the distance between them, though he couldn't shake the disappointment in himself. They had promised no more secrets, yet somehow, He had ended up with another one. And it wasn't a white lie to protect her. It wasn't even a desperate attempt to achieve normalcy, like when he'd created an online dating profile two years ago. This would be a lie that would drive a wedge between them and reignite her past trauma. He now had to bury the ghost of his addiction in the desert for good, or he couldn't marry her.

Julian poured himself a whiskey from the minibar. This was one of those rare moments when he had the space to ruminate over his choices.

It all began as an innocent escape with one of the models from his talent agency, Jazmin. He'd never forget her name; she entered his life when he'd been feeling particularly vulnerable, knowing that Lucie may have fallen for the young mechanic from Hawaii. Tarnakis had shackled him, compelling Julian to suppress his emotions for Lucie, which led to an overwhelming sense of inner panic. In this memory, photographs of her and Bradley lay scattered across his glass table, tempting him to shatter the surface as if that could end their unraveling romance. If she was in love, the least he could do was to honor it. Yet he felt so bitter because for the first time, his money had rendered him powerless.

His security followed her, to ensure she was still under the protection of the best. It

wasn't hard to see that she still wasn't over him. Her grief was his only hope that maybe it wasn't over after all. But then there were the reports of her in Hawaii, staying overnight in a house with him, and it could mean only one thing. She was moving on and giving the most intimate parts of herself to him.

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Meanwhile, Rose had been falling apart on him too; she had been hospitalized due to a serious fall. Though her recovery was quick, the guilt weighed heavily on him. For a seventy-year-old woman like her, this whole situation had become an overwhelming heartbreak, and this probably contributed to her accident.

He should have anticipated it all and avoided purchasing the luxury yacht company entirely. What had happened to his impeccable judgment in business? He downed another shot of whiskey in absolute frustration.

The unpleasant memory lingered. The flashback of that day consumed him to the point of self-hate. Julian felt a knot tighten in his stomach as he processed Tarnakis's cryptic warning. He paced the small, dimly lit room, the weight of uncertainty heavy on his shoulders. If Oliver couldn't find anything soon, they were running out of time. At night, all he could think about was that the girl that he loved was in the arms of another man. She now considered him selfish, a label that pierced his heart.

"Stay strong, don't respond to any of her messages," Oliver had cautioned him. "The more attention you give Shannon, the safer she'll be." Julian recognized the truth in those words. His only option was to keep his distance.

Even though he already had antidepressants, it still felt that the depression of recent weeks would now swallow him whole. And Jazmin brought an instant solution. "Just once, try it" she whispered, her full lips inviting him to hell. They weren't real, but he didn't care. She wrapped them around his erection, once he agreed to snort the coke up his nose. It was an exhilarating experience, and for once, he was no longer aware of the excruciating pain. Though the whole time, he couldn't bring himself to look at her face because it felt as if her features had somehow morphed into Lucie's. Except

the sensation wasn't the same. Jazmin's tongue flicked out like a snake's. It wasn't as generous and loving as Lucie's. It was possessive, lustful, and emotionless. He suddenly wanted to throw up at the choice to even do this.

"Please leave," he exclaimed unable to finish. His voice turned icy and commanding, but now, fueled by drugs coursing through his veins, it cut through the air with an angry, razor-like edge. "Here," he gave her \$20,000 in cash from his money drawer. "Please sign the paperwork with my secretary before you leave."

"Julian, you're not paying me for the blowjob, are you?" She puckered her eyebrows.

More like a half-blowjob.

Thanks to Botox, the result was a stark contrast between the rigidity of her forehead and the softness of her eyes, creating an almost eerie impression that left her features frozen in a state of heightened alertness. She scorned his inability to come.

"No, I'm paying you not to tell Shannon." He cradled her face in his hands, trying to be gentle because she was still a woman. The last thing he'd intended to make her feel like a prostitute. Nobody could know that Shannon was an undercover agent, even though it didn't seem to matter as much anymore. His reputation as a womanizer would only continue to protect Lucie.

Jazmin, offended but still accepting the money, gathered her things. "I'll see you next time. When you need more," she gave him a sassy smile, slamming the door behind her.

He never again took her up on the offer, but he'd found other ways to satisfy his new habit.

Everything swam back into focus. He suddenly felt an all-consuming familiar tug, to

have cocaine again. Already so fast? These days, it seemed like it was never enough. It had started only with a couple of grams. Now he was bleeding from his nose and his account. Money used to hold more value, that's how he knew he'd fallen to the bottom of a pit.

The silver lining? In a twisted way, he felt closer to his mom. She had battled addictions, often prioritizing them over him, but now he understood the allure they held. Maybe, after all, she didn't die because of him like he'd always thought. She died in spite of him. Strangely, this provided a blanket of comfort. Was he doomed to follow her path?

And there was an added benefit: it transformed him into the person he'd always wanted to be—someone impervious to the past altogether. It fit his brain like a well-made glove. Could he tell Lucie that he felt more like himself than ever? Heartless? No, still he wasn't completely heartless. For her, he'd go to the end of the earth and that was part of the problem.

Now he was meant to refer to Lucie as his wife, and he had everything that he'd ever wished. He reached into the pocket of his suit and pulled out a small plastic bag, a gesture that brought him a strange sense of calm. With greed, he laid its contents out on the ornate table before him. The rush of it, as the powder traveled up his nostrils, into his receptors, was unlike anything he'd ever known. This would be the last time, he promised himself. He'd do it for her. The shaking stopped. The bubbling anger subsided. But for the opening day, he could face the public in a way that finally worked for him, alongside the devil.

Trouble in Paradise. I walked past the newsstand, trying to ignore the unflattering headline. Reporters already questioned my absence from the festivities, even though my relationship with Julian was better than ever. I'd left my engagement ring in the safe at home, my finger now bare. But I didn't need to have it on me to know we were solid as a couple.

Baby, I miss you too, Julian texted back, likely already at his hotel in Dubai.

I grinned as if it were our first week in love. How are you feeling before the grand opening?

Amazing, except I wish you could be by my side. How is work? He asked caringly.

Insane, as you'd expect. But I've submitted my MBA application, so now I am waiting to find out if they accept me. I could be especially productive when I was alone in our three-story apartment.

I hope you end up doing all your homework naked. He teased. That's the one way I will survive this degree.

I may have to resort to it. I flirted back. I won't have time to get dressed if I keep going at this pace. Working seventy-hour weeks had become the norm, and that wasn't even with school yet.

I am proud of you. He texted again. Are you being careful?

Definitely! Plus the girls have been nudging me about wedding planning, so both Sophie and Valentina have penciled in visits while you're gone. You don't need to worry, Julian. Will is on my back 24/7. Our apartment complex feels like a fortress too.

Have you already had the time to check out dresses? He nudged.

This made me a bit nervous. I knew I needed a stunning dress, but spending \$1,000 right now felt excessive. Usually, parents covered the bride's expenses, if not the entire ceremony. I decided to set that concern aside for now. Not yet, Julian. To ease some of the stress, I blew out a breath, puffing my cheeks like a pufferfish.

Whatever you need, talk to Rose. She'll help coordinate. His ability to read my mind was one of his sweetest talents.

I knew it was a subtle offer to pay for it all. I could maybe accept it given his financials, but it still felt inappropriate for the groom to be footing the bill. It didn't seem like good luck either. I also needed to buy Julian a ring. It had to be special, maybe with an engraving, and worth someone like him.

Thanks, baby, I mustered a smile. This was supposed to be a joyous time. It would all work out somehow.

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Lucie?

It was never good when he sent a message with my name and a question mark. Had he fallen back into his melancholy again? Julian could be one of the most sensitive people I knew. Not a character trait that the general public associated with becoming a billionaire. But it was the character trait of my best friend for sure. We both had our share of family issues to process—his family was nonexistent, mine problematic.

Julian? I raised my eyebrow subconsciously. Is everything alright?

Yes, I love you endlessly, he typed suddenly.

It never felt like a mere formality to me; I cherished his words every time he said them. Still, my intuition told me that there was more to this. He wanted to say something but he wasn't ready to say it yet.

I feel the same way. Get home soon, or I'll blow a fuse. My body gets so hot without you, and only you can put out the fire. I replied with a playful tone, then sent him an emoji of a kiss and an eggplant.

I am instructing my team to fuel the jet now.

Oh no, don't miss your grand opening. I laughed. The entire city of Dubai will weep.

Meet you halfway in Paris then. Julian daydreamed. Maybe I can even make it back on time if we're quick. Usually, we are. He teased.

If only I could take off and just go to Paris for a few days... I'd get one of those chocolate croissants at my favorite bakery in Montparnasse, then wonder mindlessly through the city, hand in hand with him, peeking into libraries, and admiring the art sold on the street.

Love, just have a good time, okay? I turned the conversation back to serious. And call me after it's over. I can't wait to hear how everything goes.

Will do, baby. Have a good day at work! XOXO, Julian ended the conversation.

Starting my morning by talking to him put me already in a great mood. And just when I thought it couldn't get any better, I received a screenshot from Valentina.

James disclosed to a reporter the identity of the mystery girl: her name is Andrea.

I gasped. Had James really resorted to that? After everything he'd told me about their relationship? The truth was, he probably hadn't dated many people, given that our relationship had spanned nearly all of college. It left him with few options. She was a logical choice.

It's a lie? Val followed up. You are still the girl he is writing his songs about, aren't you?

I sent her back a smiley face. All I cared about was that the situation got diffused.

She didn't seem to share my sense of relief. Damn, Lucie, he has to be into you to create such a PR disaster. Andrea's posted a flashback picture of them on Instagram, and now everyone's speculating about a potential reunion. I almost feel sorry for him, and I never thought I'd say that.

I am just glad that Julian's name will stay out of it. Especially now, because he has

the opening today and I don't want gossip to overshadow it in headlines.

Julian could handle the truth, she remarked. I still felt that keeping him out of this was the best for his mental state. James was the one who had created this problem in the first place. How he'd chosen to end things with the mystery girl wasn't my fault.

You know I'm on your side, but if a guy throws himself under the bus like this, he's not over you. Not at all. And he wants you to know that, she sent a new text.

Yeah... I realize that, Val. A sudden tightness formed in my stomach. But it was time to start work, and I couldn't let myself lose focus. Amanda had once again sent an announcement that she was traveling for personal matters. She'd left me with Kali to help, but it would still be a lot to manage. Let's just hope it ends here. I wrapped up our girly conversation.

I gave myself one last moment to breathe, then pushed any lingering thoughts aside. It wasn't the time to dwell on unresolved feelings or complications with James. The day ahead demanded my attention, and there was no room for distractions.

Despite everything happening with James, walking into Apogee always brought a sense of genuine joy. It was where I spent most of my days, sitting in front of my computer, my desk now adorned with photos of Julian and me.

"Hey," Kali welcomed me. She wore a pretty green dress, her hair styled in braids. I noticed she'd put pictures of what seemed to be her kids next to her computer.

I greeted her, then slid into my chair, throwing my purse on the seat divider between us.

"Amanda left you some documents to review," she briefed me. "All she said is that it's related to her publishing business."

Curious, I glanced at the thick folder in front of me for Hart & Quill.

“What can I do to help today, Lucie?” She followed up with a question.

I wasn't great at giving orders. Being a control freak, I preferred to handle most tasks myself. But at this point, delegating was prudent. A necessity.

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“Kali, we’ve been having issues with the app not working offline. Please can you help?”

“On it,” she replied, playfully dancing her hands in the air.

“Thank you,” I huffed with relief, now ready to delve into the tease in front of me. The dream of owning an established publishing company felt distant, especially since I didn’t have the funds. Still, I wanted it so badly.

Amanda sure knew how to keep me motivated. She’d also left a note on the first page of the documents she’d left for me to read.

Lucie,

As you can see, the financials for this business haven’t been great. Self-help book sales make up the majority of our revenue, but fiction sales are lagging behind. Do you have any ideas on how we could boost those? Naturally, only get to this if you have extra time.

Amanda

Extra time? As a publishing icon, she understood that the success of a publishing business relied heavily on both quality content and effective marketing. But this was a full-time job, not a side hobby.

I took out my calendar, to scribble a list of tasks I needed to do in the near future.

MBA classes

Fulltime job – app optimization, magazine articles & managing Kali

Wedding prep

Make 13 million

Look into publishing business ideas

My schedule didn't look feasible at all, and I could already feel the weight of the words I'd have to say to Julian: that our dream wedding might have to be postponed, or worse, that we'd have to elope in a quiet, small ceremony first. The thought of disappointing him gnawed at me, though. So, somehow, amidst the chaos, I'd have to figure it all out. Rose, Julian's chief of staff—and, in a way, our surrogate grandma—would likely step in to help me hire a wedding planner if needed. But such careless spending never felt right to me, so I still planned to stay at the forefront of it all. Besides, there was fun in planning my own wedding, and I didn't want to miss out on that.

Naturally, I was the last one at the office. To my great satisfaction, toward the end of my day, I received an email that I'd gotten accepted into LSU's program. Classes would start the following week, which is why I spent about an hour trying to set up my student profile, and email, then hurried through the registration process. I picked International Economics, Finance & Accounting for the first three months. Why not start with what I found the most challenging?

After shutting down my computer around 7:30 PM, with the summer sun still casting light outside, I followed my usual routine. I took the elevator down, got into my Land Rover, and drove out through the emergency exit. Cortez was only a few blocks away, but per Will's instructions, I took a different route home. This time, I detoured

through Bankers Hill, then wondered if I could swing by Whole Foods in Hillcrest for some takeout sushi. With Julian not at home, I had no rush to get back.

I heard the loud roar of a motorcycle engine, and for a moment, I braced myself, expecting the rider to swerve left and weave through traffic. It was legal in California, but to me, it always seemed like the most reckless maneuver in the world. Instead, though, the motorcycle pulled up beside me, clearly intent on overtaking. I eased off the gas, giving him room to pass.

It was a dirt bike—one that had been modified for the street—painted in black and purple. The color scheme hit me like a wave, bringing back memories of Bradley. I remembered the ride we took to the ocean, the wind in our faces, the freedom in the air. He used to have a bike just like that.

Oh, those were the days. I missed our friendship more than I liked to admit. Bradley's shop had been closed for months now. How much longer would it stay empty? How long before everything he'd built—everything that reminded me of him—faded away entirely?

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That's when it hit me—it wasn't just a reminder of Bradley. It was him.

A surge of excitement swept through me as I pulled over to the side of the road, parking quickly and without hesitation. I jumped out of the car before the engine had even fully quieted, my feet almost stumbling in my rush. As he lifted off his helmet, the familiar grin spread across his face—one that I hadn't seen in far too long.

“Hey, stranger!” I exclaimed.

He studied me with a quiet intensity, his expression stoic and serious, though there was a hint of amusement in his eyes—as if he knew this would catch me off guard. His time in Hawaii had clearly left its mark on him. His muscles were more defined, likely from all the surfing, and his skin had deepened into a rich tan. Yet, aside from those changes, everything else about him was exactly as I remembered.

“Lucie,” he said, his voice deep and resonant—one I'd always found irresistibly masculine. I couldn't help but remember how Valentina had once joked that it was the kind of voice perfect for narrating a steamy audiobook. He was undeniably good-looking—too good-looking, in fact. I didn't see him as a romantic interest anymore, at least not in the way I used to, but that didn't stop me from acknowledging just how attractive he was.

“Any plans?” he queried, his voice smooth and casual.

“Well, I was thinking of grabbing sushi from Whole Foods,” I acknowledged my upcoming culinary sin, rolling my eyes slightly at my own choice. “Julian's out of town, and work's been exhausting as always, so I'm starving. I skipped lunch.”

His lips curved into a teasing smile. “Want to go with me to Aki’s instead? My treat.”

A rush of excitement hit me at the thought of diving into a plate of fresh nigiri—especially with him for company. Aki’s sushi was always so much better than the stuff I’d reluctantly planned to settle for.

“I don’t consider what they sell at Whole Foods sushi,” he teased. “No offense.” His Cheshire grin reminded me how easily he could read me.

I laughed, shaking my head. “I’m down.”

“Great, we’re just a few blocks away, so no need to repark.” He slipped his helmet off. I suddenly remembered what Valentina had told me about his ex-wife. Should I bring it up now?

“It’s really good to see you here. Is this just a visit?” I queried.

“Perhaps, I haven’t decided yet.” He glanced at me briefly, his expression unreadable, then kept walking toward the sushi bar. It was clear he was ready to change the subject. “You’ve been working out, Lucie,” he noted.

“It helps to keep my mind off things.” I acknowledged my efforts.

We were now entering Aki’s restaurant, and the familiar scent of fresh fish and soy sauce greeted us. Aki, the elderly Japanese chef, welcomed us with a knowing smile. He clearly knew Bradley was back in town. We took our seats at the sushi bar, and Aki immediately set to work, expertly preparing our orders.

“Val told me about your ex-wife. I am sorry Bradley, how are you feeling?” I asked caringly.

It seemed like he needed a moment. He finally spoke, his voice low, pained. “I’m fine, Lucie. It was a lot to process. She didn’t tell me she was considering ending her life, and I just wish she’d reached out when things were tough.” Pain shadowed his handsome face as he spoke.

“Yeah, do you know why? Do you know anything about it?” I wondered gently, afraid to push him too hard but needing to understand.

“I connected with an ex-boyfriend of hers. He thinks it was an overdose, not a suicide,” he replied quietly, his words heavy with regret.

I swallowed hard, unsure what to say next.

“I’ve made peace with it,” he continued, his gaze softening. “On the plane to Hawaii, I had five hours to think about everything, to look back on it all. I don’t think we would have gotten back together in the end, Lucie.”

I furrowed my brows as he continued his train of thought.

“When I came home, I realized the right thing was not to step back into the same river,” he self-reflects, referencing the ancient philosopher Heraclitus. “Even rivers, while appearing the same, are always changing, just as we are.”

That startled me. When he’d left for Hawaii, he seemed so eager to reconnect with her. I had no idea he’d come to this conclusion.

“I cleaned up. She didn’t,” his voice quivered as he paused. “And honestly, I had no idea that she was still wrestling with an ongoing addiction.”

I couldn’t help but notice that he’d said the decision happened on the plane, so he couldn’t have known that by then. So, what had prompted it?

“It still hurts, doesn’t it?” I asked, my voice full of compassion. I knew Bradley, he cared about people, and if there was anything he could have done to save her, he would have.

“It does, Lucie. And I’ll always have her in my heart. That won’t change.” His voice was firm, resolved. “I donated some money to a charity in her name. Not that it’ll bring her back, but to celebrate her life.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” I let him know again, wishing there was more I could do. “If you ever need someone to talk to, I am always an ear.”

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“I’m alright, really,” he reassured me, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Besides, I don’t think Julian would be happy with that. In his defense, I probably wouldn’t want my girl staying close to a guy she used to date.” His words carried a weight, reminding me of the intimate moments we’d once shared. Despite the lightness of his tone, I couldn’t help but notice a flicker of sadness in his eyes. Of course, it would be there after what happened with his ex-wife.

“You’re sort of right with that, but I make my own decisions,” I replied, choosing to assert my independence. Unfortunately, Julian was quite the jealous type, and I couldn’t exactly blame him for it either. Bradley and I had crossed the line of friendship a few times, and I understood why Julian might feel uneasy. But still, it was important to me that my now-fiancé trusted me enough to let me decide which friendships I wanted to keep.

I decided to shift the conversation away from the tension between them. “I heard that you and Valentina have been talking.”

He quickly gritted his teeth, a clear sign this conversation was heading in a shallow direction. “We’re friends, Lucie. Don’t look for more there,” he cut off any hope of further speculations.

I felt a sudden pang for Valentina.

Just then, the waiter arrived, and we both quickly placed our orders. The conversation shifted to food, and for a moment, we both laughed at how we’d both chosen the same appetizer without even discussing it. It was funny how, when it came to food, we had the exact same taste, despite growing up in totally different environments.

“How long are you staying?” I asked, curiosity creeping into my voice.

He subtly shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not sure yet. An old client of mine wanted me to rebuild his truck here in San Diego. I took the business partly because I miss working on cars like that in Kauai. Over there, I’ve just been working as a fleet mechanic.”

“Are you still renting there?” I hoped to understand more about his decisions.

“Yeah, I’ve got a whole house for myself.” Next, he showed me some pictures on his phone—beautiful views of palm trees swaying in the wind, the ocean stretching into the horizon. “I am thinking of buying a house there, but it can be pretty lonely and isolating in Kauai. I don’t know if buying there is the right move.”

He was from a wealthy Hawaiian family who put an emphasis on their financial legacy, so it didn’t surprise me that he planned to invest. I nodded, understanding his hesitation. Maybe Kauai had been about finding space to heal, but living there long-term might not be the answer. I could tell he was still figuring it out.

“I’d settle for half a year here, half a year there,” I suggested. “We all miss you.” I meant mostly Valentina and myself.

He sent me a sharp gaze that I couldn’t quite place. It held a confusing depth, with a tinge of familiarity that tugged at my heart as if I should know exactly what it meant.

“How are things with you and Julian?” He suddenly brought the conversation back to me.

I looked at my bare finger. I could tell him because he wouldn’t be the one to share it with anyone. “Actually, he proposed.” I paused, watching for his reaction, knowing it wouldn’t exactly be ecstatic. However, it was better if he found out from me than

from the paper.

He tried to hide his surprise, but the fact that he coughed on his water gave it away. “You said yes, right? Congrats.” His voice carried a blend of genuine concern and a hint of forced sincerity. I knew he didn’t like Julian—his obsession with money and admiration for the superficial life rubbed him the wrong way. But it seemed like he was trying to be supportive, maybe hoping I wouldn’t stay in a situation that made me unhappy.

“We’re keeping it under wraps for now,” I explained, not wanting to reveal too much. “We’re waiting to tell my Gram in person.”

“Ah, so that’s why you aren’t wearing a ring,” he observed, a knowing look in his eyes.

“Yeah, we don’t want her to hear about it from the headlines.”

“Are you excited?” he asked, his smile broad and warm as the food arrived.

“Very much,” I shared honestly. “But you know, it doesn’t feel like I have time to enjoy this time because of work. We probably won’t even have the wedding until I finish my MBA, Amanda’s new requirement.”

“She doesn’t give you a break, does she?” he scowled, though his tone turned light, almost teasing.

“You don’t even know...She’s offering me to buy into her business when it goes public next spring.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t her business worth around a billion? Is that a wedding gift?”

I shook my head profusely as I hovered a nigiri in my chopsticks. “Nope, I’m determined to earn the money on my own. I need about \$13 million to buy enough A shares to become an executive.”

“Girl, you’ve been busy...” he joked. “What’s your game plan?”

“No idea yet,” I said with a shrug. “I’m ready for it to not work out. But the idea of Hart Media becoming my venture is exciting. I’m really into the publishing side of things—it has a lot of room to grow. Amanda hasn’t really been focusing on it since she’s been all about Apogee.”

He took his time savoring his tuna roll, the citrus-soy dressing complementing the seared fish perfectly. “I get that,” he continued after swallowing his last bite. “My car shop was like that for me. But I didn’t do it alone—my mom invested with me. If it’s a significant amount, you might want to ask Julian. You could borrow the money and pay it back later if it makes you uneasy. I’d do the same for my future wife if I could.”

“Sophie said the same thing,” I replied, considering it. “But it doesn’t feel right. I don’t want to start my marriage with a transaction, you know?”

He studied me closely, then his eyes flickered to my lips. I became self-conscious, noticing the cracked skin on the corners of my mouth. It had finally started to heal.

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“I don’t think that’s it, Lucie,” he commented quietly.

I glanced up from my dish. Was there something more I wasn’t seeing? For a moment, his eyes caught mine, a flicker of something unreadable passing between us. An embarrassing flashback hit me—of him tearing my clothes off at the same restaurant several months ago. I quickly pushed the memory aside, my cheeks warming.

Just then, his phone rang, and I saw Valentina’s name light up on the screen. He hesitated, then stepped outside to take the call. “Excuse me, I’ll be right back”

I watched him through the window, silently hoping that maybe the two of them could find a connection. As if seeing him with someone else would somehow reassure me that he was truly in a good place.

I then reflected on what he had said earlier—about sensing something was wrong but not being able to figure it out—and it made me wonder. Why did it seem like Bradley, with his uncanny ability to read people and situations, could always pick up on things I missed? His street smarts, honed by years of navigating the complexities of life, often gave him an edge that I didn’t have. I wondered if he was seeing something in me that I hadn’t yet acknowledged, something I couldn’t quite bring myself to confront. Maybe he had a clearer picture of the situation than I did, or perhaps his experiences had taught him to notice the subtle signs that others overlooked.

A few more lonely days without Julian started to mess with my head. I tried to keep busy with a packed schedule, but I couldn’t wait for him to be back home from his

trip. The grand opening of his complex had been a huge success, drawing in a large crowd and lots of media attention. Unfortunately, he remained on-site, making sure everything ran smoothly as the first transactions began. To my limited understanding, he still needed to iron out a few things regarding the commercial side of his project and why he wouldn't be back for another week.

We were finally set to grab coffee with Evy, the impressive woman who had briefly taken my place as Julian's fake girlfriend the previous year. She'd invited me to her apartment, possibly because of privacy. I agreed that Will drove me, relishing the chance to relax in the backseat while I took in the sights of our surroundings. Judging from our direction, Evy lived near the coast, as we headed down the 52 West. The familiar skyline and bustling streets provided a comforting backdrop as I settled in, enjoying a mindless drive.

It took us about twenty minutes to get to our destination. Her house was just as I had pictured it—lavish yet minimalist tucked away in the affluent La Jolla neighborhood, renowned as the former residence of Dr. Seuss.

Similar to other visits with Julian's friends, we first had to pass through a guarded gate. She came to greet me with a bright smile, her voice smooth and even melodic. Carrying herself with relaxed confidence, her wavy hair cascaded down her back in shades of chestnut and gold. Since I last saw her, she'd dyed it blonde, a color that complemented her round blue eyes. The brunette phase seemed like a temporary choice when she'd posed to be Julian's girlfriend, Shannon Kingsley. I remembered her as a femme fatale, but to my surprise, she seemed remarkably approachable, her eyes framed by soft wrinkles. She'd selected a white pantsuit for our meeting, and I guessed she was in her early 40s—hardly evident when she'd posed with Julian for the cameras, her face covered with thick makeup.

I kissed her on the cheeks before she pulled me into a warm hug. It was a French habit that felt fitting for the moment. This gesture perfectly expressed that I had no

negative feelings, even though initially I'd felt all sorts of ugly emotions toward her thinking that Julian cheated.

“Great to finally meet you, Lucie, especially under the right circumstances,” she remarked, her gaze curious—something you'd expect from someone in the Secret Service.

I handed her the large bouquet of flowers I had brought along, accompanied by a personal thank-you letter and a gift card to one of our favorite restaurants with Julian. It was the least I could do for a woman who had been willing to take a bullet for me.

“These are gorgeous, thank you very much.” She gestured for me to sit on her all-beige sofa, a bold choice considering how easily it showed stains. She definitely didn't have pets...

“Would you like some coffee? I've also made some Galaktoboureko for us to try. It's a puff pastry, my grandma's recipe.” She brought out the tray.

“Do you speak Greek?” I queried. It occurred to me that the reason why she'd also been a great fit for the role of Shannon was because she spoke the language of Tarnakis, Julian's former business partner who later became his mortal enemy.

“Yes, I do. I hope Tarnakis didn't leave you with a bad taste for Greek culture.” She frowned slightly.

I shook my head profusely. “Definitely not. Actually, one of my dreams is to visit the remnants of ancient Greece. The Acropolis and the Parthenon.” Next, I tried a small piece of her pastry and it was mouthwatering. “These taste like heaven, by the way,” I quickly complimented her baking skills.

She placed the flowers in an ornate vase before coming to sit with me. “I figured I'd

make something different, something that you usually don't have as a treat."

Silence fell for a few seconds. I didn't know why I felt so nervous but I did. Meanwhile, she remained serene, like a still pond.

"I want you to know how immensely grateful I am for your help." I blurted out. "You put yourself into a dangerous situation to keep me out of trouble. Being in the middle of a shooting had to be terrifying." She'd become a living target at a gala in Los Angeles to play the role of Julian's girlfriend.

She waived it off as ordinary. "My pleasure, Lucie. Besides Oliver is a good friend of my husband, so when he reached out, I knew I had to help. Do you know that I protected a few US presidents in the past?"

It didn't surprise me. "That's impressive, Evy."

"Public service. It feels good to make a difference in a world full of evil. We can both agree there is a lot of it around us."

I gave it a nod. "Julian still can't seem to move on from it all," I opened up to her.

"Yes, the whole thing was traumatic for him." Her voice was full of empathy and kindness.

"I still wish he had told me when he found out there was a threat." She had a husband, so she'd be able to relate to this yearning.

She shook her head with fervor. "Lucie, he did what was best for you two to stay alive. At one point we managed to convince Tarnakis that you two were but just another meaningless relationship." She then began to recount an exchange that took place between the two men in his office. Tarnakis essentially warned Julian that any

woman he loved would soon pay for the death of his wife.

“Evy, do you think there’s a chance I could still be a target?” I felt compelled to bring it up. Julian’s paranoia had a way of rubbing off on me. Just because Tarnakis was in prison didn’t mean he suddenly had anything to lose. I wouldn’t let fear get in the way. But staying informed could sometimes mean staying alive.

“We don’t believe so, Lucie.” She confirmed calmly. “We’ve struck a deal with him in regards to his son. Thankfully he does have one person he still cares about.”

Julian hadn’t mentioned this part. I felt sudden relief wash over me.

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“A deal?”

“His son will be taken care off, financially, as well as otherwise.”

I didn't really care to ask that otherwise entailed. Was that how Julian managed to finally make it go away?

“And even if I told you that he was still a threat, would you walk away from your marriage?” She glanced at me. “After all, we cannot read the minds of criminals. We can only come close to it, which was my job here.”

It didn't surprise me she knew that we were engaged.

“No, I'll never walk away from Julian,” I affirmed.

“Have his team worry about it then. He's doing everything possible to keep you safe. Also, because of who he is, he'll always attract a certain amount of danger to himself. And you know that. You've accepted that.”

“Yeah,” my voice wavered. Maybe I needed to become more mindful of my surroundings and learn how to protect myself, too. It had been many years since I went to karate classes and resuming could potentially be a valuable step.

It didn't feel right to keep this chapter open any longer. My main purpose for visiting Evy was to say thank you anyway. So, for the rest of our conversation, we kept things light as she shared that she was expecting her first baby—and most likely her only one, given her age. She planned to retire from fieldwork and start a mentoring

program focused on body language once her maternity leave was over.

As I walked out that evening, I couldn't help but feel like I'd gained a solid lifelong friend. It eased the sting of knowing she wouldn't be continuing with the case. Honestly, it made sense; there wasn't much left to worry about now. We were all moving on.

"Lucie, I'd still love to hear how you and Julian are doing," she let me know, walking me to the door. "Stay in touch."

"I will," I promised, suddenly realizing that with her pregnancy, it was probably best for her to keep some distance from me. Hanging out in public wasn't going to be an option anytime soon. "I'll write updates."

"And congrats on the engagement. I hope to see a wedding invitation." She winked, now fearless.

If anyone deserved to be there on our special day, it was her. "You'll be the first to receive it," I promised.

