



# Out of the Dark

**Author:** Lyla Andrews

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Dark

**Description:** Claire

I left behind my family, my friends, and everything I've ever known for a chance at a new life—one where I wouldn't be under the strict, oppressive rules of the church. But now, I'm barely surviving in the harsh Chicago winter, living out of my car and saving every penny I can in hopes of making a better life for myself.

So when a stranger saves me from certain danger and offers me a place to stay, I can't say no, even if he exemplifies everything I've always been told to avoid.

However, Mark isn't what I expected him to be. Despite his tough exterior, he gently helps me navigate life as I learn what it means to live outside of religious extremity. But what starts as a kind gesture quickly becomes something more, and I find myself wanting him more than I should—even despite his rules and repeated warnings.

**Mark**

I've worked hard to build the life I have, one of independence, indulgence, and pleasure. The only "relationships" I have are short-term, kinky, and no strings attached. So, the last thing I expected to do was offer my home to a woman in need, one who's fifteen years younger than me and who I have no intention of sleeping with.

But it's clear that whatever she ran away from haunts her, and I hate how much it makes me want to take care of her.

Neither of us can fight the undeniable attraction between us for long, but I make it clear that while I'll show her all the things she never got to experience—all the darker sins she's never indulged in—our arrangement must stay strictly physical. However, as the lines begin to blur, I don't know if either of us will get out of this unscathed.

Out of the Dark includes the following tropes: BDSM, age gap (23/38), virgin FMC, soft pleasure Dom, FMC with religious trauma, one bed, and a no-strings-attached relationship (or so they think...)

This is book 2 in the Club Caliber series, but it CAN be read as a standalone.

**Total Pages (Source):** 84

## CHAPTER ONE

### CLAIRE

I don't belong here.

The thought circles through my mind as I navigate the dark, frigid streets, looking down at my phone just frequently enough to make sure I'm driving in the right direction. The phone is cheap, one that barely functions for anything other than calls, texts, and a somewhat usable GPS feature, but it's all I have for now. Well, in addition to the equally junky van I'm driving and whatever I was able to fit in it before I left.

I don't belong here.

Whether I mean this city, this neighborhood, or my general place in life, I'm not sure. It's a gut feeling more than an intentional thought, forming a knot in my stomach that winds tighter and tighter as I'm reminded again of how different all of this is from my real life. Or rather, my old life—the one I left behind. But I can't think about that right now, so I push the feeling away as best as I can. I'll deal with it later.

I squint at the buildings lining the street, trying to make out the numbers in the dark. Deciding I'm close enough to be in the general vicinity of the apartment I need to find, I pull into an empty parking space on the street and grab the pizza bag from my passenger seat.

Delivering pizzas isn't the most glamorous job, but I had to take whatever job I could

get as quickly as possible after I ran away from home, so I'll grin and bear it for now.

The winter air bites at my skin as soon as I open the car door, and I burrow further into my coat as I hurry down the sidewalk. Finally, I spot the correct building and pick up my pace, desperate to return to the warmth of my vehicle.

That familiar emptiness sinks into the pit of my stomach again as I wonder how long it'll be before I can save up enough for my own apartment. The thought doesn't last long, though; it's too cold to focus on anything except the numbness seeping into my skin.

When I step into the apartment building, I'm comforted by the warmer air that surrounds me while at the same time assaulted by a pungent smell that I only recently learned is marijuana, courtesy of my coworkers who smoke it outside the back door of the pizza parlor at any given opportunity.

I find unit 12B, knock on the door, and listen as heavy footsteps approach before the door creaks open. The man smiles—because nobody's ever unhappy to see the pizza delivery person—and thanks me as I hand him the two boxes from my bag. When the door closes, I linger in the hallway for a few minutes longer, soaking up as much heat as I can before making my way back out into the freezing Chicago wind.

The silence of my car is a painful reminder of how alone I am here, but turning on the radio only makes me feel worse since it inundates me with Christmas music or commercials emphasizing how it's "the time of the year to cherish your loved ones." All of it just makes the ache in my chest deepen. This year, the holiday season will be bleak, cold, and lonely.

I could go back home if I wanted to. They'd welcome me back with open arms, especially if I played into their excuses about the temptation of sin, saying that I left because of that temptation rather than telling them the true reason: I wanted freedom

from a life of subservience.

But no, I can't go back, even if returning would mean safety and warmth and security—all things I'm missing here. That's not my home anymore, I'm not the woman they want me to be, and I can't pretend to be that person anymore. If I were to go home, I'd be walking back into an arranged marriage to a man twice my age, a job where I lead Sunday School prayers to a God I'm not sure I believe in, and a lifetime of walking on eggshells to make sure I don't do or say the wrong thing.

They say their love is unconditional, but every word of affection always seemed to have an unspoken asterisk attached to it, noting terms and conditions reliant on obedience.

No matter how tempting a warm bed and a full stomach might be, the freedom from constant chastisement and judgment is worth any obstacles that might come my way.

I just need to get through the winter, save up some money, and find a place to live. Once I do that, I can figure my life out from there.

The bell above the door chimes as I step back into the pizza shop, a small, cramped space filled with the scents of greasy pizza and greasier men. The warmth of the ovens envelops me as I make my way to the back, melting away the biting cold I've been fighting all night.

"Hey, Claire!" one of my coworkers, Nate, calls out from behind the counter. He's tall and lanky, always leaning on something as if standing upright is too much effort. He flicks a flour-dusted hand toward me in a wave. "How'd it go out there? Big tips?"

"Not really," I reply, pulling off my coat and hanging it on the rack near the back door. My voice sounds flat, but I feign a smile anyway. When you've spent your entire adult life faking contentment, it's easy to put on a convincing smile.

"Figures," Nate says with a smirk, elbowing Randy, who's mindlessly fidgeting with a handful of change from the tip jar. "At least you have the option of getting more tips. Just wear something low-cut."

Randy snorts, looking up from the register with a slimy grin that makes me wish I had stayed out in the cold. "Yeah, maybe you oughta try that. I bet you'd rake it in if you got some clothes that actually fit and showed some skin." His gaze falls to my chest, and even though I'm wearing a loose turtleneck sweater, the way his eyes seem to undress me makes my stomach churn.

I freeze, unsure of how to respond before I decide that ignoring them is the best option. I busy myself with folding pizza boxes near the counter. I'm fully aware that I'm an outcast here and have limited knowledge of social norms outside of the community I was raised in, so maybe I'm just missing the joke here, but I can't imagine any woman would laugh along with them like they seem to be expecting me to.

"Man, leave her alone," Nate says, but his tone is more amused than serious, like this is all just part of the nightly routine.

"She knows I'm joking." He turns his attention back toward me, and I cringe internally. "Don't you, Claire?"

I flash another fake smile, cursing myself for my fawning response to stressful situations but not daring to meet his eyes. "Sure."

It's not worth the confrontation. At least, that's what I tell myself as my fingers work mechanically, folding the boxes into neat stacks. I wish I was more confrontational, especially now that I'm on my own in a big city, but my response to stress is an unfortunate learned behavior—smile, calm everyone down, deflect the negativity as much as possible, and deal with the guilt or anxiety later.

"Man, I'm just saying," Randy adds. "You'd clean up out there if you really tried. Some dude would probably invite you inside right after giving you a twenty." He waggles his eyebrows to emphasize the point and walks over to me.

I focus on the boxes and pretend their conversation doesn't exist, but my silence only seems to spur him on.

## Page 2

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"Come on" he teases, leaning closer. "You can't tell me you don't get propositioned every once in a while." His pupils are massive, and it makes me wonder what sort of substances he decided to partake in tonight. Most of these guys have the habit of doing some sort of drug at the start of their shift.

Before I can respond—or find a way to deflect—the printer near the counter whirs to life, spitting out a new order.

Thank goodness.

Randy grabs the ticket. "Another delivery. Claire, you up for it?"

"Yes," I answer before he can even finish his sentence. As soon as the pizza is cooked and boxed, I'm rushing out the door. The cold outside, as bitter as it is, is much more welcome than the warm but stifling atmosphere inside.

"Don't forget to smile!" Randy calls after me.

I don't respond.

The icy air nips at my cheeks as I make my way to the car, but I don't mind. It feels cleaner out here, untainted by crude jokes and uncomfortable stares. I slide into the driver's seat, set the pizza boxes on the passenger side, and take a deep breath.