Then, Will opened the door for me, and soon enough, we were headed back to our empty three-story apartment. Without Julian around, it felt lonely, almost too much space for just me. Only a few more days, I reminded myself.

I decided to make the most of the solitude, so I spent the rest of the evening brainstorming ways to turn my ideas into real income—around 13 million, to be exact.

"You could publish a book, *Tell It All*," Sophie suggested during a catch-up phone conversation.

“At 25?” Even though some artists have achieved enough milestones to make that work, I certainly wasn’t one of them. “I am just a generic corporate girl, remember?”

“Absolutely not. You’re the modern Cinderella,” she objected, her voice rising with excitement. “Babe, there’s probably a whole readership of girls out there who would love to know how you managed to lock down a serial billionaire playboy like Julian.”

“I’ve never been a fan of the trope where the poor girl marries the prince,” I sulked. Besides, my life definitely didn’t feel like Cinderella. It felt like the combination of *Fast and Furious* (due to Julian’s driving style) and *Hitman* (thanks to Tarnakis). Maybe also a bit like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, without the kinkiness. Except for the one time we’d gotten a purple feathered whip as we cruised around a sex shop for fun...

“A biography like that would be a hit. Everyone would want to know who Julian’s future wife is. You’ll make your dream money, guaranteed.” Her ideas flowed.

I rolled my eyes, though she couldn’t see me over the phone. “It’s a hard no.” It still involved monetizing my relationship with Julian. I could have as well ask him for the funds directly.

“What are your other ideas then?” She let out a frustrated sigh.

Sitting on the third floor in what was mostly my office, I had Amanda’s folder in front of me. In her letter, she’d asked me to examine the numbers from her publishing business and reverse them. I glanced at it for the millionth time.

“I got a preliminary plan, but first have to research it before it turns into reality,” I volunteered.

I heard a giggle, then a male voice. She was most definitely making out with Mark

during our conversation. I didn't mind she was so distracted. Seeing Sophie in love soothed my soul.

“Why don't we meet this weekend, and talk about it?” I proposed, now giving her a way out so she could focus on him.

“Yeah,” she rejoiced. “Let's do a proper girl's night out. Just me and you.” It sounded almost like a moan.

We ended the call quickly, and after laughing it off, the silence of the apartment closed in around me once more. I sank into my thoughts, pondering whether this was truly the right move. I didn't have much time to decide, though—the IPO was coming up too fast to hesitate.

So, I made up my mind to send Amanda a bold email, one that would definitely make her think. I was certain that my offer would benefit her, and I trusted that she'd seriously consider it.

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Subject: Proposal

Hi Amanda,

I hope you're enjoying your time in New York!

I've reviewed the documents you left with Kali, and I have a plan for your publishing business. I also find myself needing to make some extra money this year. Here's my proposal: if I can increase the revenue of Hart and Quill by the amount needed for the A shares, would you be willing to pay that out to me?

Looking forward to your thoughts!

Lucie

Asking Amanda such a significant question made my stomach feel queasy. But she'd asked me to level up knowing well that I didn't have the means. The worst she could say was no, but as a businesswoman, she would evaluate carefully what I had to bring to the table.

Next, I went through my student portal and added my new class schedule to my daily calendar. It looked like the following months would be nothing short of hectic. Yet, it didn't feel overwhelming because I was always up for a challenge. Besides, working had to some extent turned into a passion, one more reason why my English major had paid off in the end contrary to what my father had predicted.

I browsed my emails to fill my calendar, only to be astounded by the briskness of

Amanda's response. I opened it too fast to even give myself time to be nervous.

Subject: Re: Proposal

Hi Lucie,

I'm glad to see you're staying productive! You've got yourself a deal. Any profits at Hart & Quill above the number from last year will be yours.

I'll send you the contact info for the current Managing Director. Please let them know you'll be replacing them. I really think we should...

Best,

Amanda

Naturally, she had to remain the draconian boss we all knew and loved, throwing an extra hurdle in my path to test my resilience. She expected me to toughen up, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't suppress the emotions bubbling up inside me. I'd tackle the specifics later—maybe I could find a workaround for whatever the managing director needed. But for the moment, my heart was racing with excitement. I had finally seen a clear path toward my dream. Sure, I had no prior experience in publishing, and the clock was ticking to generate revenue from scratch. But I had something now that I hadn't before: a tangible sense of possibility.

The next day, I was so caught up in my new venture that I decided to skip the office. I texted Kali to check on the offline access, then slipped into my comfy black baggy sweatpants and matching tank top, and brewed a cup of alarmingly strong coffee. Next, I browsed the folder that Amanda provided for ideas how to improve our fiction sales. In just a few hours, I'd compiled a list of twelve goals that I planned to hit within a year. I also shot a quick email to the current managing director, with a

heads up that we needed to meet asap.

Got a dress already? Julian texted while I was posting a new employment ad for a marketing director.

Oh hey, baby! Not yet, but when the time comes, it'll be the most beautiful dress you've ever seen, I vowed.

It's the woman who makes the dress, he flirted. I am coming home tomorrow. Just wanted to check in and wish you a beautiful day. I miss you like hell.

We'd both had some separation anxiety. Me too. Next time, I am going to try to make time to come with you, Julian. In the meantime, I've got news. I couldn't wait to tell him.

Yes?

Amanda is having me run the publishing branch of her business. She's going to pay me a hefty paycheck at the end of it, assuming things go well. And I want to use that money to buy into Apogee. It almost felt silly to share this with a billionaire who could probably initiate an immediate transfer and make my pain go away. But I was proud of it.

How many books do I need to buy?

Of course, he would respond with something like that. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could throw at him. Julian!

Just kidding, I am incredibly happy this is happening for you. Let's go out and celebrate tomorrow?

Can't wait, I felt such relief that his trip would finally be over.

Love you, Lucie, he texted at last. I quickly followed up with the same, my heart warming at our exchange. Now, feeling like I was on Cloud 9, I dove back into work. I was confident that with enough hard work, I would not fall short of my ambitious goal.

I didn't get much more done, though.

My phone dinged again, and I quickly checked it, expecting it to be still from Julian. But, it was Valentina this time. Lu, is there anything you want to tell me? She included a sad emoji with her strange message.

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I didn't have anything in particular to share, so I hesitated for a moment, unsure how to reply. What could she be hinting at?

Almost at the same time, another message arrived. Are you sure you're over Bradley? The photos say otherwise.

It didn't take long for me to connect the dots. Shit, we hadn't been discreet during dinner, and someone from the media had probably caught a glimpse of us. Bracing myself for the worst, I typed my name into the search bar. I'd been right with my assumption—our seemingly friendly outing had spiraled into an online disaster.

Love Triangle: Lucie Benton Moves On with Young Hot Mechanic While Ex-Boyfriend Tours the Middle East

Shit, shit, shit. The story was going viral, with pictures of me next to Bradley's motorcycle. They even got a few shots where our faces were uncomfortably close. I'd have to explain to Valentina that isolated photos didn't exactly tell a thousand words. I'd also need to explain it to the world now.

I ran into him while driving to Hillcrest. We went to grab sushi and catch up. I summarized. It annoyed me that she, of all people, would suspect me of being unfaithful to Julian.

Sorry I don't believe you, she retorted. He told me that he couldn't get dinner the same evening, Lucie.

Come on, Val. I suddenly felt terrible. I am happily engaged. This doesn't have to turn

into animosity between us. You know I would never betray you or him.

She didn't say anything after that, so I kept searching online to gauge the damage. What if my grandma saw it? I needed to call her and explain my side before it all blew up in my face. I quickly skimmed the content of the articles, as my anger with them grew progressively worse.

San Diego—In a surprising twist, social media sensation Lucie Benton has been spotted getting cozy with a young mechanic, sparking rumors of a blossoming romance. This comes just as her ex-boyfriend embarks on a tour of the Middle East, leaving many questioning the timing of these new developments.

Witnesses report that Lucie and her new companion have been seen enjoying intimate outings around town, fueling speculation that she's ready to move on from her past. Meanwhile, her ex, currently navigating the bustling streets of the Middle East, may be left wondering what could have been.

It's no secret that Lucie Benton spent two weeks in Hawaii with the mechanic last year when her relationship with the billionaire hit a rocky patch.

What about Julian? Would he be angry? But I hadn't done anything wrong, so he shouldn't feel betrayed.

In panic mode, I dialed his number just minutes after our text conversation. I didn't want him to feel hurt, and he deserved at least an explanation. His phone rang several times before going to voicemail. My anxiety spiked as I quickly tried again, but this time, it went straight to voicemail. Damn it, he'd seemingly rejected my call, a sign that he'd most likely just found out and got pissed.

I shouldn't have felt embarrassed about my deep friendship with Bradley, but I did. Still, I wasn't willing to give it up to please anyone. Just then, Bradley's name

popped up on my screen—he was calling me now as if he had read my mind. “Hey,” I answered. At least we could sort this out together.

“You okay, Lucie?” he asked, his voice tinged with concern.

My heart was still throbbing in my chest, my life exposed again in ways I didn’t appreciate. “Not really. Valentina is agitated. And Julian hasn’t picked up my calls.” I sighed. “I planned to get a lot of work done today, but instead, I think I need to figure out how to stop this PR disaster.” The media sure knew how to turn my life into hell.

“Breathe, Lucie,” he reminded me, his voice steady. “I’m sorry how this turned out. I should’ve considered the possibility that the press might be lurking. You’re a lot more well-known now than when I left.”

“It’s not your fault,” I exhaled, trying to calm the nerves that still jittered beneath the surface. “Besides, I wouldn’t take it back now. Aki’s salmon roll was out of this world.” I let a hint of humor slip back into my voice, grasping at something light-hearted to hold onto. What I really wanted to say was that seeing him again after his long stay in Kauai meant more than I could express, and I had every right to spend time with him as a friend, no matter the complications.

I heard him laugh just a little bit. “I’ll talk to Val.”

“She really likes you,” I remarked, feeling the weight of the truth in my words. “I meant to tell you the other day, but I think she has stars in her eyes whenever she talks about you.” I cleared my throat. “Maybe take her out to dinner.”

A quiet moment hung in the air.

“I know.” He acknowledged.

It further confirmed my feelings—he wasn't looking for anything serious right now. I understood that much.

“You worry about taking care of Julian,” he said, shifting the topic.

“Yeah,” part of me felt incredibly frustrated that they had to stir up rumors that could hurt him.

“I gotta go now, Lucie,” Bradley continued, his voice softer. “I’m trying to make a deadline for the truck I’m rebuilding. I mainly wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Of course,” I murmured.

“If there is anything I can do to help all this, let me know. I figured if a reporter approaches me I should say nothing?”

“Yeah, that’s the stance of most PR departments,” I sighed. “Bradley?” I blurted out before he had the chance to kill the call.

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“Yes, Lucie?” His deep voice was as comforting as it always had been.

“I don’t want to lose our friendship over this,” I said firmly. “You’ve been there for me through my hardest times, and I don’t want to let this get in the way of everything we’ve shared.”

There was a pause on the other end, and I could almost hear him processing my words, the weight of the situation settling in. Finally, his voice softened, carrying a hint of reassurance. “I had no intention of that anyway.”

I spent the following day dodging overzealous reporters while trying to be a highly functioning wreck. Without a shadow of a doubt, Julian had been ignoring my attempts to explain everything. And it hurt. Because two people who loved each other and had trust did not need to go through such an estrangement in the first place. But I also understood that he needed time to process it all. He shut down on me, withdrawing into himself as he often did when confronted with vulnerability. I knew, deep down, that a large part of his reaction was rooted in insecurity, and Bradley, despite being just a friend to me, was an unspoken threat in his mind. It wasn’t just about trust—it was about fear. Fear of losing me to someone who had undoubtedly shared a deep history with me.

So, I chose to wait until I could talk to him in person. I worked around the clock, instead of fixating on the scandal. After all, I didn’t have time to procrastinate if I was truly committed to revamping Amanda’s publishing business.

To my relief, Kali was handling her tasks remarkably well. She surprised me by asking for more work, even though I thought she already had more than enough on

her plate as a new hire.

“You’re doing an incredible job! I’ll definitely pass that on to Amanda,” I remarked about her progress with the offline access. But it was still difficult to look cheerful, as I had made headlines in even more tabloids. I’d developed a hard shell, but even with my newfound strength, I still felt really low.

The chatter of people in the office became unmistakably about me, and Kali began to show concern. “Glad to hear, Lucie. By the way, I saw the news online, and even though it’s none of my business, I do hope you are hanging in there.” For the first time, she acknowledged my personal life from a friend’s perspective.

I leaned into my chair, the aroma of my third coffee lingering in the air, and sighed. “Yeah, a friendly dinner turned into hurtful gossip. Bradley and I are close, but not in that way.” I sulked.

The whispering of people outside faded as I focused on my thoughts, feeling the weight of the rumors pressing down but determined not to let them define me. “It’s best to ignore it. If they don’t write this, they’ll write something else.”

“Well, if you ever feel like you need to talk, Amanda had me sign documents, so I’m officially a great person to confide in,” she remarked with a playful grin.

“Is that so?” I hummed with quiet amusement.

“And for many more reasons, considering I’ve taken some serious hits in life more than once.” She flashed a wry smile, her eyes sparkling with that familiar mischief, turning a tough situation into something a little lighter. “I have never dated a billionaire, but all men seem to follow relatable patterns.” She winced.

I liked how down-to-earth she was. However, she’d have to truly meet Julian to know

that he was short of predictable. “You know, she mentioned that you had a tough time before coming to Apogee. I didn’t want to pry, but I feel the same way. You always have a friend in me.”

She let out a sharp breath. “It’s not a secret. They let me go from my last job after I had my son. My maternity leave morphed into unemployment. After almost 10 years at my company.”

“Isn’t that pretty much illegal?” I frowned.

She shook her head. “Not really, they said it was because of restructuring. Then they gave my work to a new colleague. But, who would want to take legal action against a former employer, right? At that point, you’re basically bound to never find a job again.”

She had a valid point. Still, the image of her alone with a newborn tugged at my heart. She didn’t have a ring, so I was almost certain she was a single mom. “That’s rough, did you have any support?”

“Not really, I got through it mostly on my own.” She admitted. “My son’s father walked away the moment he discovered I was pregnant. Unfortunately, I have myself to blame for choosing him in the first place.”

“That’s harsh, Kali, I am sorry. We all fall in love picturing the best outcome.”

“I didn’t exactly have the best taste in men, Lucie. It always started out as strong relationships, but it ended with broken promises. I found myself in a tough spot, suddenly unable to pay the rent. I mean, taking a newborn to a homeless shelter just didn’t seem acceptable, you know?” Her eyes glistened, the weight of those memories still heavy on her shoulders.

“Do you have close friends or family?”

“A sister. She lives in Atlanta. Let’s just say she wasn’t available to help. Her husband has never liked me.” Her voice cracked, a hint of vulnerability breaking through the facade she usually maintained. “I started looking into government housing options when my savings ran out. It got so scary.”

“Amanda stepped in, didn’t she?”

She nodded vigorously. “I wrote her an email out of desperation since we used to be great friends. We’d lost touch for almost a decade, though.”

I knew the rest of the story. Amanda offered her a job. But it wasn’t just a charitable move on her end. Kali was incredible at what she did.

“I am glad you are here now. Honestly, you’ve been of great help in a short amount of time. I think your prior employer made a huge mistake, but it’s to our benefit.” I winked, my mood now much better after chatting with a friend.

She smiled brightly. “That’s exactly my intention, Lucie. I know you have a lot on your plate, so I’m here to make things easier for you. As for the app, I’m ready to take on anything you hand over.”

This cheered me up because I’d been drowning in tasks, and also bogged down by Julian’s silence. “Great, if you really don’t mind...”

“I don’t.” She reiterated.

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“I’ll send you a list of technical issues we still need to resolve. I worked with our helpdesk, but I think some of them will require an experienced engineer. Maybe even someone we need to hire. Are you good with that?”

“Consider it done,” there was a spark in her eyes that told me she was ready to take on the challenge, and I felt a wave of relief knowing I could count on her support. At least there was something I could count on these days...

The evening of Julian’s return finally arrived. I spent a few anxious minutes mindlessly scrolling through Instagram with my anonymous account, one I created so I could interact with my close friends. The distraction helped, even if just for a moment. In my wandering, I stumbled across a fascinating fact: the Hydra, a water organism, could be blended in a mixer and then regenerate its entire body in just a few days. It was a strange comfort to think about resilience, even in such an odd context.

Right around the time when I expected it, I heard the unmistakable roar of Julian’s Lamborghini Huracán engine revving outside. The sound was both exhilarating and nerve-wracking, a reminder that he was back and that our conversation was imminent. I glanced out the window, my heart racing at the thought of what would transpire between us. We were two strong-minded individuals, so any disagreement could feel huge.

He’d ignored all my messages so there was no doubt that he was pissed. Did he have the right to be? Probably yes. But we could have resolved all of it if only he’d picked up my calls.

I remained in our home office until I heard signs that he was inside our apartment. There was no way to hear him open the downstairs, so by then, he'd already come up to the middle-floor kitchen. One thing became clear immediately: he wasn't looking for me. A mix of anticipation and apprehension settled in as I contemplated my next move. To my great disdain, his choice to ignore me triggered a wave of fear tied to memories of my dad. As a child, I often felt that same knot of dread when my father came home upset, and now Julian's mood was stirring up those old feelings. These memories now flooded back.

I descended the one floor separating us, hoping that his excitement of seeing me would overcome any bitterness he may have been holding onto. "Hi," I muttered as I spotted him in the kitchen making an espresso. The air between us was charged, buzzing with anger and desperation.

Julian looked like he hadn't slept much. Still, he was wickedly handsome, exuding confidence in his sharp suit that fit his lean physique perfectly. His thick hair had a touch of ruggedness, suggesting he didn't take himself too seriously, or that he'd perhaps had too long of a flight. Or both. His well-defined jawline and captivating eyes usually held a blend of ambition and warmth, but right now, they radiated coldness, even hate. Still, his undeniable sex appeal remained intact, unbothered by the change in his demeanor.

"Hey," he mustered enough energy to acknowledge me.

"Did you have a good trip?" I tried to spark a conversation. But the words felt like a sharp knife gliding over my skin—painful and risky. I didn't need to be a highly empathetic individual to see that he was not interested in small talk. He wouldn't even look at me, so I braced myself for one of the first fights we would have as a couple. The dinner with Bradley sure had come around to haunt me.

"Yeah, everything was fine, Lucie. Until I found out my fiancée got dinner with the

guy she dated last year.” His voice was steady, but I could hear crushing hurt simmering just beneath the surface. I could feel it—like the air around us had thickened, the anger barely contained.

At least we were trying to talk it out. “I ran into Bradley while driving to Hillcrest. And, the two of us decided to get dinner as friends.” I forced myself to look at him, searching for any sign that my words were making an impact.

BANG.

Before I could finish, he smashed the cup against the counter, the sound echoing in the tense silence.

Holy fuck. He’d never done anything that intense during the entire time I’d known him. When it came to violence, everyone was walking on thin ice with me. I could never accept any of it in a relationship. “You’re not being fair,” I defended myself. “You’re just not fair to me, Julian.”

“And you are?” His gaze, usually as powerful as the sun, which once filled me with strength, now drained me of it. “When Alice trashed my name in papers, I didn’t think any girl could top it.” His voice was tight, laced with frustration and something else—a sharp edge that I couldn’t quite place. Julian was talking about his ex-girlfriend, the one who had sold her side of the story to the tabloids. It had all happened right before the two of us met.

Still, I refused to look away. “I should have been more careful but the headlines couldn’t be further from reality.” It was then that I noticed he was trembling. His hands shook ever so slightly, and a thin sheen of sweat clung to his forehead. “Are you okay? Are you sick?” I queried. I also noticed he had lost a fair amount of weight during the trip.

He downed the double espresso despite the time of the day. “Did you fuck him?” Julian thundered, ignoring most of what I’d just asked.

“No. And if you’re accusing me of cheating,” I responded frowning, frustration rising in my chest, “we should have more trust than this. I’ve been looking forward to seeing you, but not in this mood.” Something about him seemed different, if not menacing. There was aloofness in his posture, a rigidity in his face that I hadn’t encountered before. I hated to admit to myself that I was still attracted to him regardless. Even when had was going through turbulent emotions, he was still the man I loved. And I loathed seeing him hurt because of something I did, even if not intentionally.

I reached out, my fingers brushing against his arm, a tentative touch that was meant to pull him back from whatever dark place he’d retreated to. “I would never hurt you like that,” I murmured softly, trying to coax the man I knew to return. “But I do feel a certain closeness to Bradley, and our connection means something.” My voice faltered slightly as the words left my mouth, but I pushed forward, needing to be honest. “Can you accept him in my life as a close friend?” I knew I was pushing it, but I also needed to be honest with people in my life, especially with Julian whom I planned to marry.

But all I saw was disbelief in his demeanor. He leaned against the counter, his hands gripping the edge for support, his chest rising with a shallow breath. “Lucie, I’ve seen enough pictures of the two of you since last year,” he spat, his eyes like shards of glass, each word cutting through the air. “And you’re not wearing your ring, either, from what I see.” He glanced at my bare hand. “Is that why you didn’t want to go on the trip, to spend time with him? Figure yourself out?”

The words hit me like a slap. “I shouldn’t have to explain myself, but I’m overwhelmed with work, spending most of my time there. And if you remember, I’m not wearing my ring because we’re planning to tell Gram.” I looked into his eyes,

hoping for any sign of understanding, but all I found was more icy distance.

“You’re not at work right now, Lucie.” he retorted.

I felt my eyes sting with tears. Misunderstandings could be cleared up with compassion, with kindness, with the kind of love that had always bound us together. I stepped closer, trying to wrap my arms around him, trying to force some kind of connection between us. “Julian, please.”

“Get off me.” He snapped as if I’d hurt him just with my touch.

My arms fell away from him like they were burned, the empty space between us now more real than ever. I felt urgency to convince him of the truth, but his darkness swallowed any attempt for me to go after him. It was also my pride—he’d wronged me to some extent, so why should I chase after him?

I decided to give him the space he needed, even as my heart ached. Time could sort this out, but right now wasn’t a good moment to keep pushing.

“I can’t be here anymore,” he exclaimed, spinning around at the corner of the staircase and heading downstairs.

“Then don’t,” I snapped.

“I’m going out to find another girl who is actually loyal. And trust me, in the meantime, there’s not going to be a shortage of women who want to fuck tonight. And fuck hard. Enjoy your evening, Lucie.”

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The coldness of his tone drilled a hole through my heart. This was new, new to us. Within seconds, I heard the door slam shut, leaving me feeling panicked and hollow. I collapsed to the floor, my back against the kitchen cabinets, and I began to sob uncontrollably.

The roar of his Lambo echoed in the distance as it sped away.

It took me a while to collect myself, nevertheless, I eventually got up to call Rose. She had been Julian's assistant, chef, and family all rolled into one. If anyone could console me and offer some insights, it was her, the fixer extraordinaire.

At around seventy years old, she was still a woman of sharp wit. She also saw me as the best thing that happened to Julian, so this would work to my advantage. Maybe she could talk to him before it was too late, before his pain drove him into the arms of another woman amidst his self-doubt. The way Julian dealt with pain was with revenge, and if he was convinced that I'd cheated with Bradley, then maybe he would try to prove a point by doing the worst he could do to sever our bond.

"Hi, Rose," I gasped, still struggling to catch my breath after crying so much. Still, crying had made me feel better about the situation, like a soothing rain after a scorching drought. I wiped my eyes and managed a shaky smile.

"Hunny, are you okay?" She immediately recognized that something was off.

"Julian saw articles about me while he was in Dubai. I think he believes the story." I blurted out.

“Oh, Lucie.” Based on the tone of her voice, she was already familiar with the news. “I know you wouldn’t do such a thing. Besides, he must know the truth.”

She was quite right that even if I wanted to sleep with a guy, there would be no way to do so without Will being aware of it. So why did he even ask me this in the first place?

“Please, can you talk to him? I don’t even know where he went. But I think he’s going to take home another girl.” I wrung my hands together in nervousness.

She inhaled sharply. And I suddenly noticed something seemed wrong. It was as if she was struggling to breathe. “Are you okay Rose?”

“I apologize, Lucie, I’ve had some pain in my chest today but I think it’s just indigestion. It usually flares up when I eat potatoes, for some reason I am sensitive.”

She managed to settle my mind. I suffered from heartburn too, especially when I was under stress.

“Julian and I had an argument, and we are not on speaking terms as of now.” She continued without giving me time to inquire about her health further.

What? I blinked in surprise. Had something happened between them? Was this the reason Julian seemed so on edge? It felt distinctly strange that they had a problem with each other. Rose was like a grandmother to him, or at least that’s how I would describe their relationship if I could only use one comparison. The two hadn’t had a falling out that I knew of.

“What happened?” I pressed Rose to better understand.

“Lucie, I had to promise him that I would not tell you the reason. While I disagreed, I

do believe that it's best if it comes from him." Her voice sounded shaky and weak.

"I just need to know he's okay," I frowned. "I didn't mean to hurt him." Julian had struggled with depression, and the last thing I wanted was to be the reason he shut down. "Please tell me what's going on. He doesn't seem to be fine."

She got silent. I waited and waited for her to explain herself.

"I do worry about him. He's..." Her voice suddenly faltered as she spoke on the phone. "I'm dizzy," she murmured. "I apologize." She hardly finished the sentence.

I heard the unmistakable sound of her cell phone clattering to the ground.

"Rose?" I called out, fear creeping into my voice. I strained to hear anything, but there was nothing—no response, no sound. She'd fallen, and I knew I had to hurry to do something about it. My heart hammered against my ribs while I quickly dialed 911 on the other line, my fingers shaking as I pressed the numbers. "Please, I need help," I spoke rapidly, my voice trembling. "My friend—she's in trouble. She just said she was dizzy while on the phone, and I think she fell too."

"Do you have her address," the dispatcher asked.

I ran to the office, to find it, and thankfully I still had it written down where I remembered. I hurled it out like it was the most important information I'd ever given to anyone. "Heart attack, she might be having a heart attack."

As I waited for the operator to respond, I could feel the seconds stretching into an eternity. "Rose!" I took off hold the other line, desperate for any sign of life. I imagined her alone, vulnerable, and the thought of her possibly gone turned unbearable. On the other end of the line, the phone buzzed with an eerie silence. Each moment felt heavier, a crushing weight of fear in my chest as I battled against my

rising panic. “Please, don’t go Rose,” I wailed into the speaker, hoping she could somehow hear me. My knees buckled, and I collapsed to the floor, the shock of it momentarily grounding me. But I couldn’t stay there, not with her life hanging in the balance. I pushed myself up, my legs trembling, and without another thought, I bolted for the door, rushing toward the closest ER near her house.

The doctor wouldn’t come out for a while, but eventually, she appeared with an encouraging expression on her face. I rose from my chair after having prayed for hours.

“She’s going to be okay,” she chimed.

Relief washed over me. Suddenly, Rose’s well-being became my only priority. Her relationship with Julian seemed almost irrelevant now in the light of survival.

“Initially, she’ll be weak and fatigued, and this is normal as her body went through significant stress. It would be helpful if we could get her into a personal rehabilitation program. Does she have any other family?” The doctor queried. She seemingly assumed that I was her granddaughter because that’s what I’d put in a form to get information.

Rose and I had never talked about any family members of hers. I’d never heard her mention kids and it felt that I’d know by now about them. And a husband had never been in the picture either. Knowing that Julian might be the closest person to her felt heavy, especially now.

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“Julian Valmont, my fiancée. He’d want to know that this happened.” I murmured.

The doctor gave me a weird glance and then asked me to fill out a contact form. It didn’t really make sense why I was asking the hospital to call him. But she didn’t question it.

Even though this involved Rose, I wouldn’t call Julian myself. It felt too penetrating to talk to him on the phone, too soon after everything. And I had lost all my empathy for his behavior. The way he’d treated her, the way he’d failed her, left me certain that whatever he’d done this time, it was serious. I could barely think of him without a surge of anger.

“Give it a few days, Lucie.” The doctor informed me. “But I’ll keep you posted as individual recovery can differ.”

I didn’t need to think about my next step. “I’ll stay around at the hospital then.” Rose didn’t have anybody there, so I’d be the one. I planned to call Sophie, to see if she could maybe grab me some clothes to change. Then I would live on the food from the vending machine if I could even eat anything at all. Amanda, she’d understand this was an emergency.

“Look, it may be best for you to just go home.” The doctor suggested kindly while taking a seat next to me. “Besides, I don’t know if you noticed but a few people have been looking at you here.”

I hadn’t. It was now the norm in my life that strangers felt compelled to snap photos of me. Where was Will anyway? He had to be around somewhere. That’s how Julian

would eventually find out what had happened. I was about to protest the idea of going home when I realized her advice seemed entirely rational. My decision to stay was emotional and impractical.

“Rose is asleep now, she won’t even know you’re here,” the doctor continued. “We’ll call you once she wakes up. I promise.” She then handed me a tiny envelope. “Ambien, in case you need rest. I expect to have more news tomorrow, and you’d want to be awake then.”

As much as I didn’t want to leave Rose alone at the hospital, I also didn’t want to be the source of a sensation at a time when everything seemed daunting. And I assumed the hospital couldn’t provide me with a private space to wait. In the end, I had to agree with her.

“Thank you,” I motioned to leave, offering a tight-lipped smile before standing up to head back to my car. The first thing I planned to do when I got home was send Rose a room full of flowers to remind her that I was still there for her. Then, as the doctor suggested, I’d return.

Will reappeared, and without a word, we drove home.

I didn’t want to talk to anyone by the time I got to our apartment. It felt eerily quiet, after our devastating exchange. I picked up the shattered pieces of the cup from the floor, hoping to erase the memory of our painful argument, and then treated myself to a hot chocolate. At least it gave me some sustenance without making me feel heavy in my already knotted stomach. Despite it being almost midnight, I wasn’t ready for sleep.

Although I appreciated the Ambien prescribed by Rose’s doctor, I decided against taking it, mainly to keep my clarity. Instead, I stared blankly into space, my thoughts swirling in all directions, unable to find any peace. The image of Julian with another

woman filled my mind, and with it came a surge of jealousy and aching pain. Was he, at this very moment, giving himself to someone else?

If that's how he chose to handle our problems, then I'd have to find the strength to become the one girl he could never have again. With these images, I sat there, holding the warm mug of hot chocolate, watching the steam rise softly from the surface. My fingers traced the rim absentmindedly, hoping my thoughts would eventually lull me to sleep. A wishful thought anyway.

I was about to switch to a homemade screwdriver, ready to mix up something more potent, when my phone lit up with a message. A flicker of hope ignited in my chest because I expected it to be from either Sophie or Bradley—someone who might offer the comfort of friendship when I needed it most. But it wasn't either of them.

I am sorry. Julian's name flashed on my screen.

I exhaled slowly, feeling a sense of relief, like the pressure that had built up inside me was finally starting to ease. It seemed like he was beginning to understand my perspective. And in that moment, it hit me—he might have been struggling just as much as I had. But still, I couldn't bring myself to reply right away; too much had happened, and I needed more time to hear him out and make sense of everything from his side.

I didn't have to wait long for that. Lucie, you're so pure. And I am struggling with ghosts.

Was he talking about his family? Julian, I have my ghosts too. I wrote back without acknowledging that I'd accepted his apology that soon. I needed to hear so much more than that to consider a reconciliation.