For a moment, I sit there in the silence. Maybe I should have stood up for myself. But what if that would've backfired and made everything worse? Back home, standing up for myself was one of the most disrespectful things I could do in the eyes of my

father and the church leaders.

But I'm not back home anymore, and I can't let myself forget that. It's a different world out here.

I shake my head, shoving the thought aside. It doesn't matter. I can't change how I am, and I just need to get through this for as long as it takes me to find a different job.

Starting the car, I glance at the receipt to double-check the address. A smile pulls at the corner of my mouth—not because of anything particularly exciting, but because I know I'll be away from them for at least another thirty minutes.

It's not much, but I'll take it.

## CHAPTER TWO

MARK

"What do you think, should we go with sky blue or more of a powder blue?"

I fight the urge to sigh into the phone. Shane sent me a text with a picture of a tie in each color. They look the fucking same to me, but apparently my best friend is now preoccupied with picking between colors that are almost impossible to distinguish between for wedding decor.

"Do you know how there were articles coming out a few years ago saying mantis shrimp could see a broader spectrum of colors than humans? That's what this feels like right now. You're a shrimp, clearly seeing something that I'm not. They're both light blue to me, dude."

Shane chuckles. "Fair enough. Sorry, I know this isn't anything you care about. Also,



I'm fairly certain that thing about the shrimp seeing more colors was debunked." Of course he would know that.

"Don't be sorry. This is your wedding, and you deserve to feel excited about it."

But even as I say the words, discomfort settles in my chest. Don't get me wrong, I'm excited as hell that he's marrying Dani, but wedding details seem to be the only thing he can talk about lately, even when Dani is more than happy to take the reins on planning. His phone calls and texts have been more sparse, and when they do come in, they all seem to be about him and Dani. It feels like our friendship is getting left on the back burner, and I can't help but worry that it'll stay there even after the wedding is over.

Life changes, priorities shift, and people leave. It's an unfortunate fact of life that I've learned the hard way, but I've always had Shane. He's the only person who's stuck around despite everything, but now life is changing for him in a significant way.

Unable to shake the worry, I find an excuse to hang up the phone before collapsing on the couch. I'm not going to lose Shane, I tell myself. We've been friends since we were kids, and that's not a bond that's easily broken. Things are just... different now. All I need to do is get through the holidays and his wedding with my sanity intact and hope things go back to normal.

I try to distract myself with some TV, but it doesn't do much to fill the quiet emptiness of the apartment. I usually don't mind it, but tonight, I need to get out and do something to work off this agitation buzzing through my body.

Before I can think too hard about it, I'm in my car and headed toward Club Caliber. I'll surely find a way to work out some frustration there. Even if none of my play partners are there, I can, at the very least, watch some sort of kinky scene play out.

Traffic is lighter than usual for a Friday night, but I can't blame anyone for wanting to stay inside. It's cold as fuck, and according to the news, there's a massive snowstorm on the way tomorrow. I'm sure everyone has stocked up on groceries and hunkered down for the weekend.

I'm only a few blocks from the club and sitting at a red light when I see a girl about halfway down the block rushing out of her crappy van with a pizza bag hanging from her arm. All I can really make out from here is her small stature and her long blonde hair whipping in the wind as she pauses on the sidewalk to examine the buildings.

The light turns green, and I inch forward as I watch the girl almost trip over her too-large pants that are dragging on the ground. Movement catches my eye about twenty feet behind her. A man follows her, matching her pace and slowing whenever she does.

Alarm bells go off in my head, and before I can think about what I'm doing, I pull into the space behind the girl's van. She disappears into an apartment building, and the man slows before casually leaning against the wall directly next to the door she just walked through.

I don't like this one bit.

## Page 3

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Normally, I'm one to mind my own business and not interfere with strangers' lives, but every instinct in my body is screaming at me that something is wrong here.

It takes a couple of minutes for the girl to come back out, and as soon as she steps through the doors, the man's mouth moves with words I can't hear and her head jerks up in surprise. I watch as she shakes her head and cautiously steps away, but he doesn't give up. For every step she takes backward, he closes the space between them.

I can't hear what they're saying, but when his hand closes around her arm, his grip tight enough to indent the puffy coat she's shrouded in, I refuse to stand by any longer. I jump out of my car, and both of their gazes snap to me as the sound of my car door slamming cuts through the night air.

"Is there a problem here?" I ask, putting on a menacing expression as I stare the man down.

He lets go of her arm but doesn't back off, even though there's hesitation in his eyes. "Who are you?"

"Does it matter?" I cross my arms over my chest, keeping my back straight and my expression cold. I can already see his resolve breaking. I'm not normally a violent guy, but I sure as hell give off the vibe of someone not to fuck with.

The man mutters something under his breath before storming off in the direction he came.

As soon as I'm sure he's not going to pull a gun on me or otherwise cause more trouble, I look down at the woman.

"Are you okay?"

Her eyes are wide with fear as she simply nods.

"Are you sure? I'm not going to hurt you," I promise her, knowing how intimidating I seem to strangers. My massive stature automatically makes me seem like a threat, so pairing that with my general rough-around-the-edges look, most people tend to keep their distance.

I soften my expression as much as I can, leaving a significant amount of space between us. "I saw him following you before you went into the building there. I just wanted to make sure he didn't... well, you know."

"Thank you," she says in a soft voice. She still doesn't quite make eye contact.

"I'm parked right behind you, so I'll walk you back to your car if that's okay."

She nods and walks that way without another word, wrapping her arms around her midsection as if to shield herself from the cold.

"Thank you again," she says as she opens her door.

"No problem." I'm about to get back into my own car and consider my good deed done for the night when I notice the items covering her back seats. "Wait," I blurt.

Damn it, Mark, what are you doing? Just get in the car and leave the poor girl alone.

She pauses and furrows her brow at me. Her massive coat covers her neck and chin,

and her hat is pulled down over her forehead, but even though I'm unable to see half of her face, I can tell she's beautiful. And young. Much too young for me—not that I was looking to pick up a woman by saving her from a predatory asshole anyway.

"I don't mean to pry, but are you living out of your van?"

Her gaze drops to the ground. "Yes. I'm just trying to save up enough for a place right now. No big deal."

"Are you from around here?" I ask. The out-of-state license plate answers my question before she confirms the answer.

"No."

I don't know why I think about it or why I even care, but I say, "Well, I'm not sure if you know this, but there's a massive snowstorm coming tomorrow. It's probably not safe for you to be staying in your car."

For the first time tonight, she looks directly at me. "I don't have anywhere else to go."

Her admission alongside the lost but determined look in her eyes shoots straight through my heart. I don't know why I feel this sudden urge to help her, to take care of her. She's a random woman without a home, which isn't exactly a rarity in a big city like this. But something tells me that this isn't something she's used to, and she probably needs all the help she can get right now. I could be entirely wrong, but she just seems so... lost.

"You could stay with me." The words are out of my mouth before I even realize what I'm saying. Seriously, what the fuck am I doing?

"Oh, um, that's alright. Thank you, though," she says politely. I can't blame her for not wanting to stay with a random man, let alone one who's the size of an average NFL player and has the default expression of "don't fuck with me." Shane's fiancée Dani calls it my "resting bitch face."

"I understand why you wouldn't want to accept my offer, but just in case—" I pull a pen from my coat pocket along with a receipt I forgot to throw away from the grocery store yesterday and scribble down my phone number and address. "—here's my number and address. I have a spare bedroom that I don't use. If you change your mind, let me know."

I hold the receipt out to her and she plucks it from my fingers.

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"Thank you."

"No problem. I'm Mark, by the way."

"I'm Claire," she responds. "It was nice to meet you. Thanks again."

And with that, she's back in her vehicle and driving away as I slide into my car and wonder what the hell just came over me.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### CLAIRE

The radio host's voice crackles through the car speakers, somehow simultaneously cheery and serious. It's a strange mix that seems inappropriate given the dire predictions they're making.

"Snowmageddon is on its way, Chicago," the host says. "We're looking at at least twelve inches tonight, with high winds and whiteout conditions. Stay inside if you can, folks. It's going to be nasty out there."

Meanwhile, I'm sitting here in a Whole Foods parking lot wondering if there's anywhere I could park overnight that's covered, won't get me towed, and won't cost a ton of money. I doubt I'll have any luck unless I drive through the suburbs, but money is tight and I need to save all the gas I can. I'm supposed to be working tonight, but they'll likely close early.