I went to Trading Yesterday and couldn't help but think of our first time there. The

day that I knew I wanted to marry you. He reminisced.

That was the first day I'd found out just how much of a public figure he was—and it came early in our relationship. It was also the day he'd given me my rose—the red rose he'd bought for me downtown. Then, to fulfill a childish wish of mine, he'd turned it into an eternal, glazed rose.

So, in the end, he hadn't visited a private club like he'd said. He'd gone to his yacht, choosing to retreat in his own loneliness. The idea of him there, alone, made a strange ache form in my chest.

I remember carrying you to bed that night—the moment I knew I'd lose my mind if I didn't have you right then.

No this wasn't good. My body suddenly already felt hot with desire. I remembered it too. He'd taken my first time that day. But I still needed to remind him how much he'd hurt me earlier. The sting of the memory lingered. I guess it means you didn't end up fucking any other girls after all?

It didn't take long for an answer to arrive. I wanted you to feel pain because I couldn't handle mine.

It was the raw truth, and I could accept the explanation. People dealt with perceived loss differently. But his reaction had been way more intense than ever before. He'd never used cruelty to get me to feel a certain way. I didn't like this side of him.

You should come home, Julian. We should have been having this conversation in person anyway.

Lucie, first, I got to tell you something. It's going to change everything between us.

I didn't like the way this sounded. We're only going to work if you are honest, remember? I was certain that I could handle whatever he'd say, though. What could he possibly say that would break us?

I am ashamed, because I need help. A new message arrived almost instantly.

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With? Fear robbed me of my breath. I knew this wasn't going to be good.

Before Rose had her heart attack, we got into a bad fight. Her dire condition is killing me even more because I've caused it.

I swallowed hard. Of course, he would know about Rose. But what could have possibly happened between them?

She discovered cocaine in the pocket of my suit jacket.

I stared at his message like it was a relic from a different relationship. My prior one. God damn it.

He continued with a long explanation. The first time I used it was while you were in Hawaii with Bradley. I couldn't handle the idea of you with someone else, so I tried to numb my feelings. I didn't know I'd get so hooked on it. And for a while, I kept it a secret because I was afraid you'd leave. I thought I could eventually deal with it on my own and stop using.

No, this was too much. Too much for me...not him...of all people. I wanted to scream as a rush of pain surged through me, sharp and unforgiving, like a dark swell tearing at my heart.

Lucie, I tried to quit in Dubai, but I don't know if I am strong enough to do it on my own anymore. He continued without waiting for my reaction. I'd become completely paranoid after seeing those articles. When I saw you in the kitchen, I felt unbearable anxiety, the fear that you had cheated overwhelmed everything. It was so intense, I

knew I had to run because I got so afraid of my rage.

The weight of his confession settled on me, but this was a vulnerable moment, and if I failed to show up, I knew it would make things harder to improve.

How long have you been using it? I tried to gauge the situation.

6 months, he confessed. I know it's too long and I should have told you earlier.

Drugs were a major trigger for my own trauma, not just his. It wasn't just that my father had been an alcoholic, often relying on pills to numb his pain; my first love, James Stone, and I had spiraled into a volatile mess when he became an addict. I had chosen Julian because he was everything James wasn't—stable, put-together, the complete opposite of the chaos I'd grown up with. That stability had been incredibly attractive to me. And now, it was starting to unravel.

Please say something, Lucie. He texted again.

I couldn't quite find the right words. You have to get sober because I can't do this otherwise, was all I could muster.

I am checking into rehab tomorrow. In Palm Springs. He followed up as my mind still tried to process everything. I can't put you through this. Even then, you'll probably leave. And I can't be bitter about it.

Given that he'd hidden this from me, much like he had with other secrets the year before, the right thing for me would probably be to leave, just as he was anticipating. But Julian had lost his mom to an overdose, and seeing him angry earlier only reminded me of the danger of walking away now. Abandoning him at this moment would only drive him further into the arms of the devil.

The fact that he'd made the decision to get help was good.

When I saw you today, so beautiful, so untouched by the world, a wild, reckless desire surged within me to have you right here, right now, in our living room. But I'm not clean, Lucie. I'm consumed by an addiction that pulls at me relentlessly, and no matter what I do, it's never enough anymore. His words were a twisted confession, filled with raw emotion that left me speechless.

Like a moth to a flame, I thought, though I kept the words locked within, afraid to speak them. Despite every rational thought urging me to turn away, there was something in him—an enigmatic pull, delicate yet powerful—that drew me in, a force I couldn't name. I loved him too fiercely to let him go, not now, not when he needed me most.

Come home, I suddenly texted, the words tumbling out before I could second-guess myself. It was a decision unlike me, yet it felt undeniably right.

Lucie?!!! I could almost see the disbelief in his eyes, the raised eyebrow, wondering how the girl with such strong boundaries had suddenly become so... accepting. But I wasn't accepting. I just wanted to be his reason to live.

Yes. I replied quickly, the urgency in my voice even through text. Come home now.

I waited about an hour before I heard the familiar rattle of Julian's keys. I stayed in our downstairs bedroom, so it didn't take me long to get to the door. He stood outside, alone, still wearing his suit, which now looked quite ruffled after an international flight and an evening filled with turmoil. I watched him for a moment, torn between the urge to approach and the weight of my pride.

"I'm sorry, Lucie." The scent of alcohol lingered on his breath, but instead of repelling me, it stirred something deeper—worry that things with him had gone out of

control more than I'd anticipated.

"I am really proud of you for deciding to go to rehab." A faint smile tucked at the corner of my lips.

"I sent Rose flowers to the hospital along with an apology letter, but I don't think she'll be ready to see me anytime soon." He sounded devastated. "Lucie, I feel so guilty. I caused her to have a heart attack." I could feel the tension in his frame, the rawness of his regret.

I glanced at the tip of his nose and wondered why I hadn't noticed it before. What I had once chalked up to allergies now seemed like a side effect of his use. The rawness, the subtle flaring of his nostrils—it was all clearer now, and when I looked closer, I saw the scabs. I tried to stay composed, but I couldn't control the tide of panic stirring in me. Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

"I got so angry with you, and I can't forgive myself for it," Julian said, his voice heavy with regret as he held my gaze, searching for something in my eyes. "But do you love him, Lucie?" He reached for my hand, his fingers brushing against the cool metal of my engagement ring. "Has anything happened between the two of you while I was away? Please, tell me the truth." His words hung in the air, thick with vulnerability and quiet desperation.

I locked eyes with his, struggling to understand how someone so incredible could be so insecure, unable to see how deeply I cared for him. "Julian, I've never felt the love I feel for you for anyone." I wasn't sure if it was healthy for me anymore, but I had already become too entangled in my feelings to let go of them now.

Then it struck me. I had always been reluctant to fight for anyone but myself. I had loved James deeply, and when I'd told him I wouldn't date him, it shattered me. But I hadn't fought for him; instead, I waged a war within, punishing myself for the choice

I made.

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Now, here and now, it felt different. I was prepared to face anything—anything at all—to help Julian through this. Maybe it was a bit of a toxic thought, but I never subscribed to the idea that love was just a choice, something you could fight off with enough willpower. Love, for me, had always been something deeper, something you couldn't just turn on or off. And right now, I was ready to fight for it.

He exhaled with relief. “You're my everything,” he murmured, a hint of melancholy in his voice.

I knew it was risky to take him back so quickly. In fact, it was a disaster for my mental health. But deep down, I knew I wouldn't regret it. I felt the weight of his gaze on me, and now I also turned self-absorbed, consumed with my own desires. I too needed him to put me out of my misery.

“I believe you can do this,” I whispered against his mouth. “There's so much you have going for you.”

“Lucie, I often don't feel that way.” Julian's beautiful face hovered just an inch from mine. “I know that's true that I have successful businesses,” he said softly, “but if it weren't for you, I probably wouldn't be going to rehab right now. I have money and fame... and sometimes, not even that can ease the weight of my depression. The meds don't always help me forget about my mom.” His eyes glistened, while he tried to hide it.

It could have upset me, but I wasn't. After all, I knew that most addicts not only had a genetic predisposition but also carried deep trauma that shaped their struggles. His mother dying from an overdose on his birthday was one of them. I furrowed my brow

but stayed quiet. This was the time to listen, like really listen.

“I’ve always carried this darkness, and when I’m on it, the world just seems a little softer, easier to endure. I can finally let my guard down.”

I squeezed his hand gently. “Let’s talk more about it, okay? But inside?” A wave of unease washed over me, a strange feeling that Will had overheard part of our conversation, even though he wasn’t anywhere in sight.

Julian followed me silently, his steps heavy. But we barely made it a few feet before he sank down onto the bottom step of our staircase, his body folding in on itself as his expression shattered. I shut the door with a thud.

“Everything you’ve told me makes sense. But drugs aren’t a way to make anything right. They’re just a temporary escape and you don’t need one right now. Niccolo’s nightmare is over.” I reminded him.

“I didn’t start using until my late 20s,” he said, his voice heavy with emotion. “But the simple act of it made me feel close to her—Lucie. And that scares me.”

I realized he was still talking about his mom.

“She passed away, Julian,” I said, my voice as soft as I could make it. “Because of her addiction. You’ve got too much to live for, and you will heal. You don’t want to end up the same way, do you?”

He shook his head, as if trying to shake off the weight of it all, then gave me a faint but certain smile—a quiet acknowledgment that, despite everything, there was still something between us that held him together. “No, not when I look at you.” Without another word, he pulled me closer, settling me in his lap. His fingers brushed the skin on my thigh, and even just that was enough to get me reeling. For a suspended

moment, neither one of us moved. The stillness hung in the air, but the rhythm of our breaths grew uneven, breaking into something more jagged.

It had been over a week since I'd been with him, and his presence only exacerbated the physical longing inside me. A sudden, wild temptation sank deep into my bones, stirring a desire within me I hadn't expected. I suddenly didn't care that he was probably still high, or that this might not be the healthiest choice for me. I just wanted to prove to him that we were worth fighting for—and selfishly, I also needed him to put out the lust building within me.

He kissed me gently at first, but when he sensed the heat already building between us, he took my lips with a fierce intensity. We slowly backed into the bedroom, then frantically pushed each other's clothing off. His jacket. Then his tie. My pants. His shirt. Soon, I was down just to my tank top and my poor excuse for panties.

“Do you want me to fuck you?” Julian leaned down on me. In a matter of seconds, he'd gained all his confidence back.

“Yes,” I breathed out. I grabbed his hand and brought it in between my legs. He didn't bother to slide my V string off, just pushed its silk to the side, then guided his fingers into me. “God, you're so wet,” he hissed. “You needed this, didn't you? You needed me...”

The tender tissues grasped at plunging fingers. I writhed and bucked, as he pushed my legs more apart like a man starved.

“Baby, you like when I do this to you? Because you're drenching the sheets,” he circled my clit with satisfaction.

“More,” I moaned while I felt his erection pulsate against my groin. I arched my back, lost in the heavenly sensations he was giving me. “Julian,” I cried out.

He tore his fingers out of me just when I was nearing a rapid orgasm. “Tell me you need me to be inside you,” he half pleaded, half demanded.

“Yes, please,” he received only a whimper of a response.

“Lucie,” he groaned my name, as he grabbed my hips with both hands, pulling me back. “God, you’re so beautiful.”

Julian stirred emotions within me emotions that I’d never had before—an intoxicating blend of vulnerability and desire. Paired with the raw intensity of his touch, it was a volatile mix, one that pulled me deeper than I ever expected to go.

As if I needed more arousal, he bit down my nipples through my thin tank top, then boldly took the glass of water on the nightstand and dripped it on me as an unexpected surprise. “Oh fuck,” I exclaimed as the coolness of it felt stimulating. His pointer finger pulsed over my areola, the heat now spreading through my entire body. With one swift move, he lifted the tank top entirely, his palms now massaging my breasts up and down.

“Damn,” I reached for his heavy engorged cock to return the favor. I planned to go down on him with stamina. But Julian, even if for just a moment stopped me.

What could he possibly want to say now? Blood pounded in my ears because I was so ready for him to take me.

“Are you sure this is the right move for you?” His eyes now searched mine with tenderness. He found more self-control in the end than I’d had. “I’m already grateful you let me come home, to be with you,” he murmured, gently tucking a tendril of hair behind my ear. “I want to make sure you don’t have any regrets.”

Maybe it would have been the wise choice to step back, give myself some space, and

process everything. But my mind was fixated on just one thing. “Julian, I’ve never been surer.”

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Without me begging further, he pinned me against the bed and drove into me with one go.

I spread my thighs apart to feel him deeper while he pounded me with the force of our love. The pleasure was so intense that my fears no longer burdened me. Julian grunted and moved inside me fast, then slowed down to savor the moment. That was also the moment for me when I was most likely to come, and while I tried hard not to, my body craved it. I spasmed as warmth rolled through me.

It was as if he knew my body inside out. “You feel so good, so tight,” he rammed his cock into me over and over.

But it wasn’t all animalistic. “I love you so much, Lucie,” he moaned as we both began to gasp for breaths.

I dug my fingers deeper into the skin of his back, feeling him tense beneath my touch. “I love you so much,” I whispered, letting the steady beat of his heart anchor me as he collapsed against my chest. I wasn’t ready to face the harshness of reality or the days to come, but for tonight, we had each other to drown it all out. And yet, as our lips met, a familiar numbness spread through mine, a tingling sensation—the only sign of the darkness that loomed ahead. The one sign of how far I’d gone to love him.

We lay there for a while, catching our breath in the soft glow of the moonlight. Would we stay up until almost morning? Time was slipping away, and soon he would have to leave again, for what could be a long while.

Not ready to sleep, we sank into a long conversation that unraveled the layers of

everything that had come before us—every heartbreak, every scar. The pain poured out, raw and unspoken, but somehow, by some quiet miracle, it seemed to dissolve as swiftly as it had appeared. Beneath the roughness of his words and the intensity of his demeanor, I saw the truth of our love—it was tender, sweet, and filled with care. It was ours, with its ragged edges, secrets, and suffering, but still, it was ours.

“I need your help, baby,” he pleaded quietly. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to do this without you.” Our faces were so close now that I could count the stubble on his scruffy jaw. It was then that I noticed that he was afraid. “For the first time in my life, I don’t feel like I am in control, Lucie.”

I pulled him into my arms, cradling him close. “I am here,” I promised. “Rose is going to be fine, everything is going to be alright.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” he whispered, and the rest of the night was spent with him sobbing in my arms, each shaky breath heavy with pain. I felt the weight of his grief—his mom, the memories, and the guilt of letting me down.

He’ll overcome this, I thought, trying to convince myself that this was just another hurdle in his unstable life. On the outside, Julian Valmont was the billionaire who had it all, but on the inside, he was a chaotic painting of heavy emotions. Beneath the polished surface, there were cracks, hidden scars that only a few ever saw. And as much as I wanted to believe he could heal, I feared the journey would take more from him than he knew.

The following day, we woke up around sunrise, both of us restless and unable to find any real peace. Julian, perhaps still riding the high from the night before, wasn’t easy to read. I didn’t ask about it—partly because I knew the truth: it would likely take medication to help him through the withdrawal, a process far from simple.

I texted Amanda to let her know I needed a sick day. My entire first year at Apogee,

I'd never taken one. But I felt deep in my bones that I needed to digest everything that had happened in the recent day. I knew that if I didn't give myself time to absorb the new information, I'd break irreparably.

We brewed a French press, the steam rising between us like a fragile barrier. I tried to focus on the ritual, the comforting aroma filling the room, but my mind kept drifting back to his pull toward using. His addiction explained so much, including the angular cheilitis on my mouth that had flared up again after that night we made love. It stung when I sipped on my orange juice. I winced, trying to ignore it. Part of me wondered if some of the cocaine had been absorbed through my lips, making me a reluctant participant in his addiction. The thought horrified me—how could he put me through this without realizing the consequences? Truly, he likely hadn't recognized it, but those caught in addiction often failed to see how deeply their actions impacted the people around them.

We spent a few minutes in bed, cuddling, both of us acutely aware that this would be the last time for weeks if not months. How long he would stay at rehab depended on his ability to recover—maybe two or three months? He expressed brief concerns about his business, worried he couldn't run it from rehab. The first few weeks, they wouldn't even allow him a phone, another disappointment layered on top of everything else. The rehab insisted visits weren't recommended because patients needed to focus on themselves. "We'll see if you can visit toward the end," he pondered, a flicker of hope in his voice.

"I know you can do this," I replied, striving to sound encouraging. Any doubts I had, I buried deep inside, clinging to hope for the best outcome. I wanted to believe in him, in us, even though the harsh reality of it all lingered at the edges of my mind.

While we packed his bag together, I glanced outside to see Oliver waiting patiently. I admired his strength to stick around through it all. He must have been upset with Julian for what had happened with Rose, but his demeanor seemed calm. I sensed he

was in the same place I was—choosing to fight for Julian’s life, vowing loyalty. I waved at him, gratitude bubbling up inside me, and mouthed a silent thank you. He nodded back, acknowledgment passing between us.

Holding onto the belief that this was a brave step, I walked with Julian to the car. “I’m really proud of you,” I remarked, kissing him on the cheek. “You’ve come so far. Don’t lose sight of that now.”

He acknowledged it, though his fears about getting sober lingered in his eyes. Overcoming addiction was never a simple story; it was a monumental effort requiring consistent commitment. Before he got into the car, he handed me his phone. “We won’t be able to talk for a while, but I wrote something for you—messages to read each day while I’m gone. They’re in the notes.”

I smiled, touched by his thoughtfulness, then pulled out a thick envelope from my coat, holding it out to him. Inside were 30 flashcards—one for each day of his first month away. I’d written them while he was in the shower, trying to capture everything I couldn’t say in person.

He looked at me, mesmerized. “I know we tend to say the same things sometimes, but this is more than a coincidence.”

“I didn’t believe in twin flames before you,” I grinned, feeling a warmth spread through me despite everything. “But now... I think I’m starting to.”

The tension in his shoulders eased slightly. “I think I’m a believer now too.” He placed the letters into the pocket of his coat, as if carrying a piece of my heart with him.

“Should I take any of your calls? Let people know?” I changed the subject, not wanting to spiral into tears.

“Whatever you feel is right, Lucie,” he shrugged. “I have different work to do now, and I told my staff I’ll be away for a while. Mr. Dickens is also updated.”

Being a CEO of multiple companies had its advantages, allowing him to step back. Still, seeing him so broken was hard; he’d always been in charge of everything when it came to his businesses.

“I love you,” he pulled me into a tight hug. “And about Bradley...” He inhaled sharply, visibly pained by the thought. “If it matters that much to you, go see him when you need to. I won’t stand in your way.”

I laughed softly, noticing how hard he was trying not to grit his teeth at the mention of his name. “Honestly, I have a lot of work to do, and I’ll probably just sleep in my spare time. The few hours I have left in the day.” I added with a hint of playfulness.

“Lucie,” his gaze softened, searching mine with a tenderness that made my heart ache. “Please let me buy you Amanda’s company. Investors put money into things that make sense, and you make sense.”

I appreciated it more than Julian could know. “I’ll consider it as back up option if I fail at my plan.” I mustered one last smile, though his care for me was sweet. My career worries suddenly didn’t seem as important as his recovery.

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“I won’t bring it up again, but if you need anything, just say the word to me or Mr. Dickens,” he reassured me, his chin brushing gently against my forehead.

And then, in a heartbeat, he was gone. I stood there, watching him drive away, the weight of our shared moments lingering in the air, a bittersweet reminder of the hard journey ahead.

With Julian gone, I felt a deep loneliness on the first day of his trip. The silence in our apartment was almost suffocating, each tick of the clock amplifying the absence of his presence. Yet amidst that loneliness, there was also relief present—like a giant weight had been lifted. The secret was out, and I no longer had to wrestle with my suspicions about the cause of his sudden anger outbursts or the mysterious ache in the corners of my mouth.

Rose also seemed to be making a steady recovery during her stay in the care facility. I visited her the following day. Her room was overflowing with vibrant flowers, their colors brightening the sterile space and bringing a sense of life to her surroundings. I made a conscious effort to steer clear of any topics that might distress her further, knowing how fragile her emotions were after her heart attack. Still, I felt it was important to tell her that Julian had left for rehab.

“Thank goodness, Lucie.” She croaked, visibly weak after everything her body had endured. Tears suddenly flew down her elegant face, because finding out about his addiction had crushed her. “Are you choosing to stay despite all of it?” Her eyes widened with a mix of surprise and admiration as she processed my dire commitment.

I really had to do some soul-searching about my move to do so. Years before, I’d

attended several meetings for the family and friends of addicts, largely due to my dad's drinking. Those experiences made it clear that addiction is a lifelong struggle, not just something one can overcome and move past. This was the reality for most addicts, and now it was a struggle I would be facing alongside Julian.

But I also felt that I could understand the mental struggle that underlay his chemical dependence. I hadn't been perfect myself. During high school, I'd battled two types of eating disorders, one that had sent me to the hospital. And I'd often wished I had someone there for me during that time. Actually, there was someone—my best friend Simon, whom I met in a writing club. Our friendship faded as we grew older, but I clearly remembered that we didn't always overcome our darkest days alone. Sometimes, it was the thought of each other that kept us going, the shared understanding that we could lean on one another in tough times. I wanted Julian to lean on me, as long as he was moving in the right direction.

While he wasn't around, he had arranged for Rose to be transferred to a new facility with top-notch care, a gesture that clearly demonstrated how deeply sorry he was. It spoke volumes about his commitment to her well-being, even from a distance. I could see that it meant a lot to Rose, knowing he was still looking out for her despite his own struggle. I'd become certain that if he could get better, the two of them would reestablish their old ties. After all, she had always been the one to ignite his potential by giving him his first sales job and reminding him to stay grounded in the midst of his success. In a way, Rose brought us together when she encouraged Julian to date outside of his usual circle.

When finishing my morning visit at the care facility, I headed straight to work. I intended to get on a merry-go-round routine that would keep me sane. While I waited for my morning Starbucks, a treat I could now justify, Will stood next to me with a gun tucked in his suit jacket. I quickly checked Instagram to catch up with friends. Sophie, unaware of the situation, announced her new open house for her stunning \$15 million listing. "Ballin!" I commented, then liked the picture. Inside Starbucks was

quite busy so I had a little more time to kill. I moved on to Valentina's profile. My spirited Puerto Rican girlfriend had just shared a photo of her and Bradley having breakfast just a few streets away from where I was. Seeing them together stirred a mix of emotions. Typically, couples had breakfast after they'd slept together, but it didn't fit the stage of their relationship. A part of me couldn't shake the feeling that Bradley had chosen to pursue this relationship to give the press something else to talk about—anything but us. Still, it wasn't my place to interfere in the lives of two single people. I considered liking the post but ultimately decided against it; Val owed me an apology first.

My mocha was ready, a fancy choice in comparison to my usual, bitter coffee. It would be my food for the day because my stomach right now couldn't digest anything. I'd also ordered a coffee for Kali, her usual caramel macchiato. Briskly, I grabbed the drinks from the counter and then let Will know that I'd walk the one block to my office. He nodded and remained several steps behind as we joined the crowds of people starting at 8 AM.

Just as I was about to cross the street to reach Apogee, the sight of a familiar couple startled me, almost as if it were fate. Bradley and Valentina were walking toward me, seemingly absorbed in a deep conversation. The serendipity of it coiled into irritation. Of course, the universe wouldn't give me a break. Both of them were my close friends, yet neither had any clue about what was going on in my life. It was too late to duck inside because Val spotted me the moment she glanced ahead. We both froze, caught in an awkward moment.

My first instinct was to shake my head, unwilling to accept how she'd treated me because he'd become her love interest. Bradley, as opposed to her, searched my gaze, evidently pleased to see me, his sharp jawline curving into a warm smile. I acknowledged him, but he could probably tell that Val and I had just had a falling out. She leaned in close to his ear, whispering what might have been an explanation—or maybe she just wanted me to see her almost licking his ear. She'd

gotten possessive of him, like I'd want to compete with her over him.

I really needed the light to turn green, because I suspected Val was still not in a place where this conversation would go well. It felt like I had only milliseconds to react, so I shifted my weight from foot to foot to shake off my nervousness.

They ambled toward me, but she still avoided my gaze. Right when she was close enough to spit in my direction, which I think she'd do with her fieriness, the light changed, and I quickly hopped into the intersection. I didn't look back at their expressions, even though it stung like hell that my best friend saw me as a traitor. Will noted my reaction but didn't say a word, his job requiring him to remain as stoic as possible. And I appreciated the aloofness more than he could know.

I arrived at the office, my coworkers still giving me curious glances. Kali welcomed me with a bright smile, then shoved a thick folder my way. "We're all optimized. I fixed our subscription issues. I've also made the app compatible with almost every device on the market. And no more issues with slow loading times." She summarized her productivity.

"Thanks, Kali," I rejoiced. "I feel like maybe you should take a day off after hustling like this for weeks. In the meantime, I've at least brought you a macchiato to express my endless gratitude."

She shook her head. "Actually, I'm ready for more again. I'm enjoying this. And you're always sweet for bringing me coffee, I don't think I can justify Starbucks, so thank you, Lucie," she looked genuinely happy at work, which made total sense given her situation; the job had pulled her back from impending doom, and also aligned with her passions in digital media.

I found myself wishing I were as up-to-date on things as she was. I needed to write a couple of articles, one titled *The Art of Journaling* and the other *Mindfulness Practices*

for Everyday Life. I also needed to help one of our staff members compile several pages of interviews with inspiring women. Suddenly it felt like an unsurmountable mountain.

I typically aimed to add a personal touch to everything I wrote, which made my content relatable, a quality that got me my first reader base. Yet now, I found myself completely unable to do that. For one, there was no way I could ever journal about what was happening with Julian; well knowing how destructive it would be for his business, fully aware that his other investors would freak out at the news of him snorting coke up his nose. And when it came to mindfulness, my mind was racing at warp speed. No amount of staring into greenery would help the situation.

“I have a few interviews for new engineers in the rec room,” Kali announced, her tone a mix of excitement and determination.

“Good luck,” I wished her, feeling a bit relieved that our little corner of the office would now be empty. I needed a solitary moment to collect myself after seeing Val with Bradley. It just didn’t feel good to be at war with my best girlfriend. She’d never been this way with me, except now.

When Kali disappeared, I unlocked the storage drawer in my desk, grateful for the tall divider that thankfully kept me out of clear view. Every so often, I took out the glazed red rose that Julian had made for me, a symbol of a seemingly impossible wish. That night, early in our relationship, I had expressed my desire for the moment to last forever while holding that rose, fully aware it would eventually wilt. But he had stolen it back while I was sleeping and had it custom-made into a keepsake, preserving the memory of that fleeting moment.

I played with it for a moment, admiring its golden stem. Aside from Julian’s engagement ring, this was perhaps the most precious item I owned. Its beauty was a testimony to a love that felt incredibly strong, yet now felt somewhat breakable after

what I'd learned about him. Would he get sober for us? It worried me that someone with his money and fame would constantly be surrounded by temptations. Having developed such a chemical dependency, there'd always be a ghost in our love, and the possibility of relapse.

I tucked the rose back into the drawer, then decided to treat myself to his first note. Maybe it would help me miss him a little less—if that was even possible. I pulled his phone from my purse and unlocked it using his usual code combination. He'd always shared it with me without hesitation, a sign of his trust and loyalty. As the screen lit up, I felt a rush of anticipation, eager to find out what he chose to write for our first day apart. I clicked on the first of a long row of notes.

Lucie, I've always lived by the motto "Live Fast, Die Young," but that's no longer the path I want to take. I want us to grow old together. So, if you ever doubt my ability to change, know this: for you, I'd do anything. Love, Julian.

A laugh rumbled in my chest. He really knew how to shift my mood. Also, we seemed to have toyed with the same ideas in our note for today, something that I'd expect in our unique connection. My first note to him had said: You're probably going through utter hell now. It's for your own good. I love you to a point where hopefully not even death can us part. I wondered if he'd already opened it and noticed a similar theme.

Was he truly going through hell, or did they have enough medication to numb him? He had promised to sign a release form with the rehab, so I planned to call their staff in the afternoon to check-in. But until then, I vowed to focus on my work. I wanted to use this time while he was away to get closer to my goals, even if every part of me longed to be by his side—despite the fact that it wasn't recommended.

I always looked forward to my therapy sessions with Mrs. Followay, but today, I was even more anxious to see her than usual. She was unlike any therapist I'd seen

before—because she avoided labeling clients with clinical terms. It felt like the height of cliché to label the girlfriend of an addict as codependent and then hand her a copy of Melody Beattie’s book “Codependent No More,” and I appreciated that she steered away from it.

With her gentle, subtle wrinkles, she was likely in her early 50s, though I knew better than to judge someone’s age based solely on their appearance. But it didn’t seem to matter much, because Mrs. Followay had an authentic presence, radiating a youthful energy that came from true self-acceptance. She didn’t obsess over her outward appearance, and in that way, she was even more beautiful to me. Her long blonde hair complemented a sense of modesty and a motherly charm. She had mentioned that she had multiple children of her own, which only seemed to add to the warmth she put out. You could always tell when a woman prioritized another being over herself.

Every time I stepped into her office, a sense of calm washed over me, as if I were stepping into a cocoon—safe and shielded, where I could speak my thoughts, vomit them out, and feel better in the end. It was a space where I could let out painful truths, no matter how raw, or difficult, or shameful. And due to doctor-patient confidentiality, I did not need to worry that Julian would be trashed by tabloids, though when it came to Mrs. Followay, I’d trust her regardless of an agreement.

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The water from a fountain circulated in the background as she asked me about my trip to her office. I'd had some struggles in the past with getting to her on time due to journalists, so Will had to ask the building manager for permission to park in the courtyard loading area. It had worked to get me back my anonymity.

"It went pretty smoothly," I reassured her. I was now eager to dive into our conversation, knowing that the 50 minutes always flew by too quickly. I adjusted myself comfortably on her sofa, enjoying the fact that I was in sweatpants and a t-shirt.

"What would you like to talk about today, Lucie?" Mrs. Followay asked, her gaze steady as if she sensed today was going to be particularly serious. Maybe the dark circles under my eyes had tipped her off. Or perhaps, like everyone else, she'd seen the media coverage about Bradley.

"I only found out a few days ago, Mrs. Followay," I murmured, my voice low, as if I feared she might judge me no matter what I said. "Julian's been using cocaine."

I watched the muscles in her neck tighten as she swallowed. She knew this was serious, that my once fairy tale story was now crumbling, unraveling in ways that felt eerily familiar to my past. Her eyes flashed with a protectiveness that I sometimes saw in Amanda too. "Are you safe right now, Lucie? I have to ask," she said, her brow furrowing with concern.

I nodded, my voice small. "He's really sorry for hiding it, and has already checked himself into a rehab in Palm Springs."

She put away her notes as if this was not a conversation she wanted to record. “How does all of this make you feel, in relation to your memories with James?” she brought up the inevitable. James had used cocaine at the very end of our relationship, something we’d talked about often with her.

I exhaled sharply. “The reason I fell in love with Julian was because he was so different. He built a huge business through sheer hard work and willpower. So, it’s a disappointment that I can no longer put him on a pedestal. It’s bringing up old hurts for sure,” I shared with her. “I know I don’t to be with an addict, it’s against my values,” I added, my voice steady but heavy.

“But?” Mrs. Followay prompted, encouraging me to keep going.

“Even though I can’t even wear my ring yet, we’re engaged,” I’d told her about this before. “I’ve found my home with him. I can’t quite describe how powerful our connection can be. I cherish our conversations and our experiences together. Walking away seems...” I trailed off, struggling to find the right words. It felt like a weight in my chest, something more profound. I wanted to say it felt like death. She knew better than to let me finish the sentence.

“How did you feel when you found out?”

I paused to think. There was a lot here to unload. “Angry, betrayed, and scared. Mostly angry, though. Almost as if I wasn’t entitled to happiness. As if the universe played games, always washing ashore the same pain.”

She nodded. “I want you to go back to the days you described with your dad.” She circled back to my relationship with him. “When he came home drunk, did you feel the same emotions you’ve just described?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Except there was also hate. I don’t feel hate toward Julian. I feel

sadness thinking about what led him to addictions in the first place. I know it's his mental challenges. As you know, Mrs. Followay, his mom died of an overdose on his birthday. That's heavy, you know. He feels connected when he gets high. I've gathered that he feels like he can understand his mom."

"Do you believe it's a natural thought?"

"Well, I fully understand it. We want to be accepted by our parents. Julian may feel like he's closer to her when he deals with his issues the same way."

"But you, yourself, disassociate yourself from your father." She reminded me. "You're wiser?"

"You're right. I want to be the opposite of my father."

"So, what do you think led Julian to use? The relationship with his mother?"

I exhaled sharply. "No, he said it was our separation. When he thought he lost me. He was trying to cope with pain."

"So, you have a common ground. You both struggle with dark feelings often. And you also lost your mother to something you couldn't control at a young age." She summarized. "You find emotional depth with him that not many people share with him."

She hit the nail on the head. I felt so close to him because I knew there was suffering we couldn't overcome, so we just had to carry it like a burden. He was jaded, even sarcastic like me. "Yes Mrs. Followay, I never felt like I belonged next to happy people. For a large part of my college days, I struggled with self-confidence, enough to sabotage my life." In fact, when Mom died, I abused my body with starvation because it was the one thing I could control. "I was anorexic, only to release my

emotions later on with binge eating with the flip of a switch.”

“Would you approach it all differently today? With what you know?”

“I’d probably get out there more. Have more fun. And I’d definitely enjoy food, not battle with it.” I was reminiscent of my eating disorder. “I’d grown more mature, and I can reason with my feelings.”

“It was a coping mechanism, Lucie. Unhealthy, but you processed emotions that way.” She smiled. “How can you process emotions now?” She looked at me, really looked at me.

“Writing, it’s the one time when I don’t feel like the world has me by my throat. You can take abuse, turn it into a poem, and the disgust, fear, pain, whatever awful emotions, come out in a way that’s not destructive.”

“Do you journal, or write for yourself, aside from work?” She queried with genuine interest.

“No, I haven’t written that way in years. Looking back at some of my old writings, they remind me about how much time I wasted in dark emotions instead of enjoying life.” The truth was, everyone had something to deal with, and we all went through hard experiences. I wasn’t special in that way.

Still, my life had mostly been a turmoil. Some people had the kind of love where their parents supported and cheered them on. They went on to date, maybe even marry, a relatively “normal” guy—someone with a steady job who could offer the stability they needed. They set boundaries, so they never ended up with an addict or an abuser. And I couldn’t always relate to those lives. I always seemed to have something heavy going on, and I knew how to attract it.

Mrs. Followay handed me a pen and a paper.

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“I’ll leave the room for 30 minutes,” she said softly. “I know this may not be what you were expecting, but I’d like you to sit here and write whatever you feel when you think of Julian’s addiction. Even if it means you leave the page blank, that’s still an emotion.”

I nodded peacefully. I knew what she was getting at. She was trying to get me to write again for another reason than to make a living. For the same reasons that artists did. Write to purge emotions, and to feel alive.

“We’ll read it together afterward,” she continued, her tone gentle. “And I’ll spend an extra 30 minutes talking through it with you. You have the time, right?” She smiled, her eyes warm with reassurance.

“Plenty,” I murmured. In truth, I had the whole weekend ahead of me to wallow in loneliness, then bury myself in work to escape it. But for now, I could spare the extra time here, in the company of someone who genuinely liked me. Mrs. Followay let me be whoever I was, and then she nurtured that with a kind of patience I hadn’t known before. For her it wasn’t just a profession, it was a calling. I knew her ultimate dream was to work with children, and in a way, that was serving her well with me. There was still a childish part of me that needed therapy—someone who craved understanding, guidance, and care in ways that felt almost childlike. Mrs. Followay seemed to instinctively recognize that, and she never made me feel ashamed of it.

The days without Julian were starting to blur together, like something out of a Christmas movie where Bill Murray keeps reliving the same day over and over. I’d get up, make a strong coffee or two, and head to the office—where part of my day was spent wondering if my friendship with Valentina had come to an end. I hadn’t

heard from Bradley or her, but maybe that was for the best. It gave me the time and space I needed to reflect on what was going on in my most important relationship.

The one thing that broke the monotony of it all was Julian's notes—each one heartfelt, unique, and full of care, reassuring me that he truly intended to recover. I clung to that hope despite having spent countless hours online learning about addiction, confronting the reality that healing was rarely a straight line. I dove into the works of Gabor Maté, even reading *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*, in an attempt to understand why Julian had made the choices he did in the first place. Maté viewed addiction as a coping mechanism for unresolved psychological wounds, particularly those rooted in early childhood trauma or emotional neglect. This perspective seemed to explain so much about Julian's struggles, and it fit what he'd told me about growing up in the foster care system. But I couldn't help but wonder—could he overcome this past with my help?

I had also put together a full business plan for Amanda's publishing company, then set about hiring the right people to bring it to life. Most nights, I was immersed in reviewing manuscripts from literary agents, hoping to find the one that would truly resonate with an audience.

It didn't surprise me that, after all that, I ended up getting sick. It felt like I was coming down with the flu—utterly drained, at the worst possible time. What was even stranger was that I sometimes felt short of breath. I figured it had to be psychological—maybe anxiety, because I was too young to be dealing with any real medical issues. It felt like my diaphragm was expanding, this constant heavy pressure on my chest. The weird part was, it only happened at certain times, like when I was about to fall asleep. Was I starting to have panic attacks on top of everything else? It seemed so irrational, so I kept putting off doing anything about it.

But it got worse because I'd lost my appetite—though, given all that had happened, it wasn't surprising. I made myself a promise: if I started feeling completely drained, I

would take a couple of days off, no matter what. But it was a lot harder to stick to that promise when I had so many goals pulling me in different directions.

That same week, I started my MBA classes and channeled whatever energy I had left into school. Most assignments were online—reading, homework, and proctored quizzes. The program was designed for working professionals, so there were no live classes, just recorded lectures from some professors. I found international economics interesting, but finance was a struggle. Without Julian to help, I had to reread the textbook multiple times to understand the concepts. Still, it served as a distraction from my illness and a reason to avoid overexerting myself. After late nights finishing assignments, I showed up to the office exhausted, and Kali noticed right away.

“Lucie, are you alright? You look a bit...” She blinked. “Green.” She cleared her throat, realizing the full truth was perhaps a little harsh.

That was not what I wanted to hear, but she was right that the whole morning I hadn’t been feeling well. I definitely now had nausea on top of everything. “I think maybe it’s a bug.”

“Sorry to hear that,” she gave me a sympathetic glance. “If you need to take off, I am happy to cover for you.”

“You know Kali, since it’s been like this for a week, I don’t think it’s anything contagious. I’ve just been overworking myself because Julian is on a lengthy work trip.” I had to give her the white lie version of things.

“Yeah, that’s understandable. Amanda has loaded your plate with quite a few things. Do you know she’s gone again?”

I shook my head. “Lately it feels like she’s not even wanting to run the business anymore, but I actually think it’s the opposite. She’s in New York trying to negotiate

the IPO.” I slid into my seat and sighed.

“Can I bring you a tea?” Kali offered, not letting go of her concerned look.

The wave of nausea was getting worse. I nodded with thanks, though it was becoming harder to stay focused on the conversation.

“Be right back with some ginger tea,” she selected the flavor as if the nausea was written all over my face. As soon as she left, I headed straight for the bathroom, grateful it was empty. I stood in front of the mirror, leaning on the sink, cursing whatever illness had a grip on me. The fatigue felt suffocating, and now my stomach was starting to feel bloated too. As I instinctively placed my hand over it, a sudden thought hit me. I hadn’t gotten my period yet. And this was around the time when I should. I hardly stressed about it because we weren’t trying. I’d been taking my birth control pills consistently, and they were 99% effective.

“Lucie?” The door opened as Kali entered. “Sorry, I got a little worried about you. Just wanted to check you’re okay. Also, Amanda’s just messaged me that she wants to talk to you on a video call and to get it ready for 10 AM, is that okay?”

No, I wasn’t, it felt like I’d throw up any minute.

“You know Kali, I think I need to go home.” I gripped the sink. “I feel really rough right now.”

“I’ll tell her you came down with something. I am sure whatever she has to say isn’t as important as your health and well-being.” She seemed apologetic. “I’ll leave you here if you need privacy, but if you need my company, just let me know.”

I knew she had kids, so she seemed like the perfect person to ask. But honestly, there wasn’t much to do except take the test. I figured it would just be a formality, a way to

confirm it was negative, so I decided to stop by the pharmacy on my way home.

“I am okay Kali, I’ll see you hopefully tomorrow!”

It was almost comforting to sink into the sheets, finally acknowledging that I couldn’t push myself any further. Being this unwell made everything else fade—deadlines, goals, expectations—and all I could focus on was simply being. After an hour of mindlessly watching whatever was on TV, I finally decided it was time to take the plunge and take the dreaded test.

But just when I was about to head for the bathroom, I heard a ring on our door. Nobody ever came to visit us directly, except Rose and Oliver, so I expected a stranger. Feeling a little more rested, I hurried to check the camera footage.

“Sophie!” I exclaimed, rushing to open the door, surprised to find her standing there. She must’ve decided to drop by unannounced. “I stopped by the office to grab lunch with some friends, and then I heard you weren’t feeling well.” She handed me a basket brimming with treats.

“Thanks, love,” I suddenly felt cheerful, accepting all of it with a grateful smile. Inside, there were flowers, lotions, bath bombs, chocolate—and most importantly—a journal that I hadn’t expected: a wedding planner.

“I’d invite you to come in, but I don’t want you to catch whatever I may have,” I warned her. Even though maybe it wasn’t contagious...

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She waved her hand. “The more germs I am exposed to, the better immune system I have. Have you ever heard of The Longitude Vitamins? She wiggled her eyebrows.

“Not a chance,” I croaked.

“You should try them, they’ll boost your immunity. I’ve included them in your package.”

I was going to ask her how she’d put everything together so fast, but that was just Sophie. She enjoyed doing nice things for others, so it was no wonder she amassed all this in record time.

“I certainly will. Come on in then,” I opened the door wide for her. While she took her shoes off, I briskly slid into our lower level bedroom, to hide the pregnancy test underneath my pillow. I hoped to make it look like I was making the bed.

“Dad said Julian’s away for quite some time, you didn’t tell me he was going anywhere for this long.” She pondered.

“Oh yeah. It was last minute. You know he always works. Thankfully I am drowning in work too.”

Her eyes bore into me, unyielding. Would she perhaps attribute it to my business? After all, we weren’t spending as much time together anymore.

“Well, once you’re feeling better, do you want to start looking for wedding dresses?” she suggested. But her gaze on me remained intense, and I had a feeling she knew

something wasn't quite right—not just with us, but with me.

I hadn't thought about our upcoming wedding much. There was a lot of work we needed to do before that on our relationship. "Sure, even though I can't promise I'll find time right away." I managed her expectations cautiously.

She fixed me with a look that felt like it was burning right through me. "Lucie, I've known you for a year now. And I know something is not okay. Spill the beans, please. What's wrong?" She pouted her thick lips. She pouted her full lips, this time choosing a brownish hue—clearly a sign she'd gotten a bit more conservative with her color choices since joining real estate.

"Valentina and I aren't speaking anymore," I murmured, choosing my smallest issue to mask the deeper ones. "We had a falling out over Bradley."

She rolled her eyes in disbelief. "Because of tabloid gossip?"

"I think she thinks there's more, and I wish I could say no. But Val knows we'd almost dated. And it's created this odd dynamic between all of us."

"Yeah, you are right. He's already chosen you. What does Julian think about all this?"

"He was pissed to read the articles. But let's just say he's done plenty wrong to give me a break about it."

"Fair," she sighed. "He should. But how do you feel about all of it?" She stressed the "you" in a way that reminded me she was always in my corner.

"You know, Sophie, I don't think I ever would've chosen Bradley. You and I both know there's no comparing him to Julian. The love I feel for Julian... it's so much. It's

beautiful, but sometimes, it's almost too much to bear."

She made a sad puppy face. "Yeah, you two are destined to be together. We already know that." She winced.

I couldn't bring myself to mention the ghost in our closet, not now. "How are you and Mark? Almost moved in?" I steered the conversation away from sore topics.

"We're doing great, Lucie. For the first time in my life, I feel like things are going remarkably well in my love life. No drama at all. Well, except for Jess." She rolled her eyes.

"Jess? Has she been in touch recently?" I puckered my brows threateningly.

Sophie nodded. "She's done something strange. She wrote Mark a letter."

"What?" I was stunned that she would still try to reach out to him after everything that's happened. "What could she possibly have to say at this point?" A fierce protectiveness for my friend surged within me.

"To summarize, she professed her love for him once again and then asked him to forgive her and take her back—like I didn't exist."

"At this point, she's delusional," I remarked, my frustration boiling over.

"Mark is going to put a restraining order on her. We don't want to give her any more attention. Maybe if she gets a court order, she'll get the message."

"Yeah, I hope so." I was still taken aback by the whole situation. "I never had the impression that she was so manipulative. But maybe she has some serious mental health issues," I pondered. "Mark should be careful."

“She got what she deserved,” Sophie said. “I think she’s going to have a tough time finding a job after getting fired from Amanda.”

“Yeah, I’m sure of it.” Teamwork was definitely not Jess’s strength.

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“Enough about her, though,” Sophie switched subjects. “Thanks for liking my post about the listing, I can’t believe I got it!”

“Babe, I am so proud of you for getting all the stunning listings you advertise on your business page.” I liked that our conversation was going in a cheerful direction again.

She beamed at that. “Let me just say, my sphere of influence has come through. The other day, my old kindergarten friend hired me as his agent to buy a house—haven’t even spoken to him in decades!”

I laughed. “People remember you, Sophie, because you’re kind to them.”

She grinned, shaking her head. “Well, not exactly...This client of mine used to have a huge crush on me and chased me around school with a compass.”

I couldn’t help but smile—only Sophie could take a story like that and still manage to lift my spirits.

But enough about my reminiscing,” she shifted her tone. “What’s really going on, Lu? Dad says Julian’s been out of town for two weeks now.” Her gaze narrowed, and I couldn’t help but notice how much she’d changed. Sophie, with her bright blonde hair that always framed her face so perfectly, had become more than just the girl I’d known for years. Her features were still soft, her round cheeks giving her a warmth that made her instantly approachable, but there was a new sharpness in her eyes now—something different. A quiet confidence, almost like she’d stepped into herself fully, and it had nothing to do with the way she looked. Mark had definitely had an effect on her. I could see it in the way she carried herself—stronger, a little more

grounded, even if she still had that spark of mischief in her smile. Real estate had done its part too, molding her into someone who could handle anything that came her way.

I inhaled sharply, and the sensation only reminded me how oddly different my breath felt—shallow like I was still struggling to fill my lungs. Could anxiety really do such a thing? I convinced myself then that the reason why my period was late was because of stress.

“Sophie, I am not sure if I am ready to talk about it...” She’d already managed to melt my iceberg resolution to keep my secret wraps, though.

“My opinion is that you need to talk about it,” her voice remained steady and sure. “And I’m guessing the rift between you and Valentina came at the worst possible time. When you need a friend.” She analyzed the situation with precision.

I swallowed, then glanced at the pillow on my bed. “I can’t afford to get you upset, love.” She instantly knew what I was referring to.

Last year, I learned that she had an inherited heart condition called Long QT Syndrome, where her heart’s electrical system took longer to reset. This genetic condition was only diagnosed in adulthood, and although it could be managed with treatment, she still faced a constant risk to her life. Any intense emotion could trigger a seizure, cause her to faint, or even lead to cardiac arrest. It was a heavy burden to live like that, and would not contribute to any risks of hers.

She furrowed her brows. “Lucie, I’d rather live for 25 years and experience life like a normal person, than spend my whole life being constantly sheltered. Yes, there is a 1% chance I could die any moment, but that’s a 99% chance I won’t.”

I admired her bravery.

“Are you sure?” I also didn’t want to make her upset by not telling her the truth when she was asking for it.

“Yeah, I’ve never been surer.”

“Check underneath then.” I pointed at my pillow.

She sent a curious glance my way as if weighing my words, but then, without hesitation, she followed my instruction.

We were both now starting at the pink box of First Response.

“I don’t think it’s likely, but I have to take this today.” I murmured.

I was expecting her to put her palm over her mouth or at least give some dramatic reaction, the kind of over-the-top response I’d seen her give before. But instead, she just tilted her head slightly, her expression thoughtful, almost too calm for the gravity of what I’d just said.

“Julian’s in rehab, Sophie,” I continued. “I found out a few weeks ago that last year when we were apart, he started using coke to cope with his problems. He hasn’t been able to stop since.”

Her face softened, and without another word, she wrapped her arms around me. “I am sorry, Lucie. Now, this explains some of the erratic behavior that Dad described.”

I could tell she was searching for the right words, trying to find something that would smooth over the weight of what I’d just said. But this wasn’t just a small rift between lovers—it went deeper. Her dad worked for my billionaire boyfriend, and that detail only made everything more complicated. I’d essentially just told her that her father’s boss was an addict, and both knew the potential implications. I could almost see her

mind racing, trying to reconcile everything, to make sense of the mess I had just thrown into her lap.

“Do you think you’re pregnant? Were you guys trying?”

I shook my head. “No, I’ve been taking my birth control pills regularly.”

“It could just be because you’re going through a lot. But did you skip any? Forget to take them?” She pressed. “It’s unlikely you would get pregnant if you are careful with those.”

I’d been pretty diligent about taking my pills, but then I remembered something—a moment that made my stomach drop. Julian and I had gotten food poisoning from eating at a street vendor. “I think it’s possible I threw them up once,” I said, my voice trailing off. “We went to that taco stand, and I got so sick after... I barely kept anything down for two days.” I hadn’t made the connection at the time.

“Do you know if this was the first week of the pack?”

I assumed she knew something about their efficacy that I didn’t. “Yeah, possibly, Sophie, why?”

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“Shoot,” she exclaimed. “And I assume you have all the symptoms, like nausea, and fatigue?”

“Yeah,” I omitted the part where I’d been feeling short of breath. I really didn’t want to refer to the heart in front of her. But that’s how it felt. Like my heart was suddenly working harder to keep me oxygenated. Rationally, I knew I wasn’t short of breath, though.

She changed the subject. “My dad’s been suspecting something,” she remarked. “Julian’s been in really erratic moods during meetings, and he even blew up at another investor.”

“I know it’s a conflict of interest, Sophie. It’s your dad. If you need to tell him, I understand.” I couldn’t ask her to keep it confidential.

“But he’s in rehab, right? That’s a good sign.” She assessed.

“I just know better than to believe recovery is that straightforward,” I keenly shared my thoughts.

“I don’t think it’s my place to tell Dad,” she assured me. “He’s, however, thinking of retiring and has announced this to Julian a few weeks ago. So, I know Julian is looking for a replacement too.”

This came as a surprise, but Mr. Dickens had definitely made enough money to be able to do so. He was also of retirement age.

“When are you going to take the test, Lucie?” She shifted back to the topic of my likely pregnancy.

“In fact, I was about to,” I sulked.

“Do you want me to stay with you?” She squeezed my hand. No matter how hard all this was, it felt so great to have her as a friend.

“No, Sophie, I think I need to process this alone. Besides, I am sure you have better things to do than wait for me to pee on a strip.” I tried to turn my response into a lame joke.

She nodded in understanding and stood up to leave. “Look, Lucie, I’ll give you some space now, but if you need me, I’m always here. And if you want a place to stay—just to get away from Julian for a while once he comes back—Mark and I have plenty of room.” She added with a soft smile before heading out. “Please call if you need me anytime.”

I understood the message she’d left me — I needed to stay vigilant about my boundaries. But if I was to be honest, I didn’t have the best track record of that, especially when it came to Julian.

Hello Lucie, it’s been three weeks now that we’ve been apart. I know you’re probably working a lot, but try to take some time for yourself as well. Swing by my office today, I left you a surprise there. Hope it puts a smile on your beautiful face. Love always, Julian.

I started my day by reading a new note from Julian. They had become a reminder that, despite our challenges, he was stubborn enough to fight for our love. And that felt good, knowing that he was determined to get back to himself.

My first pregnancy test came back with a positive, and so did my second one. Getting up each day was becoming more difficult as my body adjusted to make room for new life. I longed to tell him, but I knew what would happen if I did—he'd leave Palm Springs and come back home, a choice he couldn't afford to make. Every time I called the rehab facility, they gave me updates, but always recommended against connecting us for a conversation anyway.

I also needed to do a lot of thinking separately from his emotions. Still lying in bed, a disappointingly weak coffee on my nightstand, I browsed Google for information, the one thing that doctors usually warned against. I typed "Father using cocaine upon conception," into Chrome, and immediately a handful of articles popped up, each with a warning. The headlines were a blur of alarming statistics, medical studies, and personal stories about the potential risks of drug use during conception. Most of the articles discussed the long-term effects of drugs on a developing baby, from birth defects to developmental delays. The grim statistics left a sour taste in my mouth and echoed in my mind. Did my life's decisions already make me a terrible mother already?

I placed my hand on my stomach, feeling the faint, comforting warmth where our baby was growing. The baby I loved already, the baby I had wanted with all my heart. But as I thought about the circumstances, the timing, and the conditions surrounding this moment, doubt crept in. Everything felt so wrong—the way things had unfolded, the choices made, and the uncertainty that loomed over us. I couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't how it was supposed to be, that the foundation we were building for this little life wasn't solid enough. And yet, I couldn't help but love this baby with every fiber of my being, even as the world around us seemed to be unraveling.

The sound of a notification stopped my train of thought.

Hey, Lucie,

It was Bradley. Part of me was relieved he'd finally texted, but I was still lost in my own head, in a world that didn't have room for anyone else right now. Except for Sophie. She'd been my constant through all of it.

Hey,I replied back, mostly out of politeness. Bradley had always had my back, so I should return the sentiment.

Got a moment to talk?

Sure,I responded, trying to shake off the fog I was in.

I'm leaving for Kauai soon, he texted, like he was preparing me for something. It seemed like he'd wrapped up his project in San Diego and was heading back to the islands.I wanted to say goodbye in person, but after all the news articles, I don't want to make it worse for you.

While I felt the sting of him leaving again, Hawaii was the place where he belonged, it was his one true home. I couldn't be selfish toward him. And I most definitely understood his reasoning with that.I'll miss you, Bradley. But I feel genuinely happy you've found your place. By that, I was referring to the stunning house he'd been renting there, that he'd showed me in the pictures.

About Valentina,he continued.I know you two are no longer on good terms, Lucie. I hate to hear about it.

Yeah, to say the least, we had a falling out. But I guess I played my role too. I downplayed the role she had in all of this.

It's about me, isn't it?

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I hesitated. I didn't want to go too deep in my explanation. What could I say anyway? She likes you a lot, Bradley, I noted instead, knowing that he probably already knew that much.

Maybe I've given her the wrong impression, Lucie. She's got a great sense of humor, and we connect when we talk. She was just right there, and things progressed a bit further than I should have let them.

He didn't need to explain more. A guy who was really into a girl wouldn't casually admit to leading her on.

It's fine. Don't worry, she'll shake it off in no time. Val as you know, she always has suitors. Do you like her enough to consider a relationship eventually? I didn't want to give up hope.

It's more about me and what feels right. I'm planning to stay single for a while.

This usually meant that there was a lack of feelings involved. Bradley, to some extent, could be a lonely wolf, and I respected that.

About us, he continued.

Us? If that was true, I'd buried it so far in the past that it might as well have been in another lifetime. We'd built an ironclad friendship over the one year we've known each other, though. Don't hesitate to contact me if you need anything. He reminded me.

It was a kind offer and one that made me want to reach out to him more, but I held back. Still, in my mind, it would have been so easy to tell him.

Bradley?

Yes, Lucie?

Julian's in rehab, I wanted to text, the words feeling heavier with each thought. I found out only a few weeks ago that he's addicted to cocaine. And I think I'm scared. I am scared because we're expecting a baby. And I feel so lost. I am considering an abortion. But this wasn't the kind of thing you just dropped on someone out of the blue, so I never sent anything close to it. I knew it would make him angry, to see me so shattered.

Is there anything I can do for you? He checked as if he knew I was down in the dumps.

No, I am going to be good. I quickly assured him. Do you ever just feel like you've messed up and you can't fix things anymore?" I texted, letting the words flow out freely.

It took him a little while to message back. You may think that, but you're just living your life the best way you know, Lucie.

Before I could stop myself, I was full-on sobbing. The weight of it all—Julian, the lies, the fear—broke me open, and I didn't know how to keep it together anymore.

The following day, I had an early appointment at Planned Parenthood in El Cajon. I picked the East Country location, as it seemed like the least likely place where any journalist would find me. It wasn't the kind of neighborhood where a billionaire's girlfriend would ever be seen, and with my outfit—an oversized hoodie, baggy skater

pants, and an N95 mask, a convenient relic from the Covid years—it was nearly impossible for anyone to recognize me. The hardest part, though, was getting past Will. He was practically living in front of my apartment now, his presence constant and suffocating. So, I had to get creative. The plan was simple: I'd sneak out and make it look like I was just taking out the trash. Slippers, robe—anything to look casual, like I had no agenda beyond the most mundane task. I stuffed everything I'd need to change into in a bag, holding my breath, hoping Will wouldn't notice anything was off. The plan succeeded because he didn't. Once I made it down to the parking garage I was in the clear.

The moment I was on the freeway, I sent Will a message there was a sudden change of plans and I needed to run an errand.

“Miss Benton, please inform me of your destination, as I have orders to follow you without exception,” the automated voice from my hands-free device announced.

“Will, I'm sorry, but I'm going to undertake this trip alone,” I spoke clearly to the speaker to answer. I knew he wouldn't like it, but I had no choice. I couldn't have him tagging along, not today. “It's personal.”

Then, I put my phone on silent and drove to my destination. I parked the car a few streets away in a quiet residential area, far enough from the clinic to avoid suspicion. Even if Will tracked my location because of a device in the car, he'd never figure out where I was going. The last thing I needed was for him to show up and inform Julian. The fear that Julian would quit the rehab loomed large.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. This was the only way I could do it—by staying a step ahead. Thus, I walked several stories up a dilapidated orange building, the lack of signage making it hard to find the entrance. Thankfully a woman who was just leaving pointed me in the right direction.

The waiting room was empty, which was a relief. I didn't want to risk running into anyone I knew—or worse, someone who might recognize me. I quickly checked in for my appointment, handed over the insurance copay in cash—more discreet that way—and then took a seat, attempting to calm my rattling nerves.

The silence in the room felt heavy, and my mind kept drifting to all the things I was trying to outrun. I felt like crap —depressed, disgusting, and guilty, now wondering about the little human inside of me. A boy or a girl? How could I have let things get this far?

Meanwhile, a young man in his twenties wandered in, asking about free STD testing. The check-in assistant at the front desk gave him a reassuring response and confirmed that it was available.

Within minutes, a nurse called my name. She greeted me with a polite smile, but there was something in her eyes that made me think she recognized me. I couldn't quite place it, but the feeling was there—like she knew me from somewhere. At this point, it could have been just about any tabloid.

The main RN arrived shortly after, and I immediately took a liking to her. She was Black, her hair braided and dotted with orange spangles that caught the fluorescent light of our room. I couldn't help but ask, even if just for a moment, what had inspired her to work at this particular clinic. She paused for a brief moment before sharing that, when she was younger, Planned Parenthood had been there for her during a difficult time. The care and support they had offered her then had made a lasting impression, and it was that experience that now motivated her to give back by working there.

We then switched the conversation to me. The initial consultation took about one hour. First, she wanted to know if I was certain about my decision, which I wasn't—but I tried to make it seem like it, knowing well they wouldn't proceed if I

had doubts. They ran a blood test, then pricked my finger to check for anemia. Everything seemed satisfactory.

“Honey, do you want to see pictures?” the nurse asked gently, as she continued with the ultrasound.

“Yes, why not,” I replied, trying to sound nonchalant, though inside, I was falling apart. Would I see my baby? Would Julian want to be a father? I was certain he’d want us to keep it, despite all the risks. But that was exactly why I couldn’t bring myself to tell him.

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I had to be honest with myself. I wasn't ready to be a mom—not with my career and school. Still, I could handle those, but not the fear for our child's health. I'd read enough to know this might be the best decision.

The nurse set up the ultrasound machine, checking the settings and preparing the transducer. Next, she applied a generous amount of gel to my stomach. But we had to move to the transvaginal part to even see anything at all.

“For now, we can only see the gestational sac, Lucie, not the yolk yet. We'd like that you come in three days for another test, just to rule out ectopic pregnancy. However, we can still proceed with the abortion pill,” she informed me.

At 5 week, and 3 days, it was too soon to see anything, yet I dreaded the thought of having to come back here. “Sure,” I agreed as she turned off the device, and then had me clean myself.

And that's when it hit me. What had seemed like a good idea at first had now triggered a full-blown panic. The one person I needed here, to help me get through this was Julian. Our separation at this point in time made things impossibly painful. How could I ever look at him keeping this trip a secret?

The nurse noticed my teary eyes. “You know you don't have to make this decision today? You're not that far along, so you still have about 4 weeks, if not more, to take the pill. And then there are additional options beyond that.” She took a seat on the stool in front of me. Unlike most doctors I'd met in the private hospital system, I realized that the nurses at Planned Parenthood seemed less in a rush. If they needed to take the time to listen, they would.

“I am sorry, I thought this was going to be easier. But I have to go through with this today because it’s just going to get harder.”

She looked at me intently, and I could tell she was thinking whether to turn me away. I certainly didn’t seem like someone who was sure. “Okay, I’ll go get the pills,” she nodded.

Next, she left me alone in the room for what felt like an eternity, and each passing minute only deepened my doubts. Was my baby going to die here? In this cold, sterile room under harsh fluorescent lights?

I knew many women probably came here seeking a sense of peace and their right to make decisions about their own bodies I respected. A storm of fury churned inside me at the thought of Roe v. Wade being overturned. It felt like such a violation, like a piece of my autonomy had been ripped away. The women working at Planned Parenthood were heroes, changing one life at a time. But for me, the situation was more complex. I was still engaged to the love of my life. Julian was capable of supporting a family, and I knew our child would never have to experience hardship.

Lucie, are you okay? Sophie texted. She was the only friend who knew where I was.

I welcomed the message because I felt so alone. I didn’t have anyone in my family with whom I could share my struggle.