I stare at the receipt on the dashboard. Mark's handwriting is messy but legible on the blank side, noting his phone number and address.

I don't know why I haven't thrown it away.

Actually, that's a lie. I know exactly why I haven't thrown it away; Because I'm considering his offer, which might make me insane. He's a total stranger who, frankly, looks like he belongs in a biker gang. However, he did save me, and he didn't pressure me to contact him. Just gave me his information and left as quickly as he swooped in to save the day.

Maybe I'm the problem here. Of course, I'm not wrong to be hesitant in trusting strange men, but I shouldn't be so judgmental. That familiar edge of guilt—one I've lived with my whole life—twists in my stomach. I'm no better than anyone else, and here I am judging someone who was probably just trying to help.

I'm sitting here homeless, freezing, and alone in an old van—one that technically belongs to my father, not me—casting judgment like I have any right to do so, especially after the events of the last few months.

Trying to decide what to do, I grab the receipt and fidget with it, turning it over in my hands and reading the list of items he bought.

Toothpaste, coffee, laundry detergent, chicken, pasta, and a few types of vegetables.

What am I doing? Trying to figure out if his grocery shopping list makes him seem "safe" enough to stay with? I shake my head. Seriously, it's not like I'd be able to tell from a grocery list if he's dangerous or not.

The morning light is gray and weak, barely filtering through the thick clouds that seem to hold the threat of what's coming. I haven't felt warm in days, having been



trying to conserve gas by keeping my car off as long as possible and huddling under blankets in the backseat at night. The thought of sitting through this storm in my van is quickly becoming harder to stomach.

I can do this, I tell myself. This is better than home. This is freedom.

But is it?

I'm barely surviving, living off of discounted pizza from work and confined to a vehicle that might fall apart any day now, choosing between staying warm or saving every precious penny I can.

On the flip side, I can go anywhere I want, do anything without worrying about judgmental gazes or harsh punishments for perceived indiscretions. Anything is better than what I left behind, even if it involves suffering through this bone-chilling cold for another couple of months.

But still, my worry about what today's storm might bring makes my stomach twist with unease. It's seeming more and more likely that I'll either need to pay to park in a garage somewhere or risk getting stuck in the snow.

Accepting help kind of feels like defeat, but I don't see many other choices. Maybe I will take Mark up on his offer, if only for the sake of self-preservation.

He seemed sincere when he spoke to me. You don't just save a random woman on the street without some sort of good intentions, right? And if he were going to do something terrible, he easily could have done it last night. No one was around to stop him from pulling me into an alley or, worse, his car. His sheer height and intimidating build made it clear that he would have no trouble snatching me up if he wanted to.

But he didn't.

He let me go, and he even kept a respectful space between us throughout the encounter. Plus, he scared off the man that undoubtedly did have bad intentions.

So now I'm sitting here, staring at the paper like it holds the answer to some moral test rather than seeing it for what it is—an act of kindness from a stranger.

Probably. Hopefully.

I take a shaky breath as I copy Mark's number from the crumpled receipt and begin to type out the text message.

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A sudden ping interrupts me, and I jump. It's a text from my manager: "No need to come in tonight due to the storm. Stay safe."

"Thanks for the heads up," I reply. As relieved as I am about not having to drive around in the snow, my shift being canceled also means less money.

With Mark's number back on my screen, I type out the shortest message I can think of: "If your offer still stands, I may stay tonight. I don't know where else to go."

My thumb lingers over the green "Send" button. This is probably reckless, but it's survival.

I hit send before I can change my mind.

An hour later, the snow is already whipping through the air as I pull into the parking garage of a building that looks entirely too fancy for someone like me. It's not far from downtown, and I can only imagine what it costs to live here.

I slow to a stop and double check the text from Mark noting which numbered spot to park in. The gray concrete seems to wind up and around forever before I finally find it.

I swallow hard, mentally preparing myself for whatever I'm walking into, then grab my suitcase from the trunk before heading toward the door that leads into the building.

Mark's there on the other side of the door, waiting for me just like he said he'd be. His

broad shoulders and heavy boots make him look like someone I'd cross the street to avoid, but when he raises one hand in a casual wave and flashes me a half-smile through the glass, some of the tension dissipates.

He's slightly less intimidating in the light of day, though not much. He's just as massive as he seemed last night, at least a foot taller than me and bulky in a way that shows he likes to work out just as much as he likes to eat, with tattoos winding up his forearms and disappearing under his sleeves. But there are smile lines creasing the corners of his eyes, and it's clear he's attempting to seem as amiable as possible.

"Hey," he greets me, holding his hand out toward my small suitcase in silent offering. I allow him to take it. "Figured you might take me up on that offer. It looks pretty damn bad out there already."

I adjust the strap on my backpack as I follow him down the hall. "Yeah. Thank you for this. It's very generous of you."

"No problem," he says, as if it's no big deal. Like inviting random displaced women to crash at your place during a snowstorm is a totally normal thing to do.

As I follow Mark through the hallway, I'm struck again by his size. It's not just his height; it's the way he carries himself and seems to take up all available space. He radiates an air of confidence that adds to his larger-than-life appeal.

But he holds my bag like a gentleman and motions me through the door. "After you. C'mon, let's get you warm."

His tone is surprisingly soft, like he's trying to put me at ease and assure me he's not a threat. It mostly works.

Mark's apartment is much nicer than I expected it to be, though that observation

probably says more about me than it does about him. He brings my bag into the guest room and sets it next to the bed before coming back out.

"Bathroom's here," he says, gesturing to the door directly across the hall. I follow as he leads me back into the main living area and shows me where to find things in the kitchen. It's all incredibly kind of him, and I feel even worse that I judged him so harshly.

"Is there anything else you need?" he asks. "I have to admit, it's been a long time since I've had anyone stay with me."

"I don't think so." My coat is still zipped and my backpack still on my shoulders.

Mark hovers nearby for a moment, then heads into the kitchen and opens a cabinet. "You hungry? I've got some soup I can heat up. Or I can cook something."

I shake my head. "No, thank you. I'm okay. I'm going to take off my coat and put my bag away if that's alright."

"Of course." As I walk down the hall, I can feel his gaze following me. He may give off the vibe of the quintessential bad boy with his muscles and tattoos, but his gestures show a softer side of him. Even his voice shows the juxtaposition; It's deep, and his tone is cool bordering on aloof, but every word out of his mouth has been kind and caring. Well, aside for his propensity—and dare I say, talent—for using the word "fuck" so frequently.

I take a few things out of my bag and lay them out on the bed. Pajamas, toothbrush, hairbrush, and clothes for tomorrow. The idea of being able to take a shower in an actual private bathroom is more appealing than I care to admit. I signed up for a gym membership after I got here just so I could have access to a shower, but the month-long free trial will be up soon, and I doubt I'll be able to afford it afterward.

But that's a problem for tomorrow. Tonight, I'm going to try to enjoy sleeping in a real bed and taking a hot shower. I have a few protein bars in my bag to tide me over as well, though I imagine Mark might try to feed me again later. He's already given me so much, though, and I don't want it to seem like I'm here for handouts.

Regardless, his kindness is unlike anything I've known, even though I'm coming from a community that preaches about loving your neighbor and caring for the needy. The irony is not lost on me. The people who shouted the loudest about unconditional love were the same ones who viewed kindness as transactional. Meanwhile, a random stranger is taking me in and giving me shelter without expecting anything in return.

At least, I hope he isn't.

I laugh to myself, thinking, if only my parents could see me now...

If they could, they'd probably declare this the ultimate evidence of my failure, my fall from grace, a disappointment to the family name. Staying in an apartment alone with a man I don't know, one who's covered in tattoos and throws the word "fuck" around like confetti.

I shouldn't care about any of that, but the guilt still eats away at me sometimes. They're likely still reeling after noticing I left in the middle of the night three weeks ago. But even more than that, my father is probably seething with rage that I had the gall to go against his word, to steal my birth certificate and other legal documents along with the old family vehicle. I lied, stole, and ran away in hopes of a better life, but I still can't help but worry that maybe I was in the wrong.

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But even if I was, there's no going back now. I'll just keep moving forward, hope for the best, and make the best decisions I can now that I have the rest of my life ahead of me.

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### MARK

I might actually be insane. That's the only explanation for why I invited a complete stranger to stay with me, even if she is clearly in need of help. I've never done anything like this before, usually more than content to keep to myself and avoid getting involved in other people's problems.