Not really. Making this decision is harder than I’d thought.

Do you think you just need more time?

Maybe, Sophie. I feel guilty. Guilty about not making this decision with Julian. But he needs time to get better. And I am nowhere near ready to be a mom and do it in a way that puts a child at risk of health issues.

Her response arrived almost instantly. Love, maybe you're underestimating him. Julian is a strong person, though he's had his shortcomings. The fact, though, that he's been in rehab this long tells me he's serious about change. And it doesn't sound like what you're doing is working for you.

As I finished reading Sophie's heartfelt message, a knock sounded, signaling the RN's return. She gave me an empathetic look and set three bottles of medication on the silver platter in front of me.

"Still good to proceed?" She shot me a glance, almost amused as if she already knew the outcome of the appointment.

"Yes," I gulped.

"You'll take the first two to prevent cramping and nausea," she explained, taking a seat in front of me. Then, she pulled another box from the bag she had brought along.

"And this is mifepristone, it will block any progesterone, stopping the pregnancy from growing. Once you take this, you need to go through with the whole regimen."

Sweat accumulated in my palms. Yes, this felt like an execution. I had lived with this tiny human inside me for weeks, even talking to them. Now, I was condemning them to an eternity of darkness. It felt like whatever soul was living inside me was there for a reason. I felt selfish and disgusting.

The nurse approached me with the pill and noticed my pale face.

"Honey, you still have time to think things through. We don't want anybody to have regrets." Her words, meant to comfort, only deepened the turmoil inside me.

The floodgates had opened, and I couldn't stop the rush of emotions that

overwhelmed me, suffocating me in my own tears. Guilt, confusion, and sorrow swelled within me, leaving me frozen in a moment of utter paralysis. Would I regret this? The answer suddenly came into focus. With soft acknowledgment from the RN, I slowly walked out of the facility, my baby still growing inside me. Whether I was ready to admit it or not, a sense of relief began to course through my veins. I longed for the dream of Julian and me becoming parents, and it had only taken me this failed appointment to discover it.

I didn't quite know how I got through the following work week. Every day felt like a blur, a haze of exhaustion and unresolved emotions that I could barely keep from spilling into the rest of my life. But just because my personal life was in turmoil didn't mean that my career could afford to be at a standstill. I had to keep pushing forward, even if every step felt like it was on autopilot. Then Amanda made her return to the office.

Her presence seemed to shift the air, a ripple that made everyone tense up and try just a little bit harder to appear perfect. The usual chatter grew quieter, the casual conversations more guarded. We all knew the unspoken truth: Amanda was back, and that meant we were all suddenly under a microscope, scrutinizing each other's every move, making sure nothing went wrong. Everyone was on edge, myself included, trying to put on a façade of confidence and competence, when inside, I felt like I was crumbling apart.

Amanda made quite the resurgence. Wearing a sleek black Prada suit, she looked nothing short of majestic. The fabric hugged her frame with effortless elegance, and her presence commanded attention in every direction. She looked like a femme fatale who could belong on a runway—immaculate, poised, and untouchable. It was as if she'd stepped out of another world, one where everything was perfectly in place, and I couldn't help but feel a pang of insecurity at the sight of her, standing there like she had never left. I scurried after her like a mouse trailing behind a puma. Recognizing that making money with a business was harder than it seemed, I feared falling short

of my goal.

Amanda asked me to close the door of her office, how I knew this conversation was about to get personal. As the door clicked shut behind me, her Bengali cat, Harper, padded over to me, weaving between my legs with a soft purr. I bent down to scratch behind Harper's ears, grounding myself for a moment before I raised my head at Amanda, straightening my shoulders.

Subsequently, she positioned herself behind her desk. Then gazed at me with an intensity that almost scared me."I am content with what you and Kali did with the app," she opened our conversation.

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“Thanks Amanda, Kali has been of great help with not just that,” I needed to give her some praise, for all the loyalty she’d showed me.

“Dear, Lucie, that’s why I’ve hired her. I knew you needed the help.”

I swallowed. Another thank you would probably sound dumb so I stayed silent.

“How’s the MBA program?” She asked, her eyes drifting over my wardrobe—a grey patterned dress with decorative buttons. I smiled inwardly at the irony of it—choosing to wear grey, the very color I had associated with feeling like a mouse earlier. It really wasn’t the best to get so down on myself, but anyone knowing Amanda would understand why she sometimes made everyone feel small. People like her didn’t have problems, they crushed problems.

“It’s manageable. I am enjoying the content, and I think I’ll finish the program early, even.” I assured her. The overachiever in me wanted to show how dedicated I was to self-improvement.

Her gaze was sharp, taking in every detail, and I couldn’t help but feel the weight of her scrutiny. “What are you not enjoying about it?” An amused smile tugged at her thick lips.

“It feels like it’s taking my attention from work at Hart & Quill. I’ve been sorting through manuscripts and I’ve found a few I am considering. Still, I do not know, Amanda, if I’ll manage to hit my revenue goals in the timeframe left.” I exhaled sharply.

“What you got?” She shot me an excited look.

“Right now, I am interested in a fiction story about a girl who decides to stay single her whole life because of a guy she’d met previously. It’s quirky yet deep. I’ve been considering that manuscript, and have even sent it to our professional editors.”

She paused, her tone shifting slightly. “I heard the writer’s been a bit difficult to negotiate with, demanding higher royalties. Are you close to reaching an agreement that aligns with our margins?”

I confirmed with a nod. It all didn’t seem like enough, though. I needed something better than just this.

“Great,” Amanda seemed satisfied. “Lucie, I’ve called you in here for a different reason today—not just to talk business,” she continued, her voice shifting to something more serious. She rose from her seat and walked toward the ceiling-high glass windows, her silhouette framed by the light. “There’s a problem.” Her voice carried an edge of frustration.

I cursed quietly. I really didn’t need another one.

“When was the last time you spoke with James Stone?”

My heart thudded in my chest. How did Amanda know about our connection? Still, I didn’t need to keep any secrets from her. She’d been a powerful ally since my very first few days in San Diego. “It’s been a couple of weeks. He mentioned me indirectly in a podcast. I got afraid that the news would connect my name to him, then to Julian.”

“Well, someone figured out you’re linked to him from the past.CelebrityBits,” she explained, clearing her throat as if the name itself left a bad taste in her mouth. “The

editor-in-chief gave me a courtesy call. I consider her a friend, but this is too good for her to pass on it.”

Shit. This was the last thing I needed.

“I tried to see if I could buy the rights to the article from them, but they know they can make a lot more if they release it. They wouldn’t even name the price.”

My heart was still pounding. “Do you know what they’re saying, Amanda?”

“Famous popstar obsessed with Lucie Benton, but will she choose her dark billionaire lover anyway?” She paraphrased the subject line. “They wouldn’t let me read it, so I do not know the details they’d collected. But you can bet that it’s going to attempt a cross between salacious and trashy. Trashy is what it’s mostly about.” She sniggered. Amanda looked visibly annoyed, clearly frustrated that someone was prying into my personal life during her IPO.

I felt like I was about to throw up, and it wasn’t just because of my pregnancy. “Sorry, Amanda, how unprofessional that this is going to affect Apogee,” I muttered, sulking as I placed a hand over my belly. I almost did it for emotional support, as if the baby inside me could understand. “When are they releasing it?”

“Tomorrow,” she said, her irritation growing. “I know it’s not much heads up but you may want to talk to Julian, Lucie. Also, don’t come to the office as I think that even with the security we have in place, reporters will line the streets. From what I know, James Stone is quite the star, even though I don’t follow pop bands.”

If only she knew that Julian was unreachable. “Amanda, I don’t know if I’ll be able to do that, unfortunately. He’s on a trip and he doesn’t have much reception. However, I’ll talk to his head of security.” The moment I said it I realized how stupid it sounded. No reception?

She eyed me with curiosity. “Has he been away?”

“Yes, for several weeks now. The time apart is a great way to keep our relationship healthy, though. Each of us is finding our own purpose.” I assured her. “We’re fine as a couple. It has more to do with his self-development.”

She now sat on the edge of the desk, her face just inches from mine. “Good to hear.”

Her tone said otherwise, though. I could tell she’d picked up on something.

How are you feeling after the illness?” She switched the subject to my unexpected time off.

“Somewhat better,” I lied. In fact, every morning was getting more challenging than the one before it. I needed to survive on a maximum of 200 mg of caffeine and get through my day without throwing up in public. Two seemingly impossible tasks on top of the actual work I had to do. All I wanted to do was sleep, but I didn’t have the luxury of time to justify extra rest.

“Tabloids can affect people’s mental health,” Amanda continued. “I need to know that you’ll be strong enough to handle whatever the article claims are.”

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I nodded vigorously because there was nothing else I could do. Having someone dissect my life in the public eye was always unbearable. At least Amanda had given me a generous heads-up, and I could choose what to do with it.

“I’ve been traveling a lot, but I’ll be around much more often if you ever need to talk,” Amanda’s gaze flicked back to me. “You’ve been an invaluable asset to my company, Lucie, and I’ll make sure everything’s taken care of to keep it that way.”

Her words brought a sense of relief. Amanda’s absence had left me feeling even more isolated, so her return lifted my spirits. If only she knew the mess I’d gotten myself into. “Thanks, Amanda,” I said quietly. “I appreciate you telling me about James in advance.”

As I walked out of her office, the pressure of the looming article—and the chaos in my own life—still hung heavy. It was clear I was about to face a storm, but for the first time in weeks, I felt Amanda’s camaraderie. In that moment, I found myself wanting to be a bit more like her—strong, unshakable, a force to be reckoned with. It wasn’t much, but it was a spark of determination, a reminder that I had the potential to weather whatever came next.

By the end of the workday, I finally decided to head over to Julian’s office. Will was still upset about my sudden disappearance, and with the trust between us fractured, he was on edge, more watchful than usual. But, seeing me go to a familiar place, he seemingly relaxed a little.

Arriving at Julian’s office was a reminder of how powerful my fiancée was. The blue logo of Valmont Investment Company stood out against the skyline, its signature

color glowing brightly in the distance, a symbol of the company's reach and influence. Using the usual code, I took the elevator up to Julian's office in hopes that his secretary would be there and know where to find his gift.

And she was. The pretty blonde, always impeccably put together, greeted me with a rush of excitement as if my arrival had broken the monotony of the evening. "Really good to see you, Lucie."

We'd become somewhat of friends over the course of time. I often brought her surprise gifts, knowing well that working for Julian was not always a fun job.

"Thanks, Carolyn, are you working late today?" I shot her an empathetic glance.

"Yes," she smiled faintly. "There've been a lot of calls about Julian's sudden absence. My job is to make sure everything goes smoothly despite it. But if you're here for the gift, he's left it on his desk. I was expecting to see you here per his instructions."

I sent her a grateful glance before continuing on. What could Julian possibly leave me with? With a sense of anticipation, I pushed open the heavy mahogany door, its polished surface gleaming under the soft light. The plaque beside it read "CEO & President" in bold letters, a reminder of the responsibility Julian held even at his lowest point.

I made my way to his desk, noticing a large, decorated bag resting on top of it. The bag was elegant, its intricate design suggesting something special inside. As I approached it, my curiosity only grew. The tag was simple, and it just said "For Lucie, With Love, Julian."

Pulling out the contents, my eyes widened in surprise—it was a historical copy of *The Lady of the Camellias* from 1848. My gram was French, and she was the one who had

introduced me to the book, sparking a love for its story that stayed with me ever since. The leather-bound book aged beautifully, with gold embossing on the cover. This wasn't just any edition; it was a rare first printing, the kind of book that would be cherished by collectors and lovers of literature alike. In awe, I opened its first page.

Dear Lucie, je ne suis pas une sainte, mais je vous ai aimé de tout mon cœur. He'd handwritten in French despite not speaking the language. This was a quote from the actual story, and it translated into "I am not a saint, but I have loved you with all my heart." What made it even more touching was that the original French was written from a woman's perspective. It was a detail that Julian couldn't have known as he didn't speak French, but it made the gesture even more endearing that he'd tried to do this all by himself. Thank you for standing by me at a moment when I disappointed you. Julian. The dedication continued.

This was such a thoughtful gift, him remembering my favorite love story in French literature and then going all the way to find this rare copy. My eyes prickled with tears at the realization that he was trying this hard to mend us.

I could no longer keep the truth away from him, no matter how far along he was in his recovery. I was too far along myself not to make this my priority. Our baby was too important to keep it away from him.

Tomorrow morning, I'd call my fiancée, I promised myself. The rehab would find a way to connect us, and we'd have a heart-to-heart conversation I'd been avoiding—about possibly becoming parents. He'd most likely cry to find out that he could be a dad. I'd tell Julian about James, and how I'd tried to shut down any rumors, but hadn't succeeded. I knew he'd shrug it off as if to say that relationship was long gone, buried in my past.

I had a deep night of sleep, given how fatigued my body was. No matter how hard I tried to start my mornings without technology, curiosity always seemed to get the

best of me. Instinctively, I reached for the cell on my nightstand first, my fingers brushing the device before my eyes had fully opened. The blue light felt harsh, just another reminder to adopt healthier habits.

“Honey, is Sophie at your place?” Elisabeth, Sophie’s mom, had texted around 6 AM.

I rubbed my eyes because they felt dry, even itchy, possibly from some type of contact dermatitis. Could it be my night cream? At least my angular cheilitis had finally healed up. My bet was that Sophie had forgotten to tell her mom that she and Mark would be together, and now, maybe she was asleep not reading her messages.

“I am sorry, but she is not here. But I am sure she’s with Mark.” I contemplated in my response immediately. I wouldn’t leave her mom hanging as she was a constant worrier. Having a daughter with such a serious medical condition was tough enough on her.

“Mark doesn’t know where she is,” her mom texted instantly. “She didn’t come home yesterday.”

I frowned because it was unusual for Sophie to go off the grid. Where would she have gone?

“I’ll text a few of our mutual friends,” I let her know immediately, as my phone began to ring. It was Mark himself. The moment I saw his name, the gravity of the situation hit me.

“Hey Lucie,” he blurted out in an anxious tone. “When was the last time you saw Sophie?” He didn’t even wait for me to say hi.

Upon hearing his desperation, I responded immediately. “Yesterday,” the last time I heard from her was when I was at Planned Parenthood. “We texted in the morning.”

“She’s missing,” he wailed. “I went everywhere, including her brokerage. Do you know if she has any places where she’d be hiding?”

Even if Sophie had such a place, I doubted that she’d vanish from the people she loved.

“I don’t know Mark, but disappearing on everyone doesn’t seem like her. When was the last time you spoke with her?”

“She had a showing with a client at 6 PM. She called me right before.”

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“Have you tried asking her brokerage, to see if they can contact them? Also, do you know what house she went to?”

“Yeah, they have no idea.” It sounded like he was in immense pain. “Lucie, I think something bad had to happen to her. We obtained her Sentrilock record but it looks like she never made it to any property to show.”

“Her car is gone too?”

“She took the Bentley, and it’s not back either. We’re already talking to the police but they aren’t taking it as seriously as they should.”

“Did you two have a fight?” Part of me wondered if Sophie just needed some time for herself, and all this was unfortunate, but at least not tragic. There was always the possibility that she had a side to her that I didn’t know yet. We all needed space at times.

“No, she was supposed to come home for dinner,” he retorted. “Lucie, I just know something is wrong. Please help me.” Mark’s voice cracked. This was the man who had sold \$150 million worth of real estate, calm and composed in every situation. To hear him break down like this was a shock.

A shiver ran down my spine as Sophie’s dad was now calling me on the other line. “Oliver, I’ll call Oliver. He’s going to get on this right away, Mark, and we’ll find her,” I assured him despite the rising fear for Sophie’s whereabouts. Julian’s staff had the resources to do way more than the police could.

Did this all have something to do with me? Was it possible that Sophie's relationship with me had somehow put her in danger? I let her dad's call go to voicemail, as first I needed to alert Oliver who would begin the search.

Sophie, if you are reading this, everyone is looking for you. We are so worried, please let me know you are okay, I messaged, simultaneously dialing Oliver's number. Julian's top-notch security guard picked up almost instantly. "Lucie, great to hear from you," he opened the conversation.

"Oliver, I am sorry to bother you so early, but my best friend Sophie is missing. Her whole family, including her boyfriend, are looking for her, with the police thinking that she just needs space. Can you help? We believe she may be in harm's way." I didn't think it was possible to speak at a faster speed how quickly I summarized it all.

It didn't take Oliver long to catch up. "Can you and her entire family meet me in 30 minutes? I'll come to their house in Coronado."

"Yes, I'll let everyone know" I replied quickly, already on my feet. After killing the call, I called back Mr. Dickens and asked him to get everyone ready for the meeting.

"I tried to get a hold of Julian, but he's been unavailable for weeks," Mr. Dickens explained. "I assume you know why this is, Lucie. It's made some of his business partners insecure."

To that I didn't have much to say. "Yes, we're sorting some private matters. But I am ready to help in his place," I assured him. "We still have all this security staff available."

But I couldn't ignore how abandoned he sounded, as if not only had he lost his daughter, but his close friend had disappeared too, making everything worse. I'd been

planning to call Julian soon anyway, and maybe now it was time to ask him to come back to San Diego

I rushed to make myself a coffee, then scrambled to find an outfit to wear. Work—today, it just wasn't going to happen. I'd have to explain to Amanda, who I was sure, would also want to be part of the people looking for Sophie. The girl had left a mark on so many of our hearts, and when something was wrong, we all felt it deeply. Sophie wasn't just someone we worked with; she was family in our own way. And now, with her missing, none of us could ignore the pull to find her, in whatever situation she was in. Was it possible that she'd fainted somewhere? Could her heart have decided to give up? I trembled at the thought of losing her, and refused to admit that this was the ending that fate had in store for her.

The meeting with Oliver took about an hour. With diligence, he collected everyone's account of the events, asking questions while Sophie's mom sobbed uncontrollably in the background. Her dad, pale and visibly shaken, sat stiffly by her side, his hands clenched in his lap. The two family dogs, oblivious to the gravity of the situation, played around in the living room, their happy barks feeling out of place in an atmosphere of despair. And I was sicker than ever, to the point when I had to go to the bathroom and wash the back of my neck with cold water several times.

I'd meant to call the rehab but now my personal problems seemed small in comparison to Sophie's disappearance. I briefly called Amanda, and she listened carefully before acknowledging what I'd said. "I'll speak with Oliver later," she promised, her voice resolute. "I'll also ask around the office to see if anyone knows anything." Her reassurance was of some comfort, but I could tell she was just as worried. Then she also reminded me that I was supposed to have a day off anyway.

Right, I suddenly remembered. The articles about me and James had probably started circulating on the internet. The fact that I hadn't received a message from Sophie about them was just another harsh reminder of how serious her disappearance was. I

postponed reading them, knowing well they'd only infuriate me, but soon enough, it became clear that Oliver had already found out about them.

While he remained focused on the task at hand, his occasional curious glances toward me didn't go unnoticed. I could feel the weight of his unspoken questions, but I didn't have the courage to address any of his glances. Instead, I resolved to wage a war on the tabloids by utterly ignoring them. I couldn't afford to let that distraction derail everything else—Sophie's situation became my only priority.

Will and I spent the rest of the day visiting all the places that Sophie frequented. I stopped by her favorite restaurants, spoke with a few of her closest friends, and even went to her Keller Williams brokerage in Del Mar, hoping someone there might have more information. But it was as if she'd vanished. We'd come home drained, fearful, yet perhaps still hopeful that a resolution would come soon.

Then the news came. Oliver had successfully tracked Sophie's phone. It was found in a dumpster near a highway, its entire contents smashed beyond recognition.

There wasn't anything fundamentally wrong with my home. On the surface, everything seemed fine. I always had food on the table, and my dad worked hard to provide for me, making sure I had the essentials—clothes, a roof over my head, and the things I needed to get by. He did his best to make sure I was taken care of, and of that, I was appreciative. But there was always a quiet sense of something missing. While the house was filled with the necessities of life, it lacked the warmth and connection that make a home feel truly alive. The kind of love and understanding that you can't quite put into words, but you feel in every corner of your heart, was something we struggled to find.

So, per usual, returning home often pushed me to the brink of despair. It was winter break from college, a time when everyone else seemed to be wrapped in the warmth of holiday cheer, yet our house felt as cold and unwelcoming as the weather outside

itself. My stepmother had a way of chipping away at me, no matter how hard I tried to keep my composure. It didn't matter what kind of attitude I brought with me—she knew of ways to break me down anyway.

“Writing doesn't make money,” my father shouted when I told him I wanted to pursue an English major. “Pick something practical—law, accounting, or med school. Please. I'm not paying for anything else.” His words stung, not just because of the dismissal of my passion, but because they felt like a door slamming shut on my identity.

I understood that, deep down, a part of him genuinely cared about my future and wanted me to be secure in life. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't change who I was at my core. Language had always been my passion. From the moment I could form sentences, I found solace and meaning in words. I kept journals as a child, scribbling down my frustrations, my aspirations, and the world I was trying to make sense of. When Mom passed away, poetry became my refuge—a way to capture the raw, complicated emotions I couldn't express any other way, all distilled into a few lines. If I felt such a strong pull to writing, it had to be right for me.

And even if I could agree with Dad, I couldn't picture spending my life in court, following laws that always seemed too limited, too flawed to truly serve justice. I also had no desire to spend my days adding up numbers in some office, watching the hours slip by. And being a doctor? That was never even a consideration. I could barely handle the sight of blood—my own blood during a simple draw was enough to make me dizzy, let alone someone else's.

“When you end up as a teacher making less than 30k, don't call me to borrow money,” he said bitterly. “You're just like your mother—so naïve. You need to become realistic.”

“Yes, your mother was a bitch that exploited your father for money,” my stepmom

chimed.

I wanted to punch her in the face so badly, except I wasn't violent enough to do so. My first instinct was to run to Gram's house, but I didn't want to burden her with my pain again. With only a few days left in Christmas break before returning to my dorm, I stayed put, relieved that Federal Loans would cover my school expenses. But I wasn't totally oblivious to my father's point. I knew studying literature wasn't the quickest route to a high-paying job, and paying off those loans could be tough per his prediction. The thought of it made me loathe myself.

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“I’m so disappointed in you,” he spat, slamming his fist on the table. “And with that loser you’re seeing too—thinking he can make a living playing the piano.” With that, he turned and walked out, leaving me standing there. Through the living room window, I watched him get into his Lexus and drive away, the silence enveloping me like a suffocating fog.

On a random note, it suddenly hit me how our house was completely empty of any pictures of Mom. My stepmother had taken them all down as soon as she moved in, replacing those memories with her own. Nothing in the house felt familiar anymore. Maybe I shouldn’t have even been here at all then. Without waiting for her response, I sprinted upstairs to grab my phone and quickly packed the small suitcase I had brought home for the break. I hadn’t planned to stay long anyway.

You okay? James texted to my Blackberry.

Not even close, I replied, not needing to explain how lately, life felt like hell. Fear had gripped me so tightly it was paralyzing.

I am coming to pick you up, he let me know. You’re not alone in this. My family would love to have you over for the holidays, Lucie.

This was the first time I realized that love could, in some way, save me. Without James, the day would have felt much darker and lonelier. But with him, it became an adventure, and at least I knew what came next. He had a way of helping me stop overthinking, which, for an introvert, felt like a lifeline.

Within ten minutes, James’s 2003 Discovery Land Rover pulled up in front of my

father's house. He stepped out, leaning against the truck with a cigarette in hand—a bad habit he should quit. It was the 2010s, when smoking still seemed common, especially among those who didn't think too much about the consequences.

For a moment, I watched him through the window, indulging in a fleeting moment of voyeurism, allowing myself to analyze him from a distance. James Stone had an edge to him that I liked a lot. Rebellious energy lingered around him like a cloud of smoke, while he effortlessly balanced two sides of himself: the creativity of an artist and the precision of a mathematician. He exuded a quiet, dangerous confidence—something about it, combined with his messy brown hair, sharp jawline, and eyes that always seemed to be sizing things up, had the power to crush hearts. My classmates flocked to him because he had a way of making you feel like the world was yours—if only you could see it through his eyes.

He also had a rare patience, waiting for me without complaint—something most guys wouldn't bother with. The two of us had been in a relationship for almost a year, yet we had stayed just a bit more than friends. We kissed passionately, and made out, but I still wasn't ready to cross the first base with him. Sometimes, I wondered if James had other girls on the side to satisfy his needs, but it didn't seem like it—at least not right now. He appeared genuinely invested in me, despite my own hesitations. I often found it ironic that the biggest prude in our class, myself, was dating a notorious bad boy. But that was also the thing—bad boys often had surprising depth and a sharp intelligence beneath their tough exterior. At least, that's how it seemed to me. It felt like there was a pattern there, one that perhaps science hadn't quite figured out yet.

“Oh, Lucie,” he pulled me into a hug the moment I approached the car. As I buried my face in his chest, I caught a glimpse of my stepmom through the window. I was pretty sure I saw her lips move, muttering something along the lines of, “The trash takes itself out.” I wiped my tears. “I hate her,” I spoke about my stepmom and he immediately knew.

I brought you something to cheer you up,” he ignored her with nonchalance, nodding toward a box filled with an assortment of flavored Trident gum on the passenger seat. The sight of it shifted my mood. How long had he spent collecting these? There was Original Mint, Spearmint, Tropical Twist, Watermelon, Wintergreen, Fruit Rush, Tropical Fruit, and even a limited-edition Piña Colada I’d lately liked the most. Chewing gum had become a small comfort for me, and he’d clearly noticed.

“So thoughtful of you,” I grabbed the box with a genuine smile as I settled into the passenger seat. He shut the door behind me and walked around to the driver’s side. “Let’s get you out of here.” He sank into his seat with an effortless ease, his composure unwavering.

Neither one of us said anything else, while he blasted deep, emotional piano music from the speakers. It was his constant companion, his beautiful obsession. He’d won the Seattle International Piano Competition, and it seemed like he’d be on his way to Juilliard for grad school. I wondered if life would eventually separate us and how I’d cope. Would I be able to let go when the time came? I pushed it aside for the moment, wanting to stay in the present.

He revved the engine, and we were finally driving away from the house of nightmares.

“Lucie, I care.” He sent me a side glance. “I’ll always be here for you.”

It sounded like a promise. Maybe even a vow.

I felt a deep sense of shame, realizing that everything I owned was packed into one suitcase. With the school dining hall closed for the winter, I knew I’d need to make money soon. Even buying meals could soon become a struggle, but there was always the possibility of finding an off-campus job that paid more. Then again, because of my eating disorder, I didn’t eat much. Lately, I’d become unable to touch anything

that nourished my body. It was possible to smart and dumb at the same time when it came to my disease.

“Why don’t we stop by Jack in the Box?” He proposed as if he could read my mind.

A burger truly sounded amazing—juicy, warm, with melted cheese and all the toppings piled high. But I hesitated. This wasn’t in line with the resolution I’d made to stick to low calorie foods. Yet, he made it so tempting. Not just the idea of going out, but the idea of living without guilt in general.

“I love curves on you, Lucie,” he swallowed, his voice steady and sincere. “I wouldn’t mind a few extra pounds on you.” His tone remained firm, yet gentle, as if he truly cared about my well-being. “I mean, you’re hot as hell already, but you know...”

Did he know how deeply this touched me? I’d always felt the pressure to be perfect. I had to stick to a strict gym routine, apply heavy makeup every morning—anything to gain acceptance. Only when I caught those admiring, even ogling, looks from others did I feel adequate. The idea of having any flab, anywhere, terrified me. It was as if my worth depended on being flawless. And yet, in that moment, he had completely erased that toxic notion. Because having his acceptance meant everything to me right then. He made me feel like I was enough, just as I was. Nobody, except for mom, a long time ago, had done that for me.

“Sounds good, let’s eat,” I grinned.

James was too smart to ever pressure a girl to change her body for him. But he had become aware of my struggle, and being the gentleman that he was, he wouldn’t say it directly. Instead, he dropped subtle hints, hoping I would understand that my healing was important to him. “Great, let’s go to the airport after that,” he suggested.

He was in the process of getting his Cessna license, and flying was something he couldn't wait to share with me. The excitement in his voice was palpable as if every lesson brought him closer to a dream he was eager to live out with me there. I was almost beginning to believe that he could be my happy ending. After all, Grandpa and Grandma met when they were around our age. If he did end up going to Juilliard, could I move to New York with him?

"I love you," he said, catching me off guard.

I gave him a glance, marveling at his statement. Yes, I could picture myself in the Big Apple. "I love you too," I quickly echoed. But it was bittersweet. For the rest of the drive, I stared out of the window of his Discovery, watching as the scenery quickly disappeared behind us, the landscape blurring into a haze of colors and shapes. Still, like *The Dharma Bum* said in Jack Kerouac, I felt like I had nothing to offer except my own confusion.

I lay in bed, feeling almost lifeless. The intensity of the flashback to the old days with James caught me by surprise. My positive memories of him had remained buried somewhere deep in my subconscious until now, like fragments of a past I shouldn't revisit. In that quiet moment, just before dawn, I realized something important. Everything that had happened to me—good or bad—was part of the journey that shaped me into the person I was today. And though I no longer recognized the insecure, broken girl I once was, I still understood her. I felt compassion for her pain, as if she were a part of me I could never truly leave behind.

It was probably time to finally face the articles about me and James, just to get a sense of the damage and see how far the fallout had spread. So, after making a cup of coffee with precisely 200 mg of caffeine, and settling back into bed, I googled my name along with Julian's. The softness of the morning shattered instantly, like ice water splashed in my face, leaving me disoriented.

Lucie Benton Gets an Abortion After Breakup with Billionaire Valmont: A Heartbreaking Decision

Contrary to my expectation, the articles about James and me weren't the most important news of the day, this was. I shot out of bed, a claw of shock snatching the breath from my lungs.

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If Julian found these articles first, he'd be devastated. My mind raced, fueled by sudden regret. The thought of him reading about this before I could explain, before I could even try to make sense of it all, was unbearable. Why hadn't I seen this coming, knowing well enough how tabloids chased every story?

Frantically, I dialed his rehab center, my hands trembling as I tried to push aside the gnawing thought that Oliver still had no answers about Sophie. Everything lately felt infinitely wrong—no matter how hard I tried to steady myself, more chaos kept coming at me. Then with that came a wave of nausea, a reminder that I was in fact carrying Julian's child. Unexpectedly, I felt a pop of bubbles in my underbelly, which couldn't have been the baby's movement yet, but it was distinctly different from how I normally felt. "Hi, this is Lucie Valemont. I am calling to see if I can speak with Julian, the passcode is 4222." I muttered. "He's been at your facility for almost a month now." As if I needed to remind them who the famous billionaire was. The staff at this place probably had to sign some of the strictest NDAs they'd ever read.

"Hi Lucie," answered a pleasant voice. "Actually, Julian's just checked out unexpectedly this morning."

My stomach dropped. This was definitely not how I had planned things. Now, I had no idea how to reach him, especially since I still had his phone. Was he on his way home now? Something told me that with Julian, things were about to get far more complicated than I could imagine. He was probably furious, assuming I'd gone through with the abortion without even telling him.

"Do you know where he was headed?"

“No, he left quite abruptly. We’ve tried to convince him to continue the program for another few months but it became impossible.” She let me know apologetically. “Our guests are free to leave anytime.”

There was no doubt that Julian had read the news, and that’s why he was no longer in Palm Springs. I needed to call Oliver about Sophie anyway, so hopefully he’d know how to get in touch with him. I thanked the rehab assistant, then ended the call, next dialed Oliver’s number. He almost always picked up my calls on the first ring.

“Miss Benton.” He answered instantly as I’d expected.

“Oliver, I tried to call the rehab but Julian’s checked out. Do you know if he is using a new number?”

“I will text it to you,” he assured me, then paused. Likely, he had many questions for me but he hesitated to ask...

I sighed with relief, nevertheless. “I know you’re focused on finding Sophie, and that’s really the most important thing. Any news on that?” I urged, still immensely embarrassed about the headlines.

“Actually,” he said in a promising tone. “I have one strong lead for her disappearance.”

“You do?” I suddenly felt a rush of hope, despite how grim the rest of my situation seemed. I hadn’t honestly expected him to move so quickly—after all, when it came to my car accident the previous year, we’d been stuck in a standstill with no leads for what felt like forever. This was different. There was momentum now, and with that came a flicker of hope.

“We’ve been running some phone logs from the area where Mark reported her going

that evening,” his voice remained steady despite the weight of the information. “There’s one phone that’s been used in the area, and it belongs to her former colleague, Jessica Doutzen.”

The words hit me like a cold wave. Jessica. Of all people. The name alone stirred up a mix of confusion and unease—why had she been in that area? And what did it mean for Sophie?

“I don’t believe it’s just a coincidence,” he continued, his tone even but firm. “I’ve interviewed Amanda Hart, and it seems like the two girls had a falling out. Do you have any more information on this?”

“Sure, Oliver. Jessica got fired. At one point, she told Sophie that Mark, her boyfriend at the time, had a hidden dating profile. It was pretty petty, honestly. But Sophie took it seriously. So, she broke up with Mark because of Jessica’s story, and it took like a year for them to connect again.” I then shared with him the story about the strange letter she’d sent to Mark.

“Excellent,” he seemed satisfied with my explanation.

“Do we know anything else?” I queried anxiously.

“Not yet, but I am driving to her house at the moment. I am working with the investigators to see if we could request a search warrant. It’s my goal to get them enough facts so they can do so.”

“I am so grateful for your help Oliver.”

“Miss Benton, about the news,” he switched subjects, his tone remaining calm. “I wish you’d let me know sooner, so we could figure out how to address it with the public.” I could sense his frustration with my decision to handle it alone, and I knew

he was right. Keeping everything under wraps had never been easy, but now that the story was out, the damage control felt like it was already slipping through our fingers.

“I meant to deal with things in private. I hope you understand, Oliver. I am sorry how this impacted Julian’s business.”

“Yes, Will spoke to me about your sudden trip to East County.”

To my relief, he didn’t ask what part of the story was true or not. But knowing him, he’d probably collected much of the information himself already.

“Do you know how much Julian knows?”

“He’s found out from his PR lady about the articles. She’s not too happy, let me just say it gently.” He acknowledged with brutal honesty.

Something told me that Oliver hadn’t gone as far as telling everything he knew to Julian. This was far too personal for him to throw me under the bus like that. “I’ll give him a call now, and I’ll talk to you later,” I ended our conversation. I didn’t need to remind him to keep me updated on Sophie—I knew he’d do that without being asked.

Almost instantly, I dialed Julian’s new number. A heavy rock settled in the pit of my stomach as each ring stretched on, feeling like eternity. Just as I’d anticipated, he didn’t pick up and it went straight to voicemail. “Hey Julian, it’s Lucie. I meant to tell you everything before the articles came out, but then Sophie disappeared. I am not sure you know she’s missing. Please call me back soon.” I ended my voicemail.

Then, I took a seat in our living room, randomly waiting to hear the familiar, rambunctious roar of the Huracan’s engine. Would he call? Would he come home eventually? Knowing it was a terrible idea if I wanted to keep my sanity, I decided to

Google the rest of the articles to assess the damage to my reputation. The headlines flashed on the screen, each one more damning than the last.

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Is Lucie Benton, Girlfriend of Billionaire Julian, Reigniting Romance with Pop Star James Stone?

Abortion Before Breakup: Love Rekindled for Lucie Benton with Pop Star James Stone?

Too Many Men in Lucie Benton's Life: Who's the Father?

James Stone Writes Music for His Muse, Lucie Benton: A Love That Never Faded

I didn't think it was possible to get myself into a more embarrassing situation, let alone have it play out in front of the whole world. I'd need a hazmat suit just to navigate my own life at this point. And with all these scandals swirling around, the chances of Julian coming home were about as likely as me winning the lottery. I knew his personality, and that he always pulled away when he was hurt.

Anxious, I texted him again. I love you. I need to tell you what really happened. I did not get an abortion.

But there was no answer. Julian was usually glued to his phone, and it never took him long to reply, so his silence spoke volumes. He was definitely pissed. As my stomach was more sensitive these days, my nausea hit once again. I grabbed the Preggie Pops—bonbon-like candies Sophie had sent me through Amazon—hoping they'd offer some relief. But just seeing them made me think about Sophie's situation, and whether she was even still alive. The thought pushed me over the edge, and I broke down into uncontrollable sobs, my fear for her life reaching unbearable levels.

At that moment, a knock echoed at the door. For a brief instant, I let myself believe it might be her—maybe, just maybe, God, in whatever form I understood Him (which wasn't much), would finally free me from this endless nightmare. I hurried to the door, my face swollen and flushed. Eager to see her, I checked the camera, only to feel a surge of frustration as I saw who stood on the other side. The sudden realization that it wasn't Sophie hit me like a blow, and the identity of my unexpected visitor only deepened the shock.

It was James Stone. From the looks of it, he was alone—or at least, there was no sign of his security entourage. He looked just as I remembered, though now he carried a bit more of that boy band pop star flair, the kind of polished charm that seemed to radiate from famous people. What the hell was he doing here?

In haste, I threw on a floral bathrobe to cover my undergarments—barely enough to be decent, but it was all I could manage in the rush. After all, he'd seen more of me before.

“James,” I popped the door open.

“Jesus, Lucie, you could have at least given me a warning.” A subtle smile tugged at the corners of his lips, his voice light and unruffled. It was clear that the news hadn't fazed him in the slightest. James had always been different from the others—where most would react with shock, curiosity, or judgment, he remained stoic. Whether it was a personal scandal, a new piece of juicy gossip, or the latest school drama, he approached it all with a detached calm, as though he were an outsider watching the frenzy unfold from a distance, unaffected by the tide of opinions that swept through the crowd.

“I didn't realize the press knew about my trip to the clinic, but it's not what the headlines say,” I muttered, feeling the weight of it. I figured that's what he was referring to—his name dragged into the mess, now linked to an abortion.

“I’m sorry they found out, Lucie,” his gaze swept over me before scanning the apartment, as if looking for signs of how my life had shifted since he left.

“James, it wasn’t the wisest thing for you to come here,” I pointed out.

His sharp eyes met mine, intense and unflinching. “I needed to see you, Lucie. We’ve always had a sixth sense about each other. And from the looks of it, you aren’t alright.”

I sighed. “Not when you were seeing Andrea,” I retorted. I needed to remind him of why our relationship ended. Pinpricks of anger vibrated beneath my chest.

“I was an addict back then. I made a million mistakes that I regret. Can we talk?”

He looked genuinely apologetic, but I’d already accepted an apology in the past. There really was no good reason for him to come here in the first place.

I stepped back but he stepped closer, the space between us narrowing with every movement. Then, I spotted Will in the background, his expression clear—basically asking me if he should take him out. I didn’t have the heart. James was still an important person in my history, and he’d been there for me through some bad times.

“Fine,” I agreed, inviting him in for some privacy, then shut the door on Will. We needed to talk about how he was handling his PR anyway. I led him up to the kitchen, where I poured him and myself a coffee. We both drank it black, outward evidence of our intense souls. I opted for decaf.

Still standing at the counter, I initiated a conversation. “I can’t be the girl who inspires your music. It’s not fair to Julian and to me.” Momentarily, I placed my hand over my stomach. From the way things were shaping up, he’d likely be the father of my child. Deep down, I knew I was starting to love the little one in my

belly—perhaps too much to ever consider ending its life.

“Lucie, don’t lie about your life. You can’t be okay here with him,” I almost thought he’d brush the tendrils from my face like he used to, but I wouldn’t have let him anyway.

“And why is that, James? Because I found happiness without you?” I could be sharp-tongued when I wanted.

Judging from his expression, I’d managed to injure him. Still, he wasn’t giving up on the conversation. “I don’t need saving.” My irritation grew.

“Maybe you don’t know you need saving,” he retorted, his tone hinting at something important. “I was at a house party yesterday, Lucie.” He began what seemed to be a story. By that, he probably meant a lavish party with a few famous people mixed in. I swallowed because I already had a good idea of where this conversation was going.

“I chatted up a girl named Jazmin Williams,” he continued. “She’s a rising model, and it’s Julian’s talent agency that represents her.”

I lifted my eyebrow. Julian owned a talent agency in Hollywood as part of his investments. Rose constantly nudged him to sell it, though it was doing exceptionally well. Unfortunately, I also knew he’d pulled quite a few past girlfriends from it.

James paused, contemplating taking a seat, but then decided against it—he hadn’t been invited. “Look, I’m worried about you. You’ve always had self-destructive tendencies, but he’s beyond that. I know about the coke.”

Acid filled my mouth, at the thought of what he was about to say next.

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“Why did you come here, James?” I narrowed my eyes, trying to see past his facade.

“Lucie,” he said gently, as if every word was laced with care. It almost seemed like he was about to reconsider telling me.

“What do you know?” Now that he knew about Julian’s problem, I needed to know what else was out there.

“Jazmin’s been doing drugs with him. She’s an ex-stripper who became huge after Julian’s agency discovered her. Apparently, he handpicked her himself.”

The name felt like a knife lodged in my chest. At this point, the anger inside me started to burn, pure and explosive. Jazmin? So, Julian had a female companion for his habits? Did he sleep with her at any point and not tell me? But I certainly wasn’t going to show James he’d hit me in my Achilles heel.

“Look, James, my private life is none of your business,” I snapped, my voice shaky, a mix of embarrassment. “You need to leave.”

He extended his hand to take mine. “I am here for you, like I once promised.”

I refused it, tears now welling up in my eyes.

“I will always feel awful about how things ended. I write about you in my music, because there’s no other girl I’ve ever known who has your kindness and sweetness combined.”

Was he shaking? I couldn't tell if it was the words or the weight of the past that had him visibly affected. Damn, he'd really come here changed.

Whether I wanted to admit it or not, James knew me through and through. He understood my reactions, my defenses, the way I'd lash out when I was hurt. "I know," I mustered a response. Ofcourse, there'd always be a part of me that would love him too, for everything that we'd been through before it blew up in our faces. "I have forgiven you," I added. "But you can't go around saying I am the inspiration for your music anymore. Please, James."

He took another step toward me as if he'd stepped out of a memory long gone. And for some reason, I didn't flinch away. It was as though I was revisiting my past, but from a completely different angle, seeing it through new eyes. It felt like a strange reconciliation, a chance to view everything we'd shared without the bitterness. For the first time in a while, I wasn't just looking back—I wasre-seeingit all. His lips hovered just inches from mine, his gaze intense, as if he were drinking me in—each fleeting moment, each subtle shift of my expression. The air between us thickened, charged with something unsaid, something that hung heavily in the space we shared. Had he tried to lean in, I would have yanked myself away. But he didn't make a move. "I am sorry, Lucie," he whispered, his voice thick with regret. "But it's the truth; I think about you each time I sit down to write music."

My blood thrummed louder. It was just then that I suddenly heard the faint click of the lock, followed by the unmistakable sound of footsteps in the hallway. The noise was subtle but enough to send a jolt of panic through me. I knew his routine by heart, the subtle rhythm of his movements, the way the door would creak when he walked in, the shuffle of his shoes on the floor. I knew the sound of him settling in—how he'd drop his keys, toss his coat over the chair.

I turned away from James, my heart pounding in my chest, and quickly walked toward the staircase. "Julian," I whispered, swallowing hard as the name caught in

my throat.

James flinched, then realized who had just walked in. Julian came toward us, the embodiment of a powerful, no-nonsense entrepreneur. Dressed in his sharp suit, tall and commanding, he exuded an aura of authority and danger—someone who didn't mess around and got things done his way. His glare—ready to melt the gold frames on the wall—now burned everything in its path.

First, he gazed up at me without saying a word, his silence almost louder than anything he could have said. In that brief exchange, I felt it—the raw connection we'd always had, the kind of bond that wasn't easily severed by time or distance. It wasn't just familiarity; it was something deeper, an invisible bond that had always existed between us as if our souls had been tethered together long before this lifetime. Even with the intensity of his anger, I felt unafraid, as though I had the ability to diffuse it with just my presence.

But with that depth came discomfort, because Julian held the power to mirror back to me parts of myself that I wasn't always ready to face. He didn't just reflect who I was in the surface-level sense, but he revealed the shadows—those hidden fears, insecurities, and unresolved wounds that I'd long tried to bury. And right now, it was more than that; it was the raw, justified tangled mess of emotions that surged within. I felt insecure about Jazmin's role in his life, certain that James hadn't lied about it. I pursed my lips, now feeling like I had every right to be upset myself.

A muscle flexed in Julian's jaw when he noticed James. "You can't be serious, Lucie," he growled, next, his eyes scanning my outfit with an intensity that made me feel exposed. It certainly wasn't doing me any favors. I knew exactly what it looked like—disheveled, unkempt as if I'd had company overnight. "James came to visit me this morning," I attempted an explanation, even though I wasn't sure if Julian deserved it after me learning about Jazmin.

“I better head out,” James murmured, his voice tinged with apology directed at me. For a brief moment, I could see the hesitation in his eyes, as if he were debating whether to add, “Call for help, if you need,” but he wisely held back, sensing the fragile tension of the moment. But Julian had already caught his glance. His eyes narrowed, the unspoken tension between them suddenly palpable. “What the fuck are you doing in my house with my girl?” He roared.

This wasn't going to be an easy exit...

“Bro, you need to calm down,” James stepped back with his hands slightly raised in a gesture of peace. His voice was steady, but there was an edge to it. “I came to talk with Lucie about the mess online, while you were busy most likely snorting drugs somewhere.”

Bad choice of words. With a furious growl, Julian lunged at James, using all his strength to try and pin him against the wall. But James wasn't a stranger to physical confrontation. He'd been in his fair share of fights, and he was quick to react. As Julian's body collided with his, he twisted out of the way, his reflexes sharp and practiced.

“Stop, let him go” I tried to grab Julian by the arm.

“Get out of the way, Lucie.” He ordered me, and I couldn't help but notice he put his hand protectively over my stomach.

“You want a fight, we can have a fight,” James seemed now ready for a confrontation. The air around them crackled with aggression, and I could feel the pulse of danger in my chest as they circled one another.

A sickening crunch ripped the air, followed by a howl. James's blood spurted everywhere.

“I know enough about how you treated Lucie to know that I’ll never let you come close to her,” Julian’s voice was cold, but his words hit with the force of a slap. “You’re not welcome in our home.” Though powerful, he was fueled by emotion, and I hoped it wouldn’t cloud his judgment to do something that would result in a lawsuit.

“Julian, it’s fine, I put that behind me,” I said softly. “He’s going to leave now.” Julian was referring to the incident when James broke my phone and hurt my wrist while trying to restrain it.

James, still reeling from the tension and physical struggle, stood frozen for a second, the gravity of the accusation sinking in. His mouth opened, but no words came out—he knew better than to try and justify himself now. Just then, Julian aimed another punch at him, and he barely ducked in time, the punch missing by mere inches. The force of the swing sent Julian off balance for a brief moment, but he quickly regained his stance, his eyes locked on James with a renewed fury. James didn’t waste a second, his body reacting instinctively. He sidestepped, putting distance between them, his chest rising and falling with controlled breaths.

“I care about her,” James exclaimed, his voice sharp. He showed no signs of fear, while the potent smell of blood filled the air. Next, he took a step closer, his posture firm. “At least I’m not leading her on, as I keep prostitutes on the side. Don’t pretend you’re a saint, Valmont.”

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My pulse drummed. This was not going to end well. And whose side was I on? If what James said was right, he'd come with the intention to help. Julian lounged at him again, this time managing to hit James hard enough so he sank to the ground, his jaw bleeding enough to send him to the ER right away.

"Please stop now," I cried out desperately. I ran to James, while I tried to pick him up.

"Get out of the way, please, Lucie." Julian rolled up his sleeves as if he was just beginning the fight. Clearly, he'd come here to get his retribution.

James took a few seconds to gather himself as Julian watched him with narrowed eyes, his expression darkening like a predator sizing up its next move. There was loads of blood on our white carpet now. The two of them remained locked in their tense standoff. The silence felt heavier now, as if the room itself was holding its breath, waiting for someone to speak, to make sense of the chaos that had exploded here. But no one moved. Both of them breathed hard, the tension between them thickening with every labored inhale. James stood up again, and I stepped away, giving up on involvement in this. This time around, it was him who punched first. He wasn't backing down, "I am not giving up on Lucie." He attempted to punch Julian, and he succeeded with a weak result.

Julian's gaze was sharp, his fists clenched at his sides now, the veins in his neck standing out with the force of his anger. There was something wildly inappropriate about seeing an entrepreneur like him, in his suit, so roughed up with splatters of blood. The sharp, crisp lines of his tailored blazer were rumpled, the collar of his shirt undone, and a few dark smudges marred the otherwise pristine fabric. I made another

attempt to grab him by the arm, but I wouldn't try to restrain him. James was a strong opponent and I couldn't tell if he was contemplating another blow.

"Please just stop this, both of you," I begged.

"No, Lucie." Julian's response was sharp, almost cold, his gaze flicking to me for a brief moment before locking onto James. He stood his ground, unafraid, the simmering anger still radiating off him. "It's my goddamn business that this wannabe popstar is writing songs about my fiancée and announcing it to the media for his own publicity."

Julian's protective instinct was on full display, but the way he spoke, the way he viewed James—like some sort of enemy or threat to what he thought was his—felt almost comforting to me.

"It's my goddamn business he's inserting himself into the relationship with my future wife." He scanned James like he was ready to finish him off.

"I am leaving now. For you." James glanced at me. "I can't see you suffer like this," his voice was low, almost breaking, as he turned his back to us. He started walking toward the staircase, his steps measured, as if he were trying to make this moment as dignified as possible. "I love you, Lucie. I always have," He muttered somberly.

An odd ache gripped my chest.

It was only then, when his back was turned and the distance between us started to grow, that I realized it—the way his eyes had glistened was more than just an injury from the fight. There was something in them that I hadn't seen before, something raw and vulnerable, like the weight of everything we had gone through had finally caught up with him. Like he'd truly come here to save me from harm's way.

“You ever come close to her, in any way—even if just insinuating her name in public—the two of us won’t be done yet,” Julian threatened, his voice like ice, cutting through the tension that hung thick in the air. There was no hesitation, no room for negotiation. He meant every word, and there was an edge to him now that made it clear he wasn’t bluffing.

In a strange way, I almost welcomed it, because I didn’t want these declarations of love from my ex. And he just wasn’t getting the message. I also had zero interest in being the internet’s mystery girl.

Julian’s eyes slid to me once the door slammed shut. The tension in the air was thick, but it wasn’t until then that I realized my face was wet, with more tears streaming down my cheeks. His hard jawline softened, his movements swift and urgent like he couldn’t bear to see me like this for another second. But instead of pulling me into an embrace, like I might have expected, he kneeled in front of me, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that made my heart ache. He took my hands into his, his grip firm but gentle, as if he were trying to ground both of us.

“Is it true?” He swallowed. “You’re having our baby?”

I again wondered how much he knew already. Julian didn’t rely on tabloids for his information—Oliver’s team was always gathering intel for him, keeping him in the loop on things.

“I meant to tell you,” I started, my voice shaky, “but I couldn’t find the strength. Julian, I don’t know if we can do this—keep this baby.” My voice broke. “The doctors are saying it would most likely be fine, but there’s a lot of research saying otherwise. I am scared because this all didn’t start right.” It was a huge relief to finally tell him the truth.

His thumbs brushed over my skin, soothing in the way only he could, though the

rawness in his eyes told me that he was just as torn apart by everything as I was. There was something deeply vulnerable in the way he held me—like he didn't know what to say, but he couldn't stand to see me sad anymore.

For a moment, we both just hugged, the silence floating in the space between us. It was like time had slowed, like all the noise and chaos outside the room had faded away, and it was just us. Julian's eyes finally searched mine, filled with questions, guilt, and regret. "Lucie..." he whispered, his voice hoarse, as if speaking my name was all he could manage. "I'd love to be a father. I want this with you more than anything despite the timing."

My chest, already tight from my pregnancy, heaved with each breath. "I also don't know if I'm ready myself, you know." The words tumbled out in a rush, each one heavy with the weight of everything I hadn't said, everything that had been building up inside me. "But I love this little thing inside more than I could ever imagine. I couldn't do it when I went. I couldn't go through with the abortion."

Would he be upset that I tried to take things into my own hands? Was it weak of me to try to hide it from him?

It didn't seem like Julian harbored any bitterness toward my actions. Without a word, he kissed me on the forehead, both of us still kneeling on the floor. His arms wrapped around me, a steady, grounding presence amidst the chaos. And for a moment, as I clung to him, I allowed myself to feel the smallest bit of relief, even if just for the briefest of seconds. The weight of the world hadn't disappeared, but in his arms, I felt less alone.

"I love you, Lucie. It's your body and your decision," He whispered softly, his voice full of quiet conviction. He held me tighter, his hands gently cradling my face as I continued to sob, the tears soaking his shirt. "And I'll be there for every moment of it." He pressed a kiss to my forehead, his lips warm and tender against my skin, a

silent promise that spoke volumes. “I’m ready for all of it with you—the pain, the happiness, and even our darkest of griefs.”

The following day, the sun came out, casting a golden glow that seemed to make everything just a little bit brighter. The world outside looked like it was moving on, as if the weight of the night before had never happened. But for me, it was still hard to find any real joy. My mind still lingered on Sophie all the time, as if my entire future happiness depended on her coming back from whatever hell she was going through. While I wanted to continue searching for her, Oliver urged me to stop, insisting that doing so would only jeopardize his progress. So, I had to summon the strength to step back and trust the process—a difficult reality for a control freak like me.

I woke up beside my handsome fiancée on the couch, tangled in each other’s limbs, our breaths soft and steady. We must have fallen asleep there the night before, likely from sheer exhaustion. He was still resting, his face calm and serene, so I quietly slipped away to our espresso machine. Before long, the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the room. I took a moment to calculate my daily caffeine limit, consoling myself that decaf was still an option once I’d finished my first mug.

Was Amanda expecting me at work today? I felt relieved I hadn’t gotten a frantic call from her asking if I needed maternity benefits anytime soon. But, true to form, my workaholic nature kicked in—the drive to succeed pulled me back to the office. I quietly made my way downstairs to the bedroom, and then into my closet. Today, more than ever, I was determined to choose an outfit that made a powerful statement. I selected a stunning Armani suit, its sleek lines and tailored fit exuding both confidence and sophistication. Valentina had gifted it to me straight from the runway, one of the few items left from our friendship. In no time, without waiting for Julian to awaken, I slipped out the door.

Will tried hard not to send any judgmental looks my way, and it almost made me

chuckle because I knew exactly what he was thinking. Despite his best efforts to mask it, his eyes betrayed him, scanning me up and down with a mixture of disbelief and admiration that I was still standing after all the stuff on the internet.

The drive to the office was uneventful, aside from a few photographers stationed at the exit gate of our complex. Their presence was just part of the routine now, an oddity I hardly noticed anymore, as if they were simply another fixture of my daily life.

“Well, well,” Amanda greeted me the moment I appeared at the door.

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“Hey Amanda, I know you said I could take more time, but I just couldn’t stay away from work,” I walked over and settled into my chair.

Kali gave me one of those looks, the kind that silently acknowledged and celebrated my decision. The others, however, weren’t quite as empathetic.

“We’re dying to find out if it’s the popstar or the billionaire,” Misha chimed in, his tone teasing. The sight of him shifted my empowered mood, even if only slightly.

“Boys are a waste of time,” our new colleague Krystal muttered under her breath. “That’s why I date girls only even though I am bisexual.”

I was surprised by how confidently the staff gossiped in front of Amanda. She must have been in a lenient mood for this to be the case.

“Lucie, congrats on the empty article,” Dan, our new staff writer, casually drifted in. “That was amazing! It reminded me of *The Blank Canvas* by Salvator Garau.”

I knew what he was referring to, because thanks to my mom, I read about art often. The work was essentially nothingness—a literal blank canvas that was sold for nearly \$18,000. It was a conceptual piece, and Garau insisted that the “absence” on the canvas was meant to provoke deep reflection about space, perception, and the value of art in the modern world. “What?” I shot him a puzzled look. “Not sure what you mean, Dan...” I furrowed my brows as I caught sight of Amanda’s wide grin.

Even with my creative mind, I couldn’t come up with a single plausible explanation for what he had just said. I gave Kali a glance because I knew she was the one most

likely to tell me what was going on.

“Great job,” Amanda remarked with a light laugh, her steps fading as she walked away.

Kali finally saved me from the torture of not knowing. “The app we use has an automatic submission deadline. I think you missed it, and somehow, it published your opinion column as blank.”

The blood drained from my face. “Dear God. I forgot there’s no proofreader for it after me.”

“The good news is,” Kali said with a warm smile, “the moment it got out, your readers went absolutely crazy. They’re thinking it’s a statement in response to tabloids.”

“It most certainly isn’t...” I gulped.

Kali grinned, “Within just a few hours, your article had sparked over two million Instagram posts, each one featuring the hashtag #BlankStatement. On Facebook, there were over 450,000 posts tagged with your name, generating an avalanche of comments and shares. So basically, youemptyarticle had become an unintentional viral phenomenon. We now have almost 1 million more subscribers to the app.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Nope,” she pursed her lips. “I am not even going to add that the internet is upside down because now everyone knows that you’re the secret girl from Stone’s songs. I mean, I am expecting a lot more subscribers.” She gave me a remorseful glance. “There’s something good in everything bad.”

“Not what I want to hear, Kali,” I said somberly.

She glanced around to make sure Misha was gone, then leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Lucie, I had a thought—maybe your nausea is more than just the flu.”

I shook my head. “A lot of it isn’t true, Kali.”

“When it comes to your audience, they love you regardless,” she reassured me.

I paused, trying to figure out how to navigate this strange situation. “What does one even write after a statement that’s this successful?”

We both burst into laughter—something I hadn’t expected, but it felt good. Almost as quickly as it had started, though, a wave of darkness swept over me again. “Actually, I need to talk to Misha. Kali, please excuse me,” I rose from my seat and drifting toward his desk. My mind was set, and I had just one goal now as I hurried to speak to him.

“Yeah, Lucie? Finally realizing that the two of us might have a chance?” Misha quipped, raising his eyebrows in mock suggestion. I ignored his salacious remark.

“You know something about Jessica,” I said, my tone sharp. “With Sophie missing, tell me everything. And don’t even think for a second that Julian is going to take a picture with you. This is not a trade. It’s human decency at this point.”

He suddenly looked frightened. “Lucie, I already spoke with the security guard, Oliver. By the way, he seems like a badass. All I know is that Jess plotted revenge.”

“How do you know this?” I asked, my eyebrows furrowing threateningly.

“I overheard a phone conversation,” he replied with fear in his eyes. “I’m not sure who she was talking to, but it sounded like a dude. She told him that she’d planned to get back at Sophie for what happened to her career.”

“When was this? Place and time?”

“The day she got fired. I was leaving Apogee for lunch break, and heard her have this conversation in the lobby.”

“Is there anything else you heard?”

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“No, Lucie. Look, I know you hate me. But in reality, I loved Sophie too.” He frowned. “I wouldn’t want her to get hurt.”

“Don’t use past tense to talk about her. Why didn’t you say anything earlier? When we could have done something about it?”

He pressed his lips together, his voice tinged with guilt. “I wasn’t thinking much of it back then. Girls can be mean, but I just figured it would be some harmless gossip online. I really wanted that picture with Julian, and when you refused, I sort of pushed it out of my mind.”

“You’re a snake, Misha. I don’t know what to believe anymore.” I vented my anger at him.

“I know it’s deserved, but I’d love to help to look for her.” He assured me. “I am sorry.”

“What happened between the two of you, anyway?” Sophie had always been too staccato for him, and that was likely because of his general demeanor.

He exhaled sharply as if one way he could remedy the situation was to open up. “When I started working here, the two of us became really close friends,” he explained. “And at one point, I found myself falling for her.”

I wasn’t surprised at all—Sophie was stunning. She was an angel in real life.

“So, I ended up deleting a lot of messages from her online dating profile,” he

confessed. “She thinks she missed out on a lot of opportunities. For a while, she thought maybe the guys didn’t like her pictures.”

“Did you know what Jess did with Mark’s profile all along?”

“No, Lucie, pinky promise. It may surprise you, but I’m not that much of a crook. We all saw how happy she was around him.”

“Okay, Misha,” I gave him one last glance. “If you hear anything, please let me and Oliver know. We’ve got to find her soon. Alive.” I couldn’t believe I was emphasizing that.

He nodded. “I tried to get in touch with Jess, to see if she’s still around, but it seems like she’s not responding to anyone from Apogee.” This was just another admission of guilt on Jess’s part. Oliver was on the right track, but what could have possibly happened between the two women?

“Yeah, but we’ve got a lot of people working the case, and I’m sure we’ll find her,” I said, trying to sound confident, hoping my words would somehow make it true. Misha looked utterly devastated, and I couldn’t shake the thought that maybe—just maybe—he still loved Sophie and that he was honest. For a brief moment, I felt a twinge of sympathy for him. He’d never recognize his own flaws, never take responsibility for them, yet here he was, suffering because of them.

The rest of the day flew by. We’d finally set the marketing plan for Hart & Quill’s new release into motion, and this time, I had more to contribute than just a blank page. I decided to write a heartfelt message to my readers about Sophie’s disappearance, and as I did, I couldn’t help but shed more tears. What we needed now was for it to go viral, igniting a wave of people joining the search for her. Fortunately, I had the power to give the case the attention it desperately needed.

Baby, how are you feeling? Julian texted midday.

Good, but still no news about Sophie, though. I attached a sad emoji. Are you at work?

Yes, there's a lot that I need to catch up on, he confirmed, adding a hug emoji.

The two of us had spent the night talking late, also tending to some of his injuries from the fight with James. We'd never gotten around to discussing Jazmin, mostly because I didn't think I could bring myself to ask about her—not yet, anyway. But with Julian's past reputation, I couldn't help but wonder if he'd had sex with her, especially when I wasn't around. I'd always assumed it was Evy who had captured his attention, but the idea of another woman being involved had never crossed my mind.

Whenever Julian returned from a trip, we typically ended up in bed within minutes of being together, but this time we'd held back. We were reconnecting slowly, carefully, while I couldn't quite bring myself to trust him yet. Even though I had more or less decided against the abortion, the idea of becoming a mother both thrilled and terrified me. Would I have to give up my job? Especially because I did not have family around?

Is it okay if I ask when your next appointment is, Lucie? If you're comfortable with it, I'd really like to be there, he requested.