After I had given her my number and address last night, I went to the club with a plan of getting my mind off things for a while, but all I could think about was her. It was annoying as fuck, because I wasn't smart enough to ask her for her number, so I had no way to get ahold of her otherwise. I ended up leaving the club thirty minutes later after having a drink, suddenly not in the mood for sex anymore.

Seriously, what's wrong with me?

My phone buzzes with Shane's response to my earlier text explaining the situation: "I don't even know what to say. Good on you for helping someone in need, but be careful."

I'm not sure if his warning to "be careful" is due to the fact that people in dire circumstances sometimes resort to desperate measures or something else, but I reply,

"I will be. She just looked so lost. I don't know what came over me, but it's not like I don't have the space."

"Understood. Keep me updated and let me know if you need anything," Shane texts back.

Setting my phone down, I run a hand through my hair and try to focus. Claire's been in the guest room for hours now, and while I want to respect her privacy, I also want to make sure she eats something. The thought of her going hungry while staying under my roof doesn't sit well with me. Plus, if she's living out of her car, I can't imagine she's eating as much as she needs to in the first place. But there's also the chance she might be sleeping right now—I doubt she's gotten great sleep in that van—so I don't want to knock on the door on the chance that I wake her.

I may be an asshole by most people's standards, but I'm not a monster.

It's a bit early for dinner, but I head to the kitchen anyway, feeling the need to do something to occupy my time. I rummage through the cabinets and fridge trying to decide what I could cook. It's not often I have to worry about cooking for someone other than myself. I finally decide on pasta with garlic bread. It's nothing fancy, but as I start cooking, the simplicity of the task calms me. The smell of garlic and butter permeates the apartment, and I hope it's enough to coax Claire out of hiding.

Sure enough, after twenty minutes, I hear her door open and shut down the hall.

She appears in the doorway a few seconds later, her frame almost ethereal in the dim light. Her blonde hair is damp, and her oversized clothes hang on her small frame like they belong to someone else. That wide-eyed, somewhat fearful expression is still on her face.

"Hey," I say, trying to sound casual despite the awkwardness of the moment. "Are



you hungry?"

She nods tentatively, biting her lip, like she's nervous to admit that she's hungry. Weird, but whatever.

"Go ahead and have a seat," I say, gesturing to the small round table by the window. "It's almost ready."

As I plate the food, I can't help but steal glances at her. She's young—too young to have that hollow look in her eyes. She stares out the window at the storm enveloping the city and fidgets with the hem of her sleeves. I can't help but wonder what kind of hell she's been through to end up here, so young and as skittish as a stray kitten.

"So, how long have you been in Chicago?" I ask as I set a plate in front of her then sit down across from her.

"About three weeks." She picks up her fork but glances up at me, only taking a bite after I've done so.

I want to ask where she came from and why she left, but something about the way she's behaved so far makes me think it would be too serious to tell a stranger, and she's guarded enough that I doubt she'd tell me anyway. Instead, I go with a safer question.

"So you came here, got a job delivering pizzas, and then what? Got any grand plan, or are you just going with the flow?"

She chews on her bottom lip before she answers. "I hope to find a better job, since this one seems to be more dangerous than I expected it to be... Then, hopefully one day I'll be able to save up enough money for my own apartment. Maybe go to college one day." A hopeful expression lightens her expression with the last statement.

"So you just plan to live in your car until then?"

The words come out sharper than I intend, and her reaction is instant—she shrinks back slightly and breaks our eye contact. I curse myself internally. Great. Way to sound like an asshole.

"Sorry," I blurt. "I didn't mean it like that."

She shakes her head. "No, it's okay, it's a valid question. But yes, that's the plan." The tension lingers in the air, neither of us knowing what to say next.

We eat in silence, and guilt sits heavy in my chest. I know what it's like to scrape by, to wonder how you're going to make it to the next day, to not have any family to rely on when you need them most. That was most of my childhood, so I know the last thing she needs is someone making her feel worse about it. I don't know where she came from, but it's clear that she's making the best out of a shitty situation.

Clearing my throat a couple minutes later, I try again. "Do you have any questions for me? I want you to feel safe here. I know we didn't really have time for introductions."

She hesitates with her fork hovering over her plate, then asks, "What do you do for work?"

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"I'm a software engineer," I say, unable to hide my laughter at her surprised expression. "Not what you expected?"

She shakes her head, and for the first time, there's a flicker of something close to amusement in her eyes. It warms my heart in a way that confuses me.

"I guess not."

I offer her a smile. "Don't worry, most people are surprised when I tell them that." I say it partly because she looks embarrassed from assuming incorrectly, but also because it's true. I look more like someone who should be a bodyguard or a bouncer than a computer nerd.

When we're done eating, Claire stays seated until I finally stand, as if she's been waiting for me to make the first move.

"Thank you for dinner," she says. "Can I do the dishes?"

"You don't have to—"

"Please." There's something about her tone that makes me think she'll feel worse if I don't let her, so I relent. She's probably struggling, feeling like a charity case, and I only think that because it's a feeling I know well. It's hard to accept help when you've had to be stubbornly self-sufficient for so long.

I steal glances at her as she washes the dishes. Her movements are slow and deliberate, as though the act of cleaning gives her a sense of control. Like it's

something small she understands in a world of uncertainty.

When she's finished, she starts to leave the room, but I find myself calling out, "Wait."

She stops, turning back with an expectant look.

"Uh..." Shit. I don't actually know what I was going to say. But I don't want her to think she needs to be confined to the bedroom the whole time she's here. "Do you need anything? You can use the TV out here if you'd like to."

She hesitates again, then asks, "Actually, do you maybe have some paper and a pen I can use?" Her gaze doesn't meet mine, as if she's embarrassed for asking for anything, even as minimal as paper.

The request catches me off guard. Maybe she likes to draw or something. "Sure. Lined or blank?"

"Lined, please."

"Yeah, sure, follow me," I say, leading her to my office down the hall.

As I rummage through a drawer, I can't help but wonder what she wants this for. To write something, I'm assuming, because if she was an artist she'd want blank paper. A letter, maybe? Is she reaching out to someone who can help her?

I shove the thoughts aside. It's not my business.

But maybe I'll be able to find out a little bit more about this enigma of a woman before she leaves.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CLAIRE

I hesitate at the threshold of Mark's office, taking in the sight before me. Two towering bookshelves line the walls, their dark wood shelves packed with books of all sizes. I yearn to touch them, to pull them from their places and peek inside. I've never seen so many books in one place outside of the library, and never had the nerve or the time to linger at the library on the rare occasions I could sneak there.

"Can I look at these?" The words fall out before I can stop them.

"Of course."

I approach the shelves and run my finger along the spines. Some are textbooks about programming and computer science, but most appear to be fiction. Many of the covers are worn, clearly well-loved, and a pang of envy shoots through me.

Growing up, our reading material was strictly controlled. Religious texts, approved biographies of religious figures, and carefully curated educational materials were all we were allowed. Anything else was considered potentially dangerous, a gateway to sinful thoughts and worldly temptations.

I'd managed to sneak some library books here and there when I was sent into town to buy the groceries we couldn't grow or produce ourselves, but those moments were always rushed and fearful. I never had time to explore or figure out what I liked. I just grabbed whatever I could quickly access and hide.

"You're more than welcome to borrow any of them," Mark says, interrupting my thoughts.

"Really?" Where would I even start?

He cocks his head to the side, confused by my surprise. "Yeah."

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"Umm, which ones would you recommend?"

"It depends. What kinds of books do you normally like?"

The question catches me off guard. What kinds do I like? I don't even know. I've never had the luxury of developing preferences or favorites, simply grabbing what I could in the limited time I had and reading them at night after the rest of my family was asleep. My gaze drops as I shrug, unable to formulate an answer that wouldn't lead to more questions. It's embarrassing that I can't even answer a simple question.

Mark studies me for a moment, then reaches for one of the books. "Try this one. Let me know what you think."

I take it from him and examine the cover. It looks like something about magic—another massive no-no at home—but the swirling, nature-themed artwork immediately draws me in. My heart quickens at the thought of being able to read it openly, without having to hide it under my mattress or sacrifice sleep for it. It still feels like I'm breaking rules, internalizing the guilt even though I shouldn't feel this way anymore.

While I'm lost in thought, Mark rummages through his desk drawers until he finds a notebook and pen. He hands these to me as well, and I clutch all three items to my chest like the precious treasures they are.

"Thank you," I say, already backing toward the door. "I'll be out of your hair as soon as the storm clears."

Before he can respond, I hurry back to the bedroom, closing the door behind me. My heart is racing, though I'm not sure why. Maybe it's the thrill of holding a forbidden book, because even though I'm not under their control anymore, it still feels forbidden. Or maybe it's just the lingering anxiety of being in a stranger's home and accepting his kindness when I've been taught that the outside world is full of nothing but danger and corruption.

But Mark doesn't seem dangerous. Intimidating, yes, but not in a threatening way. More like... protective? The way he scared off that man last night and the way he's offering shelter and food without asking for anything in return goes against everything I was taught about the "outside world." The worldly or secular people were not guided by God's will, and therefore were inherently sinful. But nothing about Mark or the way he treats me feels wrong. In fact, it's a welcome reprieve from the judgment I endured at home.

I settle onto the bed, crossing my legs beneath me and laying the book in my lap. I trace the raised letters of the title then flip it open to the first page.

This is another taste of what freedom feels like, I realize. The ability to read whatever I want, whenever I want. There's no one looking over my shoulder, no one judging my choices or telling me I'm inviting evil into my heart.

I open the notebook next, the pages smooth and empty and full of possibility. I learned a long time ago that writing things down was the best way to sort through my thoughts, but I rarely dared to do so for fear of it being discovered. It happened once, when my mother found my diary when I was still young—maybe eleven or twelve years old. In it, I had detailed my frustration with my father's anger and my mother's refusal to stand up to him, along with my wishes that everyone would actually follow the teachings they preached.

My mom had lectured me in a harsh whisper, telling me to stop being ungrateful for



my family but keeping her voice down lest Dad hear, because we both know that if he would have found it, the punishment would be ten times worse.

So, I learned early on to be careful what I committed to paper, because it could be used as evidence of my wavering faith or curious nature, both of which would result in punishment.

But now, I can write anything. I can write all of it, and that's exactly what I intend to do.

The sound of the wind whistling outside draws my attention to the window. The snow whirls in the harsh wind, obscuring the city from view.

I open the book Mark gave me and begin to read. The words draw me in immediately, painting pictures of a world so different from anything I've known. A world where magic exists, where people can choose their own destinies, where good and evil aren't as simple as I was taught.

Hours pass as I read, and I only look up when I hear movement in the apartment. Mark must be getting ready for bed. The thought makes me slightly nervous, reminding me that I'm sleeping in a strange man's home, but something tells me I'm safer here than I was in my car.

I set the book aside and change into my pajamas then slip under the covers of the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in. The notebook and pen sit on the nightstand, still blank, but my mind is already spinning with ideas of what I'll write in it tomorrow.

I lie awake despite the luxurious comfort of the bed, realizing that for the first time in a long time, it's not worry keeping me awake; it's hope.

## CHAPTER SIX

MARK

She's been locked in that room all day.

I've checked my phone at least a dozen times, debating whether I should text and ask if she's okay, but that feels weird. I don't want to come across as overbearing when I'm just trying to make sure she's alive in there, but I also don't want to just knock on her door—that feels even more invasive.

The only proof of life I've gotten was the sound of the shower running this morning and her soft footsteps afterward. Since then, silence. Not even music playing in the background.

Did I say something wrong or do something to make her uncomfortable? I know I come across as a bit rough and intimidating, but I've made it a point to be on my best behavior.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts. Why the hell do I even care? She's a stranger who needed help during a storm. That's it. I gave her somewhere warm to stay, and she doesn't owe me conversation or company.

It's just confusing. She didn't even come out for lunch, and I don't like the thought that she might still be afraid of me.

This is why I don't do relationships—other people are so hard to read, and it makes me fixate on how I'm acting and how I come across. It's annoying as fuck. Not that Claire and I have a relationship, obviously, but the point still stands. Even having someone—particularly a woman—in my home apparently has the same effect on me.

Still, as I stand in my kitchen trying to decide what to make for dinner, I can't help but wonder if she's hungry. She's been in there since dinner last night. She has to be hungry, right?

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Before I can talk myself out of it, I walk down the hallway and knock on her door. The mattress squeaks with her shifting weight followed by quiet footsteps before the door cracks open just enough for her to peer out.

"I was just wondering if you wanted something to eat," I say. "I haven't seen you since last night and want to make sure you don't starve."

She opens the door a bit wider, but I notice the way her expression shifts to one of politeness, as if she's remembering to put a mask up. "That would be lovely. I could cook something if you'd like."

"No, you don't have to do that. You're my guest. I actually have some chili cooking right now—wait, you're not vegetarian or anything, are you?"

She smiles, and it's a genuine one that catches me off guard with how much it lights up her expression. "No, I'm not vegetarian. And I appreciate you cooking."

I notice the book I gave her yesterday lying on the bed behind her, along with the notebook that's opened to somewhere in the middle of the pages. "What were you doing in there all day?"

Her cheeks flush as she glances back at the bed. "Reading and writing, mostly."

"Didn't realize I was running a study hall," I joke, but her face falls slightly. Shit. There I go again, saying something wrong. "Sorry, I didn't mean—"

"It's fine," she interrupts. "I was homeschooled, actually. So maybe old habits die

hard." There's a flash of something in her expression I can't quite place—longing, regret, worry? It's gone before I can figure it out.

Homeschooled. Interesting. There's one more piece of the puzzle falling into place. "Religious family?" I ask before I can stop myself. It's not always the case, but it's common enough that it's a valid assumption.

"Very." Her tone makes it clear that's all she wants to say on the subject, but it explains a lot: her quietness, her hesitation, the way she carries herself like she's trying not to take up too much space.

"Well, food is ready anytime, so you're welcome to join me for dinner," I say, not looking behind me to see if she follows as I make my way back down the hallway.

I ladle chili into a bowl for myself then turn to see Claire hovering at the edge of the kitchen. Another thing I've noticed about her is how quietly she walks, as if she's making herself as unnoticeable as possible. I hope she realizes she can take up as much space as she needs to here, even if she won't be here much longer. It's the thought that counts, though, right?

She's wearing another sweater that's at least three sizes too big for her to the point that it almost looks comical. That's yet another thing that seems to be a constant for her—wearing clothes that are much too large, that shroud her body in fabric.

I hand Claire a filled bowl before grabbing the plate of grilled cheeses I had made before I went to her room.

"I don't know about you," I say, carefully setting everything on the table, "but I firmly believe grilled cheese and chili is the best comfort meal anyone could make during the wintertime." God, I sound like an idiot.

She nods and gives me a soft smile, and I notice again that she waits to take a bite until I do. Starting to connect the dots, I wonder just how strict of a home she grew up in between the homeschooling and religion. I desperately want to ask her, but I have a feeling that if I ask her outright, she'd feel uncomfortable.

Still, I can't help but ask something. "Do you have any siblings?"

She nods, finishing chewing her bite before answering. When she speaks, there's a sort of hesitation surrounding her words, as if she's weighing out how much to tell me. "I'm one of five. Two brothers and one sister older than me, and one sister younger than me."

"Wow, that's quite a few. I can't imagine that." I dip my grilled cheese into my chili and take another bite. It's a little more bland than usual, but I made it that way on purpose. I wasn't sure if Claire liked spicy food or not, so I toned it down for her sake.

After a moment, she asks, "What about your family?"

"Not much to tell," I say with a shrug, matching her vagueness. "It was just me and my father for a long time, but my best friend Shane and his parents are the closest thing I've ever had to a family."

We stand there for a moment, locked in an awkward stalemate of unspoken histories, before I take an unnecessarily intense interest in staring at my food. What am I even doing, trying to get to know this girl? The last thing I need is to complicate my life by involving another person like this, even if I am just giving her a place to stay for a day or two.

She'll be gone soon, which is good because, honestly, not being able to walk around naked anymore is a major check mark in the "negatives" column of her being here. In

fact, the only thing I've done since she got here is worry about keeping myself in check and attempting to seem non-threatening. It's exhausting.

"Thank you," she says. "For all of this. For helping me last night, and letting me stay here, and..." she gestures at the food. "Everything. It's been a long time since I've been shown so much kindness."

"It's just chili," I tease.

"No, it's more than that. You didn't have to help me. Most people wouldn't have."