Tomorrow, I have to do a blood test. Then the next one is at 10 weeks, I let him know.

Is there anything you need right now?

Only that Oliver finds Sophie. It's excruciating to miss her this much, Julian. Tears

prickled my eyes again. I am a mess.

I have around a hundred people working the case right now, he noted, offering immediate comfort. Mr. Dickens is devastated because he's worried about her heart condition, on top of any situation she's in. I'm going to try to spend some time with him today.

These words only poured more salt into the wound, but it was a valid concern. I'm certain Jess is involved. There has to be something in her phone history, I told him. But I've already mentioned this to Oliver.

I'll keep you posted if we get any new clues. In the meantime, please be extra careful, Lucie. He reminded me.

I wondered if I should let the conversation die down, then I decided against it.

Julian?

Yes, Lucie? He reacted almost immediately.

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How is your sobriety going? Are you managing now that there are more temptations around? I asked, now genuinely wondering. We'd only touched on the subject of rehab briefly the night before, because so much else was going wrong, but it was a conversation that deserved more attention.

31 days clean now, he responded immediately. I love you, Lucie, and I will not let you down. And our baby.

Should you go back to rehab, to finish the program? Concern crept into our conversation. It didn't seem like long enough to me. He'd had a deeply rooted problem before he went, and with everything happening now, he hadn't been able to devote the time he needed to truly heal.

My absence worried the investors, so I plan to stay, he explained. And besides, I can't leave you now. Not with what's going on with the Dickens family. They need me.

I understood that. I hoped he'd be strong enough to stay away from trouble.

About what James mentioned yesterday... I messaged next. There was no reason to walk around the subject anymore. Knowing the truth, no matter how hard it was, would allow me to make the best choices for my future.

Lucie, I don't know if this is a text message conversation. Let's talk about it in person. He suggested.

Did you sleep with her? I know we weren't together, but it still feels important to know.

Julian was calling me now, and I quickly concluded that, because of my bitterness, this wasn't the right time to talk to him. And certainly not in front of an audience at my office. Even stepping into a room wasn't a doable plan, because I simply couldn't afford another PR mistake.

I need to talk to you about this in person, he followed up via text, possibly understanding that I didn't want to have a call.

This could only mean one thing — yes, he'd slept with her. And while I knew that men could separate love and sex much easier, it still made me think that our bond wasn't as tight as I'd initially thought. He'd been able to enter another woman's body, while I'd almost gone insane without him. I knew better than to Google her name, knowing it would only send me down a spiral.

I was already in a dump because of his hidden addiction. There was the Julian I had known before his confession, and the Julian I knew now. While it didn't change the fact that I still loved him, I couldn't help but wonder if James had been right about one thing—our relationship was becoming dangerously toxic. I skimmed through the pictures of us on my desk, memories of past happiness, of the moments I had believed Julian was my purest salvation. Now, there was no such thing.

I arrived home late, as usual, my workaholicism being my constant refuge. To my surprise, Julian hadn't yet returned from the office, so I went ahead with my usual evening routine without him. I ate a cup of hot canned chicken soup, satisfying a craving, then took a hot shower, read a few pages of *The Lady of Camellias* that Julian had gifted me, and finally went to bed.

I fell into a deep sleep almost immediately, my body surrendering to the exhaustion and desperate need for rest. I wasn't sure how long I had been asleep when I finally felt Julian's touch on me.

He'd spooned me into a gentle hug, trying not to wake me, but I'd always been a light sleeper. Almost instantly, I spun around, our foreheads brushing as I breathed in the elegant blend of his cologne and the warm scent of his skin, a heady mix that felt like my own personal addiction. Heaven—he was my heaven, no matter how hard it could get between us.

“Didn’t mean to wake you up baby,” he whispered against my mouth. “How are you feeling?”

The Alexa on the nightstand chimed, filling the room with ocean waves. Its display casted a faint glow—it was almost 4 AM, an hour that felt oddly out of place for his return. “I’m fine,” I mumbled, my voice hushed and dry. I needed water, so I reached for my cold tea on my nightstand and chugged the rest of it.

“Were you late at the office?” It was more of a conversation starter because I already knew the answer anyway. It wasn’t unusual for him to pull an all-nighter, especially if he had several meetings scheduled in the Middle East. I also knew he was probably ridden with guilt for taking a month off. When it came to his business, Julian needed to be fully in the driver’s seat.

“Yeah, Lucie, we’ve been reviewing Sophie’s file with Oliver. I can’t stand seeing Jack this heartbroken, and Sophie means a great deal to all of us.”

It was sweet of him to say this because he really didn’t know her that much. “She does,” I muttered, my voice strained with pain. I was almost ready to make coffee and get up, now. Maybe there was more I could do during this search, too.

But I decided not to let go of his embrace. We hardly had moments like this anymore. Julian was still in his suit, the fabric rumpled from the long hours, and he hadn’t even bothered to change. The sharp lines of his blazer were softened by the wear of the night, his tie slightly askew as if he’d been too tired or distracted to care. His gaze

shifted to me as soon as he saw the heat in my cheeks, then lingered on my short white robe, and I knew exactly what that look meant.

“Kiss me,” the words were half plea-half demand. His hand slid up my thigh, my quiver now giving away my susceptibility. But sex couldn’t fix everything, especially not with the dragon in my mind.

I met his fiery gaze, reluctant to comply just yet. “Julian, I want to talk about Jazmin.” There was no point in avoiding the issue and letting my anxiety simmer.

Tilting his head, he brushed his lips over mine.

I mentally prepared myself for the bad news.

“I didn’t sleep with her, Lucie.” He flashed me a subtle yet guilty smile.

“Why wait all this time to tell me that?” I pressed. He could have just said this in a message and spared me the overthinking.

“You need to look me in the eyes when I say this.” He inched closer, and a wave of butterflies fluttered in my stomach. He then gently pulled me toward him, positioning me to straddle his hips. I felt heat and moisture between my thighs, and I was no longer sure if I cared about a conversation in the first place.

“Lucie Benton,” he murmured, brushing his finger across my cheek, and my pulse skipped. Even after all this time, it still felt like a wild dream. No one had ever made me feel this way—so exposed, so raw. I couldn’t quite pinpoint whether it was his striking looks or his undeniable power, though it was likely a mix of both—the very essence of who he was. It wasn’t just his success that set him apart; it was the sheer force of his presence, the way he moved through the world as though it bent to his will. There was something undeniably magnetic about a man who had achieved so

much on his own. And he had a kindness that the tabloids would never mention, though those close to him knew it well.

“Coming home to you is all I will ever want,” he said, his gaze locking onto mine with a quiet intensity that wouldn’t let me look away. “You need to stop looking for excuses why we aren’t going to work.”

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The blood rushed to my core, as I felt him go hard against me. The collar of his shirt parted while he undid the buttons, exposing his strong throat and chest.

“It’s my tendency to look for the worst,” I admitted, my voice softening. “Julian, you haven’t exactly made me feel confident inus.”

He slid off my shoulder straps, pulling them down enough so my breasts spilled out of my ensemble. “The full truth is, Lucie, I was trying to forget you,” he confessed, his voice laced with regret. “It seemed like the sensible thing to do because I was the reason your life was in danger in the first place.”

I closed my eyes and moaned as he stroked my nipples with his thumbs. It was pointless to try resist something that felt so good, and so natural. So what, I pursued my physical needs selfishly.

Yes, he was right, thanks to his business decisions, Tarnakis had almost succeeded at killing me.

“Say more,” I panted. He wasn’t oblivious to the double meaning.

“It drove me crazy to know another man touched you, that I had to give you up to save you,” he growled as he shoved his fingers inside me.

It was the case for me too. I’d never known the depth of jealousy until I met Julian. It wasn’t just a fleeting pang; it was a constant ache because so many other women pined after him. But I had my pride, and I’d nursed these small heartbreaks without fully always admitting to them.

I trembled, now on the edge of what seemed to be an orgasm. “Julian,” I panted.

He searched my eyes again. “I let her give me oral sex, for a moment, only to find myself disgusted with the decision. I didn’t even come, Lucie.”

A sudden stab of pain pierced my heart. So, he was intimate with another woman...

“I numbed myself with drugs, and pushed Oliver to find whoever was trying to hurt you.”

He continued to push his fingers into me, his thumb pressing against my clit. I bent my back, so he could fill me deeper. I never thought he could confess to something like this and I’d still be turned on.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my hips against his, the message clear. Julian’s mouth crashed onto mine, and we kissed like we were drowning, like we were each other’s only source of oxygen.

He spun me, then pinned me to bed, now reaching for his zipper. The sight of him never ceased to leave me in awe. He was glorious, beautiful, and for a brief moment, I allowed myself to savor the quiet triumph of having his love. Truthfully, the year before had tested us both to our limits. I’d found intimacy with Bradley, and perhaps Julian had tried to escape from pain the same way with Jazmin. Did it matter anymore?

“Julian,” I moaned his name.

“Keep repeating my name, baby,” His cock lengthened and swelled, and I briefly took him my mouth, to moisten him, to lick off his precum. He groaned with pleasure. I felt his muscles suddenly flex as he covered my body, just enough not to press me down with his full weight. “My Lucie, I love you,” he drove into me at

once.

“I love you too, Julian.” I ran my fingers through his hair, my body now trembling through it all. I didn’t realize how the sudden rapid-fire thrusts would feel, how, because of my hormones, I wasn’t as soft, and everything felt way more sensitive and rougher. Noticing how tense I was, he slowed down, his movements becoming sweet and soft.

“Does this feel good, baby?” He groaned.

“Yeah,” I bit my lip as I adjusted my hips in anticipation of an orgasm. My whole body was now tingling, close to spasming in ecstasy.

“You’re everything to me,” he whispered against my mouth, then ravaged it with another deep kiss. I dug my fingers into his strong back as I climaxed. Pleasure drifted across his face as he’d clearly gotten there around the same time. He let the rest of his cum wet the outside of my sex, then collapsed on top of me. Our eyes locked for just a moment.

“I missed you so much,” he murmured, wrapping his arms around me before pressing his nose gently against my face.

Maybe it was just the time of day, but no matter how hard I tried to convince myself this moment should be filled with hope, it felt heavy, dark. Despite my efforts to stay away, I couldn’t resist Julian, though the shadow of his potential relapse haunted my thoughts, lingering at the edges of my mind. I allowed myself a few extra hours of sleep, alongside him, before another day would begin, before we’d need to face it all.

In conclusion, the economic forces of supply and demand, when properly balanced, have the potential to drive prosperity and equity, yet their effectiveness depends on the careful consideration of external factors and the role of policy interventions. I

typed the last sentence of my economics essay.

Kali sat beside me, lost in the task of refining our app, the two of us growing into an inseparable force of productivity.

“I’m going to grab more coffee from the kitchen, want anything?” she offered.

“Yes, please, decaf coffee this time, thanks.” I replied. “Any chance you could also bring me the hazelnut cream with it?”

“Guaranteed that can mean only one thing...” She sent me a meaningful look.

I blushed. “It’s just so complicated.”

She glanced around the open space, but there was hardly anyone around. “I have two kids of my own. I did it by myself, Lucie, and it’s been the best thing that’s happened to me.”

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“I know Julian would be a great dad,” I volunteered. I couldn’t quite tell her why I had health concerns for the baby, though. It still really bothered me that from the beginning, we didn’t give our child the best start.

She gave a knowing nod. “You two really seem like the ultimate power couple. I’ll return shortly with our liquid of accomplishment.” With that, she vanished into the kitchen.

Once the buzz of productivity settled back in, I turned my attention to my email. I began with my personal inbox, knowing that sometimes, even work-related messages found their way there. I spotted a message from my doctor through Scripps about my blood test and immediately opened it.

Lucie, your HCG levels have risen from 5902 to 8952. We’re going to follow up with another test in two days to ensure it’s doubling as expected.

She didn’t provide any other explanation, but it seemed like 8952 was not double 5902, a sign that perhaps I’d need further monitoring.

Doctor Hui, is everything okay with the baby? I asked anxiously. I knew it would likely take her a few hours to respond, so I turned to the internet, hoping for some answers. But all I found only fueled my worries, with information that was far from reassuring.

HCG (human chorionic gonadotropin) is a hormone produced during pregnancy, and its levels can offer valuable insights into the health and progression of a pregnancy. Doubling in Early Pregnancy: In the first few weeks of pregnancy, HCG

levels typically double every 48 to 72 hours. This rapid increase is a positive sign of a developing pregnancy.

Should I call Julian? I needed to talk to someone about this new concern, but I hesitated, not wanting to worry him too soon. Instead, I decided to wait for the doctor to confirm whether my lower increase was normal. After all, I still had all my pregnancy symptoms, and the nurse at the clinic had mentioned that starting with an HCG level of around 5000 was a strong indicator of a healthy pregnancy.

Trying to avoid spending the whole day on Dr. Google, I shifted my focus to my work email instead. As usual, there was a flood of emails to sort through. I expected it to be all mundane—just another pile of tasks to tackle. But as I skimmed through the messages, an unusual subject line caught my eye.

Confidential: Ransom Request for Sophie.

The sender's email address looked suspiciously fake, and I quickly became almost certain this was someone trying to exploit my article about her disappearance. How sick...

Despite the warning bells ringing in my head, I clicked the arrow at the top to expand the email. What if there was a chance it was real?

Hello Lucie,

Bring 10 million dollars in cash, in exchange for Sophie's life. You will receive the location for the exchange from a stranger at Starbucks downtown, precisely at 7 AM tomorrow.

To confirm the accuracy of our information, your friend mentioned that she left her favorite bracelet in the drawer of her old desk. Please check so you can verify for

yourself.

Please remember, come alone. If you tell anyone about this message, including your billionaire boyfriend, you will never find Sophie or us. Enjoy your day, bitch.

I felt a sudden surge of anger, like something had just pushed me into a corner. Without waiting for Kali to return, I yanked open her drawer. At first, it seemed empty—just papers scattered inside. But as I reached toward the back, my fingers brushed against something cold. There it was—Sophie’s bracelet, tucked in the back. Getting access to Apogee had become nearly impossible with all our security, so it seemed like the author of the email was telling the truth.

My first instinct was to call Oliver—handling this on my own felt too risky with little chance of success. But I couldn’t bring myself to dial his number in panic. After all, this wasn’t just a ransom request—it was Sophie’s life that I was supposed to protect here. I briefly considered tracing the email’s IP address but quickly dismissed the idea. The stranger was likely too clever to send it from a traceable location. There was a chance they genuinely only wanted 10 million, and Sophie would be returned unharmed. But what if it wasn’t that simple? Could following their demands save her life, or would it only make her more vulnerable?

“Coffee doctored to your specifications,” Kali reappeared and set the paper cup on my desk. I jolted and closed my Outlook. “Thank you,” I barely managed to reply, hoping she wouldn’t notice the fear on my face.

“Everything okay?” Kali immediately picked up on my sudden shift in mood.

“Yeah, I just got some bad news in my email,” I said, my words automatic, as if I were no longer fully present in my own body. I had already made up my mind—I would go, follow their instructions, and not tell a soul.

“Do you want to talk about it?” She examined me, concern in her eyes.

“No,” I murmured barely above a whisper, my gaze going distant.

“I’m just going to get back to work now.” I slipped Sophie’s bracelet onto my arm, its special meaning grounding me as I turned away from Kali, who probably felt flabbergasted, but said nothing.

My day got progressively worse. Several hours after receiving the ransom email, I began to feel subtle cramping in my legs. At first, I attributed it to my uterus expanding to accommodate a growing baby, but when I went to use the bathroom, I found blood in my underwear. It wasn’t a heavy flow, but it was definitely bleeding— a frightening sight for any mother-hoping-to-be.

Returning from the bathroom, I quickly sent a follow-up message to my gynecologist, adding something panicked to the subject line. It worked—because her nurse responded almost immediately.

Lucie, Dr. Hui says that bleeding in early pregnancy is quite common. Especially after sexual intercourse. It doesn’t mean that anything is wrong, but let’s repeat the test in two days. She informed me.

After our passionate night with Julian, it was likely the cause. I’d been quite sore, after all. But I couldn’t afford to focus on my health scare now; I had to be strong to follow through with getting the money. After all, I didn’t have 10 million myself, and Julian was the only person who could help me with such an urgent request. But would he suspect something?

Determined, I made my way into the conference room, which was now vacant. “Carolyn, can you put me through to Julian and tell him it’s important?” I called his secretary, knowing he was likely in the middle of a meeting.

“Let me give him the message. Is everything alright, Miss Benton? Do you need help?” She sounded genuinely concerned.

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It seemed like she was already walking to him already.

“All is fine, but this cannot wait, unfortunately,” I said in an apologetic tone. “I know he’s in the middle of something.”

I heard some rustling, followed by a muffled sound, and then finally Julian’s voice. “Baby, are you alright?”

I jumped straight into my request, in hopes that he’d focus on my alarmed state more than on the logic of it all. I’d prepared my story ahead of time, in hopes that the story would be credible enough to get me where I needed to be. “Julian, I’m worried. Amanda wants to expedite the sale of Hart & Quill, and I don’t think I’m going to be able to get the funds. I hate to ask this, but is there any way I can borrow the money? I’ll pay it back as soon as possible,” I blurted out. It sounded so out of character for me that I feared he wouldn’t believe me. But at least he knew this was my dream, so he’d be less likely to question it.

I heard him pause, his silence stretching as he clearly thought it over. Maybe he was weighing the practicality, or trying to gauge the urgency. Finally, he spoke. “Sure baby, I am glad you asked. I’ll text you Phil’s info,” he was now talking about his finance manager that often worked alongside Mr. Dickens. “When do you need the funds?”

“As soon as possible. I’d like to have them this afternoon,” I felt a wave of shame wash over me as I asked for his money so blatantly.

“Why is Amanda rushing it? Do you need an attorney to review the documents?”

“No, you have to trust me. I really want to do this on my own. And yes, I already have an attorney helping me,” I lied. “The contract has been in the works for a while, and we’re just expediting it.”

I heard a few people talking in the background, then Julian’s voice again, “Excuse me, gentlemen.” He’d clearly stepped away entirely.

“I am sorry to interrupt your meeting,” I added. “I know this is sudden.”

“Lucie, is everything okay?” He asked in a voice laced with concern. “Are you safe?”

I wasn’t good at pretending, but I’d do my best. “Julian, yes, I think I’m just very stressed out. I’ve been chasing this money, and it was naïve of me to think I could make that much in just a few months. And if you can help me... Maybe it’s the pregnancy getting me really emotional,” I made a stupid excuse. “I want to make sure I can also provide for a baby myself. Being an entrepreneur is ultimately also my dream.” I was teetering on the edge of tears which was working to my advantage. Wanting to be an entrepreneur was something he could relate to strongly, and I made sure to use it to my advantage.

“Our baby, yes of course, Lucie,” I could almost feel him smiling on the other end of the line. “I’m honored I can finally buy my fiancée something that makes her happy.”

It sounded like he was buying my story. And considering everything else on his plate that day, it seemed my out-of-line request wasn’t going to raise as many questions as I’d feared.

“After I hang up, Phil will get you set up by 5 PM at the latest,” he let me know. “I’ve got to get back to my meeting, but call anytime you need me.”

“Thanks Julian, I love you.” I finished with the sincerest sentence of our

conversation. “This means a lot. And I’ll pay you back,” I tried to make it sound like a loan. That way, he’d question it less knowing my character.

“Anytime baby, I’ll see you later, I’ll be home from the office on time. We can talk more about it.”

“Can’t wait!” I mustered a positive tone.

“I love you more,” he killed the call, likely anxious to get back to what he did best—making money.

I wondered if Phil would be bothered by the fact that I was asking for cash, too, but I figured we’d cross that bridge when we got there. Maybe he was used to paying money to Julian’s exes, sometimes even for hush money to keep them silent before the press, so there was a good chance he wouldn’t question it at all.

The night stretched on, long and excruciating, and I felt like I had reached the limit of what I could mentally handle. Julian and I ordered Chinese food, watched TV, but I was only half present. Earlier that afternoon, I had withdrawn 10 million dollars from his bank account and stuffed it into my largest backpack, all without his knowledge.

The whole time, I couldn’t shake the doubt that I’d made a mistake, believing this could actually go well. But since I had no idea who my enemy was, or if they could find out that I’d broken my part of the deal, I decided to proceed with my plan. When it came to Sophie’s life, I couldn’t afford to take any erratic risks. There was a good chance that her kidnappers only wanted the money, and I had to focus on that. If Jess was involved, I was pretty certain she wouldn’t want to hurt Sophie—or find herself tangled in even deeper legal trouble.

To my growing distress, it wasn’t just everything with Sophie that was spiraling out of control. Each time I went to the bathroom, I bled more. And each time, my heart

ached, now at the realization that it looked like a miscarriage. I stared at it like it was coming from a knife wound. But still, there was a sliver of hope—that the baby might be fine. Several pregnancy blogs had mentioned the possibility of a subchorionic hematoma, and I clung to it as a plausible explanation of my symptoms.

Not being able to share my health scare with Julian made everything feel even more overwhelming. But if I had told him, he'd probably rush me to the hospital for an ultrasound, and I'd end up missing my morning coffee appointment—something I wasn't ready to give up, even in the midst of everything. I knew that no matter what this was, there was no way I could save the baby.

In a haze, I managed to get through the torturous twelve hours. I kept my composure, pushed through the mounting anxiety, and stayed as focused as I could. When the time finally came, I slipped out without drawing much attention to myself. I carefully timed my trip to Starbucks, making sure it seemed casual. Will wouldn't find it odd—after all, I frequented the place regularly to pick up coffee for colleagues at the office. It was part of my routine, something that would make my departure seem perfectly ordinary, even if the weight of what I was about to do was anything but.

I couldn't afford to shake off Will—he'd pick up on something being off. But it seemed like whoever had sent the email was prepared for that. Instead of showing up in person, they'd skillfully slipped a piece of paper into the coffee tray waiting for me. Why not just give me the address straight in the email then? I didn't like that this whole thing felt like a game. I examined the people around, as the stranger could have been in the crowd, but it was pointless because he could have been anyone.

Accepting my fate, I grabbed the paper and quickly punched the address into my phone, still standing in front of the counter. It looked like the location was deep within Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, far out beyond East County. The only other detail was to go there at 3 PM, that same afternoon.

The hope of seeing Sophie—and perhaps even saving her—filled my heart, pushing aside the fear that had been threatening to consume me. There was no turning back now.

I finally arrived at the office, the coffees in hand helping to set a positive tone for the day, for everyone else but myself. “Kali, I have a small request,” I announced walking over to her desk.

She looked up, still chewing on her breakfast muffin, and replied, “What’s that, love?”

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“I need to borrow your car to run an errand this afternoon.”

Kali shot me a puzzled look. “It’s a beater car, so I make no guarantees it’ll get you from point A to B,” she chuckled. “But you can have it,” she tossed her car keys in my direction.

I suddenly noticed Amanda circling our desks. Her tall, statuesque frame and long legs gave her an air of elegance as was the norm. Black, silky hair cascaded down her back, framing her sharp, angular features—high cheekbones, a perfectly sculpted jawline, and full lips. Her eyes, dark and intense, seemed to see right through you, always calculating, always aware. Now they were looking directly at me.

“My office, Benton,” she snapped, her tone sharp and irritated. The anger was clear in her eyes, and it was obvious she wasn’t in the mood for any small talk.

Kali’s eye darted to me, now a bit frightened. Did Amanda overhear our conversation about the car? Was something going wrong with the app?

I honestly didn’t think I could be in a more tragic situation than I already was, so I followed her, somewhat numb to what could transpire. We strutted toward her office without a word.

“Close the door,” she instructed me, then encouraged me to take a seat as if there was no time to spare.

“I received a call today from Julian’s staff,” she informed me.

Shit. This was definitely not good.

“They asked me whether I was selling Hart & Quill to you today for 10 million.” Her gaze cut through me. “I don’t get those kinds of calls every day.” There was nothing easy about her.

“Amanda, I can explain, did you tell them you weren’t?” Worry laced my voice. “I needed the reason.” How dumb of me to even think I could get away with such a poorly thought-out plan.

She didn’t say anything at first, just stared at me as if weighing my words, her expression unreadable. Finally, she let out a slow breath and leaned back in her chair. “I told them I was selling,” she shocked me, her tone still icy. “But you better be prepared for the fallout. Julian’s not an idiot, Lucie.”

I swallowed with relief, my heart pounding.

“I’m guessing you weren’t planning to use the money for a shopping spree?”

I sat silent.

“I,” she said with a triumphant glance, “have instructed Greg to read all employee’s emails since the incident last year.” She was clearly referring to Tarnakis. During that time, I hadn’t told Amanda about an anonymous letter I received at work, and maybe that was what had pushed her to take more control. The fact that I’d kept it to myself only seemed to fuel her need to monitor everything, to dig into the lives of everyone under her command.

I stared at her, wide-eyed and immobilized, like a deer caught in the headlights.

“I have nothing more to add,” she remarked, rising to her feet.

I swallowed my nervousness. Was she really letting me off the hook that easily? It seemed almost unbelievable, especially from someone with such a controlling presence. Sophie had been right: Amanda's drive was fueled by an intense need for control, a trait she shared with many powerful leaders. It was a subtle but undeniable force that shaped her every decision and interaction, pushing her to dominate not just in business, but in every aspect of her life.

"Just maybe one more thing, Lucie," she backtracked, her voice cool but laced with something I couldn't quite place.

I glanced up at her.

"Can you kindly write the address for your tomorrow's interview for me?" She pushed a piece of paper my way.

I didn't have any interviews scheduled the day after, so this could mean just one thing. She knew everything, but she wasn't willing to have a conversation about it. There were a million fierce thoughts in her gaze, and the weight of her unfiltered strength hung heavy, impossible to ignore. I instantly loved her so much more because she was showing such protectiveness toward my friend.

"Sure, Amanda." I gulped, then with my trembling hand, I scribbled down what I remembered from the paper. The act of writing it out made me feel less drained, less alone.

She leaned in to ensure she could read it precisely before finally letting me go.

"Thank you," I forced out, our eyes locking for the final time. I hadn't prepared a backup plan, but I knew this was likely it. The woman who had already shaped so much of my life was now, once again, using her power to watch over it.

“Take care, Lucie,” she said, her words carrying a weight of emphasis.

At that moment, I just wanted to crumble into Amanda’s arms and cry. To confess that it had all become too overwhelming, that I was terrified I wouldn’t be able to save Sophie who was already fragile because of her health. But instead, I stood up to leave, drawing from Amanda’s strength, because it felt like the only way to move forward—to give this ransom exchange my absolute best. And that’s when I felt it—a heavy, sudden gush of blood.

The weight of grief crashed down on me, as I realized, with heartbreaking certainty, that I had lost our baby.

Grief, to some extent, helped to numb my fear. I’d once compared it to molten lava, a searing, unstoppable force. But now, it was something else—quiet, numbing, like a weight pressing down on my chest, leaving little room for anything else.

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After I'd finished a heartfelt letter to Julian—my just-in-case goodbye that included the address where I'd be going—and left it on top of my desk for him to find—around two, I quietly slipped into the garage to take Kali's car. And it was surprisingly easier than I'd expected because Will didn't foresee another attempt to get away. This made sense, because after the tabloids dissected my personal life, it would have been temporary insanity to repeat the same mistake.

Kali was correct—her car was the epitome of a clunker. The seats looked stained, and the engine hummed with a peculiar rhythm, making me wonder just how long it had been since she'd had it checked. It coughed to life with a hesitant roar, rattling like a creature reluctant to wake. The sight of it made me miss Bradley—the kind friend who could breathe life back into any car, which also included my old Miata. He had a way with engines, a gift for coaxing them back to life with a few deft turns of a wrench and a bit of patience. I was equally certain he'd try to talk me out of this plan, if only he knew where I was headed.

Resolute to still go ahead, I exited the parking garage. Soon, I passed the city limits of San Diego, steering eastward. My backpack shifted in the back seat, a not-so silent companion. With my eyes still on the road, I let my imagination drift to Sophie spinning joyfully in her bridesmaid dress. In that vision, she was whole, radiant, and carefree—healthy and happy in a way I desperately wished was real. That day, she'd even catch my flower bouquet because I felt that Mark would be the one companion she'd choose for life.

The further I drove, the more I ventured inland. After passing Santee, I found myself entering Lakeside, a quiet, rural community tucked away from the city's pulse. The road narrowed, flanked by rolling hills dotted with patches of dry grass and the

occasional ranch house. The air smelled of earth and sagebrush, and the landscape stretched wide, a vast contrast to the cramped confines of city life. Small, weathered homes sat nestled between overgrown trees, their lawns unkempt, giving the place an almost forgotten charm. A few old barns and rusted fences dotted the horizon, and everything felt still as if time itself had slowed down out here.

The signal on my phone had dropped to a single bar as I turned onto a road that was little more than a dusty path, littered with rocks and dirt. The car jolted with each bump, its frame rattling under the strain. I'd most likely damage the undercarriage, but I'd deal with paying Kali later.

"You've arrived at your destination," The GPS announced. I came to a stop, now surrounded by treacherous silence. The address seemed to match, yet there were no houses in sight that corresponded to the number that stranger had given me.

I waited for what seemed to stretch on forever, now even doubting that the kidnappers would show up. Had the email been real?

But soon, a rustling sound came from the trees, and a short man with curly hair and a distinctly tanned face stepped into view. He looked in his 20's, like a young kid that got on the wrong side of things. "Get out of the car," he yelled. Fear ricocheted through my body. It was as if I'd suddenly floated out of it and was watching my life from the outside. I'd never been this vulnerable.

"Leave the backpack where it's at." He leveled a gun at me, the cold metal glinting in the sun. I soon noticed that he wasn't alone.

"Put your arms up," his companion, a much taller man order, as he approached me to search my pockets.

He shoved me around so hard that I face-planted into the rocks, my knees now

bruised, my hands turning raw. As if the pain wasn't enough, he forced my face into the dirt, the gritty earth scraping against my skin. "The money is in the backpack, so I am here for Sophie," I murmured into the ground.

Then I heard her. Jess. "Bring her in," she ordered, her voice cutting through the air.

But before I could react, a wave of intense, uncontrollable pain surged through my body. It was as if every nerve fired at once, locking me in place. My muscles seized, and I found myself trapped—unable to move, my body rebelling against me. Then I most likely fainted.

I woke to the sound of water dripping, slow and rhythmic. A foul, unmistakable stench hung in the air.

"Lucie."

Sophie's face hovered above me, her voice a distant echo. For a moment, I wondered if this was death—or something just as strange, a nightmare I couldn't wake from. But no, she was right in front of me, her features sharp against the dim light of what appeared to be an elongated, shadowed space—some kind of storage room, cold and unfamiliar. She looked dreadful—dirty with mud, her face seemingly covered in bruises, as if they had beaten her up.

"Wake up, friend." She pleaded.

My strength had returned as I pushed myself upright. "Sophie, you're alive," I breathed, my voice thick with relief. But that relief quickly gave way to a creeping anxiety as I took in our surroundings. The walls were rough and uneven, coated in grime, and the air carried the faint scent of metal and earth. Every sound, every shift of movement, seemed to bounce off the cold stone, amplifying the sense of isolation.

“Does anyone know you came here?” She whispered as if someone could hear us.