I study her expression from across the table, wondering again what she's been through. "I think that's more of a reflection of other people rather than me." It's a little uncomfortable to be seen as so good-hearted when most people don't look at me very closely. They only see the intimidation factor I put off, and even if they get close to me, they usually only see me as a jokester. Though, Shane is really the only person I'd consider myself to be close to anyway, and he's too wrapped up in wedding stuff to care much about anything else right now.

Claire looks up at me with those deep, dark brown eyes but says nothing, only shrugs.

"So you live alone all the time?" she asks. "No, uh, girlfriend or anything?"

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I chuckle. "Yes, I live alone, and no girlfriend. I don't really do the whole relationship thing."

I can see the wheels in her head turning at my choice of phrasing, but I don't offer up an explanation.

She takes another small bite of her grilled cheese by ripping off a bite-sized piece and popping it in her mouth. Everything she does is so careful and precise. Meanwhile, I'm dipping the sandwich with something close to reckless abandon.

"So," I say, still curious about so much but trying not to push her boundaries. "What were you writing about all day?"

She tenses and her eyes flick to mine with concern.

"You don't have to tell me," I assure her. "I was just curious."

"No, it's okay." She takes another bite before continuing. "Just thoughts and feelings, I guess. Writing things down helps me organize my mind a little better."

"That makes sense. And the book? What do you think so far?"

Her face lights up, and suddenly she's animated in a way I haven't seen before. "It's amazing. I've never read anything like it. The way the author describes magic, like it's this natural force in the world rather than something evil..." She trails off, that familiar embarrassment creeping back into her expression. "Sorry, that probably sounds ridiculous."



"Don't apologize. It's good to be excited about things. And there are a lot of novels where magic is used for good as well as evil, or both. I'll be happy to give you more like it once you finish that one." Seeing her show an emotion other than trepidation, shyness, or fear warms my heart in an entirely unfamiliar way, and it brings with it an odd sense of vulnerability. I'm not sure I like it.

She gives me a small smile, and it makes me wonder what she's like beneath the facade.

We finish eating in comfortable silence, and when she insists on doing the dishes again, I let her. As I watch her clean each plate and utensil, I find myself wondering again what kind of life she left behind. What kind of family makes their daughter feel guilty for reading fantasy novels? Or, even worse, makes her feel bad for talking about something that excites her?

But I don't ask. I may be curious, but I'm not cruel. Whatever she's running from, she'll tell me if and when she wants to, and I highly doubt she'll want to spill her secrets considering I'm a stranger and she'll be gone soon.

"I think I'm going to read a bit more before bed," she says when she's finished with the dishes. "Thank you again for dinner. And good conversation."

"Anytime. Let me know if you need anything."

She disappears back down the hallway, leaving me alone with my thoughts and questions. Her door clicks shut softly, and I wonder if I'll see her before tomorrow.

Probably not, but that's okay. She's safe, she's warm, and she has a book to read. Sometimes that's all anyone really needs.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## CLAIRE

I stay cooped up in my bedroom for another full day, alternating between reading the book Mark loaned me and writing in the notebook. This is a turning point in my life, one that I'd like to keep a record of to look back on someday. So, for the better part of the last two days, I've sat here detailing my past, what I'm escaping from. I've cried about a hundred times as I've spilled my life onto the pages, describing everything I remember from my past—the good, the bad, and everything in between. I never realized how much some of these things have affected me until I think back to them through a critical lens. Each word I write carries the weight of memories I've tried so hard to forget or justify. It's only now I'm seeing how unjustifiable, even cruel, some of those things were.

I've filled fifteen pages already, detailing not just the arranged marriage I narrowly escaped, but everything that led up to it—the constant guilt, the demanded obedience, the perpetual fear of stepping out of line. In a world where God was supposed to be my savior, he felt more like a cruel dictator acting through my father and the other church elders. I know that says more about them than it does about God, but it still hurts. I was promised a love I'd never felt, yet I tried so hard to exemplify the dedicated daughter growing into a pious, compliant woman.

It was only a matter of time before the pressure broke me entirely.

My hand cramps, and I flex my fingers before setting the pen down and looking out the window. The storm has finally passed. It started as a sparkling blanket of snow, though it was pushed aside into a gray slush by the snow plows almost as quickly as it came. Still, Chicago looks different from up here, almost peaceful, though I know that illusion will shatter as soon as I venture back out into it.

My phone buzzes with a text from my boss, Jackson: "You're on the schedule for 4-close on Tuesday."

Reality crashes back in. I can't stay here forever, hiding in this comfortable room with a book and my thoughts. Mark has been incredibly generous, but I can tell he feels awkward having me here. I don't blame him. I'm essentially a stray he picked up off the street.

The book he loaned me sits on the nightstand with a bookmark placed at page 247. I've been rationing it, trying to make it last, knowing that each page brings me closer to having to return it. It's silly how attached I've become to this simple object and these characters who feel more like real people than words on a page.

My stomach growls as the sky fades into darkness. Mark said I could help myself to anything in the kitchen, but I've been eating breakfasts and lunches of the protein bars I'd had stashed in my car before this. Last night I did sneak into the kitchen after Mark had gone to bed and made myself a PB&J sandwich, and even though he had told me to help myself, it still felt wrong somehow. Like I don't deserve such kindness after what I've done.

Is this my self-imposed penance? Living off scraps even when abundance is offered freely? Old habits die hard, I suppose. Back home, any form of self-denial was seen as virtuous. The more you suffered, the closer to God you became.

I snort out a laugh at the thought. Joke's on them—I've been suffering in the cold for three weeks and feel further from God than I ever have. But it's liberating to know that there is life beyond what I was taught, that not everything is so black-and-white as I was led to believe. There's a freedom in knowing that my life is my own and I serve no one but myself.

As if on cue, the faint smell of food wafts through the room, and for a moment I'm not sure if my hunger is causing me to imagine things. But no, there's definitely something cooking out there.

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Before I can stop myself, I'm opening the door and following the smell to the kitchen.

Mark stands at the counter and unloads what appears to be several containers of Chinese takeout. He looks up when I enter the room.

"Perfect timing," he says, gesturing to the spread of food. "I might have ordered too much."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to—"

"I want you to," he interrupts. "Seriously, I got enough for both of us on purpose. Please eat."

There's something in his tone that shows me the sentiment is genuine, so I take the seat across from him at the table.

He opens containers while explaining what each dish is, and I accept his offer to split the food onto separate plates so we can each sample everything.

"I have to go back to work on Tuesday," I tell him as he starts eating. "So I'll be out of your hair soon. Thank you for letting me stay as long as I have."

Mark pauses with his chopsticks halfway to his mouth. "So, you're planning to go back to living in your car?"

I drop my gaze and chew my lip, trying to figure out how to answer that without seeming like I'm trying to guilt-trip him into letting me stay. "Yes, but it won't be too

much longer, only until I can save up enough for—"

"No." He shakes his head. "Don't do that. Just stay here."

I meet his stare and will my expression to stay neutral. "I don't want to be any more of a burden than I already have been. You've helped me so much already, but I can manage on my own now that the storm's over." It's obvious he feels uncomfortable having me here sometimes, that he's unsure of how to behave when someone else is occupying his space.

"You're not a burden. And frankly, I'd rather know you're safe here than worry about you sleeping in your car in the middle of winter."

His words take root in my head. Being told something so simple—that I'm not a burden—shouldn't have such a strong effect on me, yet for some reason it does. "I'm not sure. I mean, we hardly know anything about each other."

A small smile plays at the corners of his lips as he leans back in his chair. "Let's fix that then."

The way he's looking at me makes my stomach flip, though I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because no one has ever looked at me like that before—like they actually want to know who I am, not the person they expect me to be.

It might also be due to the fact that his easy smile is the most charming thing I've ever seen.

And if I'm being honest with myself, I want to know him too. Not just the surface details, but the things that make him tick, the reason he lives alone in this big apartment, why he would take in a complete stranger without hesitation.

But those are dangerous thoughts. Getting too comfortable here, letting myself feel too much will only lead to more pain when I inevitably have to leave. Because I will have to leave eventually. Besides, the rational part of my mind is aware that I'm in danger of getting too attached to him simply because he's the first person to show me genuine kindness since I left home.

The fortune cookie sitting next to my plate seems to mock me with its promises of wisdom. I crack it open, and the slip of paper inside reads: "Sometimes the right path is not the easiest one."

I laugh out loud at the irony. If only it could tell me which path is the right one.