I opened my eyes wide, to let her know this would be a lie. “No, absolutely not.” I didn’t trust it that we were there alone. Only slightly I nodded my head yes and she seemed to understand.

“Are you injured?” She examined my limbs. “They tasered you just like they did me, then threw you down.”

I shook my head, then mentally checked in with my body. It didn’t seem like anyone had attempted to hurt me. However, my stomach tightened painfully, cramping in waves that felt different from the sharpness of a blow. It was as if my body itself was betraying me, its rhythmic contractions a stark reminder of what was happening. A deep, hollow sensation began to settle in my chest—more grief.

“Sophie are you okay? Have you had water, and food?” I skimmed her, now blinking my eyelids to stop any weakness in tracks. Her mouth looked cotton-like, and her usually elastic skin had turned dry and pale. Without being a doctor, I could recognize the signs of intense dehydration.

“Not for two days,” she acknowledged. “She knows that she’s stretching my life to the maximum.” She was now referring to Jess. A sulking sigh escaped her lips before she pulled me into a hug, seeking comfort in the embrace. “I knew they were asking for money for my life, but I didn’t know they’d bring you here, Lucie.” She hardly murmured.

Then it hit me. Jess had planned this carefully to get both in this situation. And I hated the fact that I knew exactly why. She wasn’t going to let us walk like the email promised. She was letting us perish here, alone, without any help. The realization sank in like a stone in my chest—likely, they’d run off with the backpack, hoping that nobody would ever find us here in this grave.

I had to do something to take care of Sophie, to get us more time, so Amanda could find us. There was a solid chance that by now, people were looking for us already. “I am going to get some water in you,” I blurted out, “Urine is not the best to hydrate, but it’s something,” the words sounded ridiculous even to me, but in that moment, it felt like the only logical solution. I wasn’t ready to give up—no matter how gross the idea.

She smiled with her beautiful round eyes. “Lucie, you’re a fighter, you’ve always been.”

Could I make a clean catch with everything going on? I had to because Sophie’s life depended on it. Her heart condition made her especially vulnerable, and even the strongest people would be drained after two days without water.

“I contemplated drinking some of the water that’s dripping here. But it’s probably coming from a broken septic. The real estate agent in me discouraged me.” She remarked.

I scanned the darkness, desperately searching for any way out. The only light came from a flickering bulb, casting more shadows than it chased away.

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“We’re in a shaft below the earth.” She read my mind.

“Is it part of a house? Do you know if there is a structure above?” In that case, Amanda would have a solid chance at finding us, especially with Julian’s help.

“No, Lucie.” She sighed. “If you really want to know, the entrance of it is hardly noticeable. Jess made sure I knew this as she locked us in here. It’s hidden with overgrown vines, in the middle of a forest. And there’s no structure above it, nothing that would indicate there’s anything beneath.”

I searched her eyes, now filled with intense fear.

“She’s wrong,” I retorted. “We’ll both find a way out. We could try to dig our way out of here,” I contemplated, the words, however, feeling desperate as they left my lips. What if the walls collapsed on us? Tree roots snaked their way into the shaft, their gnarled fingers reaching through the earth. Maybe it was better to conserve our energy, wait for rescue, and hope we weren’t too far gone.

She seemed to agree, her face etched with the same grim reality. “The chances of it working are extremely low, Lucie. And I honestly don’t have the strength anyway.” She seemed too weak to sit up now, her body slumped against the cold, stanching walls. I could see the exhaustion etched on her face, the toll this place was taking on her. I couldn’t let her fade away, not like this—not when there was still a chance.

My eyes moistened as the words slipped out. “You’re going to be standing next to me at my wedding... and then I’ll be there for yours.” It was as if I could already hear

Mark's voice, filled with desperation, fighting to save the love of his life, to keep her by his side.

"We're not going to die here." I grabbed the sharpest rock I could find and began digging into the dry earth, desperate to create something—anything—Sophie could drink from. I only needed to get her a little bit of time, till they'd find us.

"I'll try to keep it as clean from blood as possible, I am really sorry." At this point, disgust didn't matter when she'd had no water in two days.

"Blood?" She frowned, her brow furrowing with concern. "You're bleeding?"

I took a shaky breath, my words tumbling out in a quiet confession. First, I didn't want to tell her, but maybe I too, needed the warmth and comfort of her words. "Sophie, I started miscarrying a few days ago. At least, it seems like it."

She blinked rapidly, clearly now sharing my sorrow. "I am so sorry, Lucie. Sometimes God makes decisions we don't agree with, but we have to accept them." I couldn't help but think she was also trying to make peace with our situation. "I used to resist so hard, you know, my fate. I was so angry that I couldn't just be like everyone else."

I assumed she was now speaking about her heart issues.

"But at one point, I surrendered. It made everything easier."

I nodded. "You're right, I think there's a good chance that our baby would have had many risks because of Julian's addiction," I squeezed her hand back. "Still, I think I was ready to be a mom, you know. I started picturing Julian holding the baby, and I think my abortion then also became impossible because it was his child."

“You’ll be one, someday.” She comforted me. Was it a true prediction? Would I ever feel Julian’s touch again, his warmth, his presence? I remembered how he’d told me so boldly that he’d gotten sober because of me, and for a brief moment, it made me worry that he’d go down a dark path if I didn’t return.

“Has he sobered out in the rehab?” She asked.

“Yeah, he’s come back, Sophie. He seems to be in a better place.”

She seemed content with that, not having energy for more.

Silence fell between us. I tried to shake off the iron grip of fear, but the reality of our situation pressed down on me like a weight I couldn’t escape. The fact that we were trapped underground, hidden away and so hard to find, only deepened the sense of dread that clawed at my chest.

“Let’s pray,” she suggested gently. “Prayer’s helped me survive quite a few dark moments.” She looked like she might collapse at any moment, her exhaustion evident. We sat in silence, speaking with an unknown higher power, until a sense of relief slowly washed over us. “Lucie, please tell Mark that I love him. But he’s going to have to find someone else, I want that for him.”

I wanted to stop her and tell her not to think this way, but I let her continue. If this was important to her, I’d hear her out.

“Tell my parents they did a great job with raising me. My life was a dream, and it’s only fair it didn’t last forever. My two dogs, they’re my babies, so Mom has to take care of them.”

I blinked hard to stop my tears from flowing uncontrollably.

“Jess will get hers eventually, but tell her I forgive her. Deep down, she’s also human,” she added graciously.

I couldn’t breathe through my tears now, the weight of it all settling in. Even in the middle of her worst nightmare, she remained generous, and kind—her spirit untouched by the evil surrounding us. However, I knew Jess wouldn’t face forgiveness in the aftermath. No, she’d face Julian’s wrath—he wouldn’t stop until she was dead.

“Know that being here with you is all I could have wished for,” her voice was now barely above a whisper. “When you get out, please don’t carry any guilt. Don’t weaken yourself with crying, either.”

“No, Sophie,” I wailed, the pain in my chest rising, raw and uncontrollable. “I love you. We’ll be alright, I promise.” By convincing her, I could also convince myself.

“Julian’s going to find you,” she whispered, her voice barely more than a breath.

Amidst the horror of it all, I let her fall asleep because it seemed like the best decision medically. I left my hand on her wrist, trying to feel her pulse, as if the simple act of touching her might anchor her to this world. Her skin felt cold under my fingers, and the steady rhythm of her heartbeat—slow, but steady—was the only thing reassuring me that she was still with me. The silence between us was suffocating, but I couldn’t tear myself away.

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I didn't know how long I sat there. It seemed the night had descended on us, even though there was no way of telling. Fatigued myself, I leaned against the wall of the shaft, my eyes never leaving Sophie as I continued to monitor her. Each breath she took seemed like a small victory. Trying to stay awake felt like the smart thing to do, in case someone was calling from the outside. I didn't know if my voice could carry all the way up, but I wasn't going to let the chance slip away either.

I placed my hand on my stomach, gently speaking to the baby, my voice soft but filled with hope. I wondered if he or she could still be there, if the little life I carried was somehow still alive. At this point it seemed like an illusion already. "I am sorry," I whispered, my voice trembling. "I hope you know I loved you beyond words. I would have never let you go." My eyes welled up with tears. "Julian loves you too, he would have been beyond honored to be your dad."

The silence around me was deafening, and in that moment, I couldn't escape the crushing weight of helplessness. More time passed in excruciating fear, next to my friend who seemed almost lifeless.

"Lucie," Sophie suddenly murmured, rolling to her side, her voice soft and distant. "I had a dream..." She paused, as if searching for the right words. "I think the white light is real. It felt like a tunnel, calling me with its warmth. I think it's going to end soon."

Her words sent a chill through me, a mixture of confusion and sheer dread.

"That's it," I muttered to myself, as I stood up, the desperation pushing me forward. I was about to go pee in the hole I'd dug earlier—my body had been holding on for too

long. “I am going to get water in you,” I decided resolutely, turning my attention back to Sophie. She needed fluids, and no matter what it took, I wasn’t going to let her fade without doing everything I could to save her.

That’s when a sudden sound jolted us both—a faint scraping, followed by a distant thud. Next, we heard a creaking sound, like old wood bending, and the unmistakable growl of barking dogs. A flashlight suddenly flooded the shaft, slicing through the darkness like a beacon.

A rush of relief hit me all at once.

“Anybody down there?” A deep voice shouted, echoing through.

“We’re down here,” I bellowed back, certain the sound carried far enough for them to hear us. A man in a uniform, his face half-shadowed by the beam of his flashlight, started climbing down on a rope. “We’re coming.” Others seem to be waiting on top, ready to follow.

Too excited, I turned to Sophie, only to find her immobile, her eyes closed, her breathing shallow.

“Sophie?” I whispered urgently, shaking her gently. “Sophie, please stay with me. Help’s here, we’re going to get out.” I touched her cheek, my fingers trembling.

“Get a doctor here, now!” I shouted, my voice breaking. “She’s not waking up! Please, hurry!”

The men moved with practiced speed. The medic descended almost immediately, a large duffel bag in hand, and knelt beside Sophie. His hands moved swiftly over her body, searching for any sign of life. “No pulse,” he shouted, his words cutting me deep. Time slowed. My vision narrowed. My dearest friend, the woman I had fought

to save, was slipping away, and there was nothing I could do but watch. Then I remembered Sophie's words, how she'd insisted that we pray, and so I did so fast.

"Get the AED ready," the medic barked, his voice commanding, unwavering. He reached into the duffel bag, pulling out the defibrillator with practiced ease. The sharp scent of antiseptic and the clatter of the equipment filled the shaft.

The AED whirred to life, the display screen flickering as it analyzed her heart rhythm. "No shock advised," the machine chimed, then repeated: "No shock advised." The flat line on the screen mocked us, the absence of life so glaring.

"Chest compressions," the medic barked, and his hands pressed down hard, rhythmically, into Sophie's chest. Her bodyjolted with each compression, but the line on the monitor stayed stubbornly flat. The medic didn't stop, though—he just kept going, relentless.

"Nothing," the woman assisting him said, her voice tinged with resignation. I couldn't help but notice the glance they exchanged, one that spoke volumes—an unspoken acknowledgment that hope was slipping away.

"God, please don't take her away. Not yet," I said loudly. I touched her bracelet as if the cherished item could help the situation.

"Give it another shot," the medic muttered, barely glancing at me, already back to his work. The AED beeped again, louder this time, more insistent.

"Shock advised," the device suddenly announced.

"Come on, Sophie," I whispered desperately, my voice breaking. Just then, I felt Julian's arms wrap around me, pulling me gently into an embrace. "Baby," he murmured, his voice soft and comforting. I let myself ease into his warmth, but my

gaze never left Sophie. Julian's scent wafted into my nose, comforting and familiar, grounding me in the midst of the chaos. I'll be here through the darkest grief, he'd said. And he was.

The AED beeped again, this time louder, more insistent.

The monitor blinked once.

Twice.

And then, faintly but undeniably—there it was.

A flicker. A tiny, fragile pulse.

"She's alive." The medic blurted, as the nurse exhaled.

"We've got a pulse. Keep her breathing, we're not out of the woods yet." The medic instructed. "Beta blockers, now."

I exhaled loudly. The nurse immediately sprang into action, grabbing the medication while the medic kept his hands on her chest, monitoring her vital signs with razor-sharp focus. The monitor continued to show her heart beating. "Let's get her to the hospital," he instructed.

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It seemed that he was confident Sophie could make it through the transport. Still watching that they got her out safely, I flung myself into Julian's arms, the flood of relief crashing over me like a wave.

"Baby," he repeated, his voice steady but tinged with concern. His warmth surrounded me, the powerful, unyielding presence of him anchoring me in the disarray. Julian's tall frame felt like a fortress, his muscles firm beneath his tailored jacket offering something to lean on.

A man, who also seemed to be part of the medic's group, approached us.

"I am fine," I assured him. "I just need a moment with Julian."

I searched his eyes, trying to find the courage to speak the words that had been tearing at me. I couldn't keep this secret any longer. The medic understood and gave us a moment of privacy.

"Julian," I said, my voice a whisper, thick with emotion. "I think I am having a miscarriage." I blurted, and his eyes instantly flashed with pain.

It wasn't unusual of me these days to end up in a hospital bed. The sound of beeping machines surrounded me and filled the sterile air. Despite the blanket draped over me, the room was unbearably cold, the chill seeping into my bones. Albeit Julian's pleas, the ER wouldn't allow him to come into the exam room. So, I knew he was pacing around in the waiting room, drawing glances.

The wait felt like forever. I made a clumsy attempt to reach for the bag with a new

temporary phone, but my hand couldn't quite stretch far enough due to the IV in my arm. I still couldn't believe it. Jess, the girl who'd worked at our office, the one I'd trusted, had gone so far as to try to commit two cold-blooded murders.

The nurse popped in: "Honey, do you need anything?"

I shook my head.

"Let me bring you a warm blanket," she suggested caringly, then disappeared again.

My mind suddenly drifted to Sophie. Would she be okay in the end? The evidence that she could recover was strong—her heart had started beating again, however faintly, and they'd been able to stabilize her. But would it be enough?

The curtain opened once again, and the nurse stepped in with a soft smile. "Here," she said, placing a blanket gently over my legs. The warmth of the fabric spread across my body, and for the first time in what felt like forever, I allowed myself to relax. It felt good to not have to do anything, to just be cared for.

"What are you here for?" She queried.

I guessed she'd just come in for a new shift and wasn't up to date. "A likely miscarriage." Acknowledging it made it more real—more final.

"They're trying to get you in for an ultrasound, and we're waiting for the bloodwork," she informed me gently. "I am sure this is hard on you." She sent me an empathetic glance.

I could feel the tears welling up, but I fought them back. I wanted to stay strong, at least for a moment longer. "You know, it feels... definite," I whispered, my voice breaking. I felt the lump in my throat growing, threatening to choke me.

The nurse paused for a moment, then asked quietly, “How old are you?”

“26,” I muttered, feeling the weight of the number. I was approaching 27, the age when people often went through major transformations. as 27 was infamous for the “27 Club.”

“Imagine, my friends these days are having kids in their early 40s, and it’s gone without any problems.” She tried to offer comfort. “If it doesn’t work out now, it will in the future.” She attempted to comfort me. “You have plenty of time.”

But I’d grown so attached to my baby that I wanted this particular one. It wasn’t just the idea of motherhood—it was the connection, the bond that felt so real, as if I could feel their love from within me. It was hard to explain, but it kept me going. The baby had become my anchor through Julian’s rehab. I spoke to it in the darkest moment of my life when I was starting to feel like it would be one of the last things I’d do before my own death. While everything else seemed to be falling apart, this little life inside me was the one thing that gave me clarity, purpose. It was painful to feel it now dripping out of me, literally.

When the nurse disappeared again, I sat there for just a little longer. By now, it had to be around 3 AM in the morning because I was bone-weary, yet not ready to sleep because I needed to have answers. Soon, a young male nurse slid the curtains open, and then rolled up a wheelchair. Without hesitation, he guided it toward me, his expression neutral but kind. “Having a bad day?” He queried me while he rolled me through the sterile corridors.

“Something like that,” I responded meekly.

“It’s all about the attitude, isn’t it?” He tried to cheer me up.

They said that time healed all wounds, but this was just a bunch of bullshit.

We arrived at the ultrasound room, where an older woman with a thick accent instructed me to lie down next to the machine. She closed the door behind us as I bared my stomach.

“What brings you here?” She queried.

“Bleeding,” I let her know. “In pregnancy,” I clarified.

“How far along?” Even though she’d appeared stoic, I sensed a hint of empathy.

“Around six weeks,” I guessed, though I was less certain now than I had been before. Planned Parenthood had put me somewhere around five weeks and three days, so I added a few extra days to give her an accurate estimate.

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She squeezed a bottle of warm thick liquid on my stomach. Minutes passed. The technician moved the transducer over the gel-slicked surface of my belly, the small device pressing into my skin with practiced precision.

“Your bladder is nice and full,” she seemed satisfied. Indeed, it was, because it hurt a lot when she pressed on it. The screen flickered with a grainy, black-and-white image, an abstract mess of shapes and shadows. I stared at it, knowing it meant valuable information, but there was no way I could make sense of it. The technician remained focused, adjusting the transducer as she scanned, her expression unreadable. The only sound was the soft click of buttons and the low hum of the machine.

Briefly, she turned on the sound. For a moment, there was nothing—just a quiet, steady hiss from the speakers. And then, through the static, I heard it. A distinct, rhythmic thumping. Fast, steady, and unmistakable.

Thum-thum. Thum-thum.

My heart stuttered in my chest. There it was—a heartbeat. But it didn’t make sense. I knew I had miscarried. I felt it. The bleeding, the pain. Tears welled up in my eyes, and she noticed.

“Was this planned?”

I knew I looked young—the kind of young that made people ask questions, sometimes even younger than my actual age. No wonder she was asking then. And I wasn’t wearing Julian’s ring either. As much as I wanted to wear it, to have that

symbol of him, of us, when I went to face Sophie's kidnappers, I knew I couldn't. They'd strip me off it the moment they'd see me.

"Not really," I admitted, my voice cracking. "I contemplated abortion. Twice. But I couldn't bring myself to go through with it." I paused. "After that, I felt determined to keep this baby." Pain, there was more pain in my heart now.

How ironically bitter it all was. When I'd finally reached the certainty that I'd carry Julian's child no matter what, it had slipped away. The sound, it had to most likely be my own heart.

She looked at me with sympathy, and I let go of any lingering hope. "Go use the bathroom, then come back without your bottom half." I followed her instructions in the hope I'd soon be done with the exam.

The transvaginal part of the ultrasound felt even longer. We barely spoke after that. She conducted what seemed like a routine exam to her, then quietly let me go, saying little else.

I knew Julian by now was probably going crazy. Now unplugged from the ivy, I let him know via message that we were not just waiting on results.

"Sophie is okay so far," he let me know. "Everyone is here, the Dickens family, and even Miss Hart."

I could only imagine how chaotic the scene must have been at the hospital. I felt a deep sense of gratitude toward Amanda. She had played a crucial role in speeding up the search by sharing the information I'd given her, and in doing so, she had most likely saved Sophie's life.

The curtain opened again, and a sharp-looking doctor in his 40s stepped in, his

expression professional but soft. For a brief, fleeting moment, I wished I could stop him from speaking, from delivering the final, inevitable news. A part of me clung desperately to the hope that maybe—just maybe—the baby had somehow survived. But in fact, I already knew this would be just a formality. He glanced at me briefly before turning his focus to the chart in his hands.

“The test results confirmed a miscarriage,” he announced gently. “HCG’s dropped and there’s no more sign of a gestational sac on imaging.”

I nodded, then blinked my eyes extra hard to not look like a wreck.

“There’s no internal bleeding, and I think you are at the tail end of it,” he consoled me. “It happens in 25% of pregnancies, and it does not mean anything about your fertility.” He assured me next.

I couldn’t help but wonder if Julian’s addiction had contributed to the loss. Or could it have been my stress? Did I perhaps drink more coffee than was allowed, unknowingly? I’d been so careful...

“I want to quickly scan your liver, and then we’ll get you out of here,” he informed me, his voice calm and steady as he wheeled a portable machine toward my bed.

It didn’t take long to finish the test. “Just as I expected,” he affirmed, glancing at the screen. “Despite the pain in your upper quadrant, there’s no internal bleeding in your liver either.”

I nodded, then thanked him. A sense of detachment was slowly creeping in, and I could feel myself becoming more and more disconnected.

“The nurse will bring your checkout documents,” he relayed before vanishing. “I am deeply sorry for your loss, Lucie.” He gave me one last glance.

Next, I went through the motions of the checkout process, my senses numb. I had been expecting this moment, but even so, I wasn't ready for it. As I collected my things, I lingered in the room for a moment, the weight of the silence pressing on me. No one would understand it, but I needed to stay here for just another minute. Say goodbye to the hope of what could have been, to the future I'd dreamed of but never got to hold.

Julian pulled me into a warm embrace, after placing my favorite coffee drink on my nightstand. "Hey sleepyhead, it's a nice day. Would you want to go for a walk?"

I'd been cooped up inside for what felt like days, surviving on peanut butter cookies while pouring myself into what was shaping up to be the first manuscript I'd ever finish. I had finally taken Mrs. Falloway's advice to heart: write for my own purpose, not just to make a living.

California had in place a law that allowed workers to take five days off to recover from reproductive loss. I thought this was progressive and incredibly humane, because truly, I was in no place to show up for life, and I doubted that other women in my situation were too. I grieved in ways that worked for me, even if at times my behavior worried Julian.

While he had taken my miscarriage hard, he recovered faster than I did. He seemed to feel certain that we could get me pregnant again, which frankly, was likely true. And he was ready to try again with me, in a way that would align with my happiness. He'd also be sober, which was the responsible way to have children.

So yes, there was a bittersweet silver lining to everything. I could get busy again, without feeling overbearing nausea and fatigue. And I no longer had to worry about the statistics in the articles I'd read. They remained my best justification for my loss.

I cried the hardest when I was alone in the tub, hidden from the world. There, with

nothing to shield me—naked and exposed—the pain felt sharper, more real. It was as though the water reflected not just my body, but my soul laid bare. It was as if I could see myself, stripped down to the core. I felt my uterus become hollow as the bleeding gradually ceased over the following days.

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Julian inched his face close to mine. “Would you want to get lunch with me?” From the looks of it, he was not planning to go to the office. Maybe he was starting to really worry that I’d never get out of our apartment.

There was life out there. The sun was still shining, or at least I imagined it was, despite the heavy curtains blocking it. I’d spent the full five days writing here, in our bedroom, as if the world outside didn’t exist. And it had been what I needed, to finally let go.

He didn’t wait for my response about lunch. “They got Jess this morning. She made it across the border to Mexico. They were headed to Rio with her boyfriend and his brother. We think she manipulated them both to get back at Mark.”

I had never doubted that his team would find her eventually. Still, I felt immense relief. Jess was done, and with her, the chaos she had brought into our lives.

“Oliver’s team took them all out in self-defense,” Julian noted, a hint of satisfaction in his tone. “So, there’s nothing left to worry about.” His deep-set eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Really?” I gave him a faint smile.

“Mexican police verified everything,” he squeezed my hand. “Nobody is getting into trouble.”

I was pretty sure it came with a hefty payment on the side.

“Thanks, Julian. She got what she deserved.” I felt no pity. Not after how coldly they’d tried to kill both of us with Sophie. There was a real chance I could have died down there, alone in that rat-infested shaft, next to my friend’s lifeless body. If possible, I never wanted to talk about Jess again.

“Is Sophie’s dad feeling any better?” I switched the subject. Mr. Dickens had requested extra protection for Sophie until they could find Jess, which meant the family house was practically surrounded by a SWAT team.

“Mark proposed—so now he’s got other things to worry about.” A subtle smile played on his lips.

My mouth kicked up for the first time in what felt like days.

“There’s also flowers for you in the living room.”

Judging from his look, these were important flowers.

“From?”

“Why don’t you go take a look?” he gently nudged me.

“Okay?” Feeling a little more awake, I pushed myself up from the bed and made my way out of the room. Walking up the steps, I noticed my breathing felt back to normal again. He didn’t follow, so it got me even more curious why he was leaving me to it.

“I’m sorry,” Valentina blurted out, standing up abruptly from our couch.

She looked herself. A girl with distinct supermodel qualities. A showstopper. A diva.

“I never doubted you,” I offered a small smile.

“Look Lucie, this whole thing with Bradley. It’s so stupid.” She approached with an enormous apology bouquet. “I should have been there for you through everything.”

“Val,” I grinned, “I get it. Love’s painful.”

She let out a frustrated sigh, leaving the bouquet down in my hands. It was big enough to kill someone with a pollen allergy.

“I just— I don’t know why I didn’t see it. Why didn’t I realize how much I was hurting you?”

I sat beside her. “Maybe you needed some space. Has Bradley left already?” I couldn’t help but be curious.

“Yeah, it feels like he left a hole in my chest,” she sulked, her voice softer now. “But this is unrequited love. And it’s almost ironic, Lucie. I’ve always been the one to break boys’ hearts. And now he’s breaking mine. I can’t seem to be able to get him out of my head.” Her face reddened. “Still, it doesn’t justify how I treated you.”

I looked at her, feeling a sharp pang of sympathy. It was hard to see Val like this—vulnerable. She’d always been the confident one, the one who could handle anything. Seeing her like this made me realize how deep of a connection she had to feel. This sucked. I would have wanted to see her happy.

“Lucie, do you know?” She sent me an honest glance, her eyes holding something difficult, something unspoken. She then looked around the room, as if expecting Julian to be nearby. From the looks of it, he was giving us the space to have our girl talk, staying out of earshot.

I shook my head. I wasn’t entirely sure what she was trying to say. “No, but tell me,” I squeezed her hand to reassure her that it was okay to share whatever was on her

mind. I was grateful that we were starting to find our way back to our friendship.

She glanced around once more as if making sure this conversation was meant to stay just between us. “He’s never told you how he felt because he wanted you to make the choice, to figure out what was best for you. But I think you deserve to know the truth.” She paused, her voice softer now.

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I furrowed my forehead, confusion washing over me.

“I think he is not over you.” Val emphasized the “you,” making sure it resonated.

Suddenly, I felt sweat accumulate in my palms, the familiar warmth creeping up my skin as the weight of the moment hit me. My chest tightened, and I suddenly sank into a flashback—memories of us, carefree and alive, in Hawaii. The sound of the ocean, the sun warming our skin, the way we laughed without a care, as if nothing could touch us. It had been a perfect story... if I hadn't already given my heart to someone else. My Hawaiian prince, I used to call him.

“Lucie?” Valentina's voice brought me back, concerned. “You okay?”

I swallowed, my hands still clammy. “No, not at all.” I mustered just that. I'd always seen it in Bradley's eyes—the love he had for me. I never questioned it, not really. It was there, in the way he looked at me, in the little things he did, in the way his body always seemed to mirror mine when we were together. But I'd never really seen it, not until now. Not until Valentina's words brought it into sharp focus.

“Did he tell you this?” I pressed. I hated the fact that any of this could cause him pain.

“Not directly,” she admitted, “but he's confessed that he loves another girl, and that's why he says he can't see me. And there's just nobody else in his life but you. It just makes sense. Do you see it too?”

“We have a connection, Val,” I confessed. “But I can't be right for him because I

love Julian. I'm trying to understand what it all means on a deeper level, but I'm not ready to face it just yet. What am I supposed to do with all of this, you know?" I shrugged my shoulders in frustration. "I want him in my life as a friend, and I think we'd both prefer that over having nothing at all."

Val jumped as we heard Julian's footsteps before he appeared in the doorway. "Sorry to interrupt, girls, but Mr. Dickens is on the line. He wants to thank Lucie personally," Julian exclaimed, handing me his cell. Unlike me, he seemed full of energy, dressed in an impeccably tailored suit and a checkered scarf. He flashed us both a smile so charming it could melt the room. My fiancé, my everything.

Valentina shot me an encouraging glance.

I took the phone from him. "Hi, Mr. Dickens," I couldn't help but sound weak-voiced, my words barely more than a whisper. My mind was consumed by Val's revelation, making it difficult to concentrate on anything else. A wave of guilt washed over me, leaving me feeling exposed and unsettled.

"Lucie, it's so good to hear from you!" Sophie's father's voice was warm with sincerity. "I can't begin to express how thankful I am for everything you've done to save my daughter. What a truly heroic act on your part."

His joy was enough for me. "No worry Mr. Dickens, we all love Sophie."

"I promised to award 20 million dollars to whoever led us to her." He continued.

Well, I'd saved him money for sure...

"I want you to have it," he announced. "I'd be truly offended if you say no. Please accept it from me as a reward for your courage, for bringing my child home."

I hesitated. "Mr. Dickens, that's too much. Sophie is my friend anyway." Truly, I'd

go into a fire for her without any reward.

Both Julian and Valentina slipped away to the kitchen area to fetch her a coffee. I couldn't shake the feeling that Julian was already aware of this generous proposal. He appeared relaxed, but I could sense a hint of curiosity in him, as if he was subtly eavesdropping on our conversation.

“My daughter means everything to me. You took action that was beyond brave. I am not going to be missing the money, Lucie, if that's what you're worried about.”

After more than five years as Julian's financial advisor, I knew he'd likely amassed a fortune. Still, this had to be a significant withdrawal from his bank account. “Mr. Dickens, it just doesn't feel right to profit from her situation.” I objected. Part of me resisted not just the offer, but the idea of taking that kind of money. Maybe it was fear—fear of losing myself, of losing my purpose in the process.

“Nonsense, Lucie,” he replied, his tone warm yet resolute. “Sophie mentioned you're planning a big purchase, and she insists we make it happen. Besides, we're practically family at this point.”

To be honest, I could really use the money to buy Hart & Quill. But it didn't take long for me to realize how unrealistic my goal was—trying to make it on my own, especially with an MBA soon taking up most of my time. I knew I wasn't going to come close to the amount I'd initially set for myself.

Julian shot me another look, his eyes filled with quiet encouragement as if silently urging me to accept. I could almost hear his voice in my head, making his usual argument—that I was going to be his wife no matter what. That within a day of marrying him, I'd be one of the richest women in California, regardless of anything else. He'd made it crystal clear that a prenuptial agreement wasn't even on the table, according to his principles.

I beamed back at him, feeling a flutter in my chest. It never ceased to amaze me how gorgeous he was, how perfectly nature had designed him, almost as if life had crafted him with intention—perhaps knowing how it had initially put him at a disadvantage.

I exhaled. “Okay, Mr. Dickens. Please know I am grateful.”

“Come celebrate at our house today,” he invited, his voice thick with emotion. “Mark’s engaged to Sophie, in case you didn’t know already.”

“Yes, Julian’s told me. I’m so excited for them, and I’ll be there,” I promised, emerging from the emotional cave I’d built for myself. I was determined to show up, and I definitely intended to bring Valentina along as well. It felt reassuring to know that our friendship had found its footing again.

Julian now appeared completely absorbed in his conversation with her, as they discussed strategies for growing her Poshbabe Boutique. His addiction, at least for the moment, seemed behind him. He seemed ready to face the world once more, one sportscar at a time. I loved him in ways that seemed fated, and unbreakable. Even if it meant constantly wrestling with the ghosts of his past. For now, they seemed asleep—quiet, but never truly gone.

I placed my hand over my stomach, feeling it was the last time I would do so with this pregnancy. I had carried my baby for its entire life, and I would love it for the rest of mine.