Mark narrows his eyebrows at me, but I just shake my head and fold the small piece of paper before shoving it in my pocket. I realize he's still waiting for my response to his suggestion.

I should say no. I should gather my things and leave now, before I get too attached to this warmth, this kindness, this man whose smile seems to disarm me in an instant.

But I'm tired of running. Tired of being afraid.

So instead of retreating back to my room, I pick up my chopsticks—which I have no clue how to use—and say, "Okay. Where should we start?"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### MARK

"Let's start simple," I suggest as I watch Claire struggle with her chopsticks. "What's your favorite color?" It's clear she still isn't quite sure how to react to me, so I don't want to push her too far too fast.

The question is more of a joke than anything, but she pauses, considering the question with more gravity than it deserves. "I'm not sure. I never really thought about it before."

Something about her response makes me pause. Who doesn't know their favorite color? Or at least hasn't thought about it? "Okay, well, what color makes you happy when you see it?"

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She thinks for a moment before answering, "Maybe yellow?"

"Yellow definitely seems like a happy color. It fits you."

I pretend not to notice her cheeks turning pink even though it's kind of adorable. Standing, I tell her, "I'm gonnapour myself a drink. Would you like one? I'm having a whiskey and coke, but I do have water, soda, and white wine if you'd like."

"Oh, um, just water is fine. Thank you."

"Alright, well if there's anything you want that I don't have, just let me know. Do you not like wine? I can get something else at the store this week if you prefer a different drink."

"I wouldn't know."

My brows furrow. "Have you not had wine before?"

She shakes her head. "I've never had alcohol."

"Hmm, well if you're interested in trying any, you're welcome to, but no pressure. Wait, youareover twenty-one, right?" I had sort of assumed she was in her early twenties, but if I accidentally offered refuge to a minor on the run from her family, we're going to have much bigger problems.

She gives me an amused smile. "I turned twenty-three a few months ago. And I appreciate your offer, but I'll pass tonight."



"Okay, sounds good." I hand her her glass of water before taking my seat across from her. "Alright, your turn to ask a question," I say, steering us back to safer territory.

"How long have you lived here?"

"In this apartment? About seven years. I've always lived in the area, but I've been in this place since my early thirties."

I study her expression, watching as she does the math in her head and realizes just how much older than her I am. "What about you? Where did you live before coming to Chicago?"

She pushes rice around her plate, avoiding eye contact. "In the middle of nowhere a few hours' drive from here. Just a small town I'm sure you've never heard of."

I want to ask more—why she left, what she's running from—but her body language screams discomfort. Instead, I ask, "Did you always want to come to Chicago?"

"I didn't really plan it. I just needed somewhere far enough away but still within driving distance of what gas money I had. I followed the signs on the highway until they brought me here."

The implications of her words settle heavily in my chest. She didn't just leave, she fled.

We continue like this, trading questions back and forth. I learn that she's never been to a concert and has no idea who her favorite band is because she wasn't allowed to listen to "secular music." She knows how to knit and crochet. She's always dreamed of going to college, though she's not sure for what.

Each revelation makes me more curious about her past, even as it makes me angry on

her behalf. She still carefully avoids speaking much about her family or what her life was like before, though it's clear that wherever she came from had some extreme religious practices.

I find myself smiling as I listen to her, watching her eyes light up when we discuss a topic she's interested in. It hits me how beautiful she is, especially when she forgets to be guarded. That shroud of meek, nervous energy disappears when she describes the book she's been reading or her desire to go to college someday.

I have to keep reminding myself not to stare, not to let my thoughts wander in that direction. She's too young, too vulnerable, too... everything I'm not. And considering her background, she sure as fuck doesn't know about the world I live in—the world of carnal pleasures and kinky bliss.

I may not be a good man, but I'm decent enough to not pursue her. Not that I'd assume she's interested in me in that way anyway.

"So," I say when there's a lull in the conversation, "will you stay? Now that you know I'm not some serial killer?"

She looks down at her nearly empty plate. "Are you sure? I really don't want to be a burden."

"You're not a burden," I tell her for the second time tonight. "If anything, it's nice having someone around to talk to." If Shane could see me now, he'd be laughing his ass off knowing how many women I've gone out of my way to have stick around.

"Okay, but only until I save up enough for my own place. And I'll help with groceries and cleaning and whatever else you need."

"Deal." I gather up some empty containers and try to ignore the way my worry

dissipates now that I know she'll stay. "Though fair warning—I'm not much of a morning person, so don't expect scintillating conversation before noon."

She laughs at my lighthearted warning. "Noted. I'm used to waking up early to—" she cuts herself off. "Well, it doesn't matter why anymore, but I'll be up bright and early."

I wish she would have finished her sentence. I'm so curious about her life, even more so because she's making such an effort to hide it. "Sounds good. Sometimes I work from home and sometimes I work from the office, so if I'm gone during the day and don't get the chance to see you before I leave, don't worry. You have my number if you need anything while I'm out."

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She nods but doesn't respond, and I can see her retreating back into herself.

"Well," I say, wanting to give her an escape route if she needs it, "it's getting late. We should probably both get some sleep." It's not really that late, but it's clear she doesn't want to be rude by leaving right after I bought her dinner.

"Right." She stands to toss out the now-empty plates and put the leftovers in the fridge. "Thank you for dinner and, well, everything else."

"You're welcome. Goodnight, Claire."

"Goodnight."

As she disappears down the hallway, I pour myself another drink and sink onto the couch. What am I doing? Taking in a stranger is one thing, but letting her stay indefinitely? Shane would tell me I'm insane. Hell, I'm telling myself I'm insane. I'm the type of guy who needs my own space and avoids committing to things like this, precisely because I know that attachments can turn bad quickly. I keep up my serious, aloof persona for a reason, but it's gone completely out the window since she got here.

But something about her makes me want to help her, to protect her. I don't know what this is, but I do know one thing: my life just got a lot more complicated.

## CHAPTER NINE

### CLAIRE

The comfort of Mark's apartment has spoiled me. As I sit in my van with the engine running to keep the heat on, I find myself missing the cozy bedroom I've been staying in. The thought of going back to living in my car full-time makes my stomach churn with dread. How did I manage to live like this for almost a month?

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the night ahead. My reflection in the rearview mirror stares back at me, plain but more lively than I've been over the last few weeks otherwise. The bright red letters on the dash count the passing minutes until I have no choice but to go inside and clock in.

The pizza parlor is mostly empty aside from an older couple sitting in the corner booth. It's a couple hours before the dinner rush will start, which means spending too much time in this building. Nate and Randy are behind the counter, laughing loudly at some crude joke I can't quite hear. I slip past them, hoping to avoid their attention, but Jackson, my boss, spots me from his office.

"Claire, we missed you!" he calls out with an obnoxious grin. His gaze lingers on my body a little too long despite my loose clothing.

I force a small smile. "Well, I'm back."

He chuckles, but there's something in his eyes that makes my skin crawl. "I'm glad. Having you around makes the evenings here so much nicer."

I mumble a thank you and hurry to clock in, but I can feel his eyes on me the whole time. The other guys are no better, their conversations filled with vulgarities. I attempt to block out the crude conversation and keep my head down as I make my way to the counter to keep myself occupied by folding boxes and wrapping silverware.

Relief rolls through me when Randy shouts out that I've got a couple deliveries to

make. There's another delivery driver here, of course, but he's too busy standing at the back door smoking cigarettes to care.

Oh well, more tips for me.

The first few deliveries go smoothly, and I even get a twenty-dollar tip at one of them, but soon enough I'm forced to return to work. While navigating the city can be stressful, especially with the subpar GPS on my cheap phone, it's become easier with every trip, and the environment at work has become increasingly uncomfortable. I'm starting to see why I'm the only woman who works here.

The warm air envelops me as I push through the doors and make my way to the back to check for any more deliveries. It looks like our other delivery driver finally decided to make a trip, because he's nowhere to be found and there are no pizzas for me to deliver.

Nate and Randy are deep in a conversation about some party they went to over the weekend, their boisterous laughter filling the room. I try to tune them out, but it's no use. Some of the words they use are ones I haven't heard before, but it's abundantly clear they're talking about sex.

An uncomfortable knot twists in my stomach as I try to focus on the task in front of me, and pretend to ignore them. But Jackson chooses that moment to walk up behind me, his body close enough that I can smell his too-strong cologne. My breath catches in my throat and my shoulders tense at his close proximity.

"Claire, can I talk to you for a second?"

I turn to face him, taking a small step backward, crossing my arms, and putting on a fake smile. "Sure, what do you need to talk about?"

He gestures for me to follow him to his office, and I hesitate for a moment before complying. Did I do something wrong? Am I getting fired? I thought I was doing a good job, but maybe not. It's not like I have any work experience to base that off of.

Jackson's office is small and cluttered. The air is thick with the scent of stale pizza and that god-awful cologne. He closes the door behind us, and panic rises in my chest.

"I wanted to talk to you about your performance," he says as he leans against his desk.

Oh no, here it goes. I inhale and brace myself for the bad news.

"You've been doing great work, and I think it's time we discuss a raise."

I blink in surprise. "Oh, um, thank you. That would be really helpful."

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He smiles, but there's something in his gaze that makes me want to run. "I'm glad to hear that. But I also have to be very selective about who gets a raise, so maybe we could sweeten the deal here."

He steps closer and reaches out to graze my arm, and I flinch away instinctively. But instead of backing off, he grips my wrist and pushes me against the wall. His face is inches from mine, his breath hot on my skin, and dread weighs down on me.

"Come on, Claire," he coaxes. "I can make things really good for you here."

I'm frozen with terror, my heart pounding so loudly in my ears that I can barely hear his words. I manage to shake my head in a small, desperate movement. "No, please, I just want to do my job."

He scoffs. "Don't play hard to get, sweetheart. I know you're new to the city, but this is how things work around here."

Tears well up in my eyes as I shake my head again and struggle to find my voice. "Please, let me go."

But he doesn't listen. He reaches up with his other hand to touch my face, and I react before I can think. I shove him as hard as I can and he stumbles back, his eyes wide with shock. I may be small and meek and new to this life, but I'm not about to let this creep take advantage of me.

I reach for the door and Jackson lunges for my arm. I'm fighting against him with everything I have now, lashing out with my limbs and landing a good kick to his



knee.

"You little fucking —" his words get cut off when the door to the office bursts open, and one of the cooks who I don't interact much with—Andre—steps in.

"Jackson, the oven's not working again," he says, looking between me and our boss. "Can you take a look at it?"

Jackson's grip on my arm loosens, and he steps back. He forces out a laugh. "Yeah. Just playing around with Claire here," he says, clapping Andre on the shoulder as he walks out. "You know how new girls can be, so serious all the time."

Andre's concern-filled eyes meet mine. "Are you okay?"

I nod, even though I'm anything but okay. I'm frozen in place, attempting to come to terms with what just happened. Once I shake myself out of my stupor, I quickly gather my things, mumble an excuse about not feeling well, and dart out the back door. Andre watches me go, but he doesn't try to stop me.

The drive back to Mark's is a blur. My hands are shaking against the steering wheel, and I can feel the bruises forming on my arm where Jackson grabbed me. The skin is already tender, serving as a reminder of just how bad that could have been. I choke back sobs as I drive, and when I pull into the parking garage, I sit there for a few minutes and give myself a moment to think while waiting for the tears to stop.

In this moment, I feel more like an outcast in this life than ever before. People are so cruel, so selfish, and I've only managed to escape these violent interactions due to someone else interfering—first Mark, now Andre, even though his was an unintentional intervention. How am I ever supposed to survive on my own when I can't even manage to go a month without a man trying to hurt me? Is this just how the world is for women?

I pull the key from the ignition and make my way up to Mark's apartment. I stand outside the door and attempt to compose myself. I don't want him to see me like this, to know how weak and vulnerable I am after he's already saved me once.

Luckily for me, I have abundant experience in pretending to be okay when I'm hurting on the inside. The life I left behind gave me plenty of practice in that. So many people have it worse than you, my father used to say. Be grateful for what you have and stop complaining. It was the go-to response when any of us children were upset by something, as if we shouldn't be allowed to feel emotion because our problems were insignificant in the grand scheme of things. But when I pointed out that the sentiment was the same as saying we shouldn't be happy because so many others have it better, I was still chastised for being ungrateful.

His advice never stuck with me in a way that mattered, but it did give me plenty of practice in hiding my emotions, of tamping down any feelings that threatened to overflow. I suppose now is as good of a time as any to put that practice back into place.

I take a deep breath, school my expression, and make my way inside.

## CHAPTER TEN

### MARK

The sound of the door opening pulls my attention from the football game on TV. That's weird; Claire hasn't been gone for very long. I was expecting her to be working for at least another couple hours. But when I catch sight of her as she closes the door behind her, my stomach drops. Her face is pink—and not in the adorable way it is when she blushes—and her eyes are puffy. She's been crying.

I stand but keep my voice gentle when I ask, "Claire, what happened?"

She jumps, not realizing I was on the couch. "Nothing, I'm fine," she says, but her voice wavers.

"You're not fine." I step closer, noting the way she keeps running one hand along her arm. "Are you hurt?"

Her gaze stays fixed on the ground, the wall, anywhere but me. "It's not a big deal."

"Show me." It's almost impossible to keep the anger out of my voice, but I only manage to do so for her sake. I don't want to scare her.

She lifts her sleeve, already giving excuses in a meek voice. "There's probably not even anything there. It's just a little sore."

But sure enough, there are faint marks—not fully formed bruises yet, but they will be—in the shape of fingerprints.

Fingerprints.

I'll fucking kill whoever did this.

I brush my fingers over her skin and take a deep breath, trying to control the anger surging in my veins. It doesn't work.

"Who did this to you?"

She hesitates, looking directly at me for the first time since she stepped through the door. Her wide brown eyes glisten with tears, but the gears are turning in her head, the instinct to hide her pain fighting against the truth.

Finally, she takes a shaky breath. "My boss, Jackson. He—he tried to..." She can't finish the sentence, but she doesn't need to. I can fill in the blanks well enough.

Rage boils inside me, but I tamp it down for now, keeping my voice calm. I'll go after that motherfucker later, but I have a feeling that Claire won't react well if I show my anger.

"Will you tell me what happened?"

We sit down on the couch as she recounts the night, her voice trembling as she describes her coworkers' escalating verbal harassment, Jackson's advances, the way he grabbed her and pushed her against the wall. Each word fuels the fire burning in my chest.

"I'll get all the assholes in that whole goddamn place fired," I say through clenched teeth. How? I don't know. But I can't sit here and do nothing. How dare they look at

her that way, laugh at her discomfort, touch her.

"No," Claire says quickly. "I need the job. I have nothing else, and who knows how long it'll take me to get hired at another place."

"You're not going back there. Over my dead fucking body."

She cringes at my harsh tone then looks up at me, her eyes brimming with tears again.

"But I need the money. I can't—"

"You're not going back there," I repeat. I can't let her go back to that place, but I also can't stand the thought of her struggling to find another job, of her living in fear and uncertainty.

An idea forms in my mind, one that's crazy and impulsive, but also makes a strange kind of sense. It keeps me from walking out of here and burning that goddamn pizza place to the ground with all those assholes in it.

"What if I hired you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if you worked for me? We don't really have a personal relationship, so there's no interference there, but it would help me out to have someone to help with cooking and cleaning, running errands, organizing things. That sort of stuff."

Her brows furrow. "I don't know, that feels weird. I don't want to impose on you any more than I already am."

"It's not an imposition," I assure her. "Think of it as a business arrangement. I'll write up a contract and everything. And if you find a different job in that time—preferably

nothing involving going to strangers' houses—you can stop this at any time."

She fidgets with the sleeve of her sweater as she considers the option.

"It's a good solution," I explain. "It gives you a safe place to stay, a steady income, and time to figure out your next steps. And it helps me out too by having someone to handle the tedious household stuff. It's a win-win."

She takes a deep breath, then nods. "Okay. But only until I can find something else."

Relief washes over me, even as I wonder what the hell I'm doing. "Deal. I'll draft up a contract tomorrow."

She manages a small smile, though her cheeks are still stained with tears. "Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without your generosity."

"You don't have to thank me," I tell her. "Just get some rest and some food if you need it. You're safe here."

She nods then heads down the hallway to her room. As she disappears from sight, I let out a long breath, the anger I'd been holding back finally surging to the surface. The thought of someone hurting her like that makes me want to put my fist through a wall. Or his face.

But more than that, I'm struck by the realization of what I've just done. I proposed a deal that will undoubtedly force us to interact frequently and that will make her feel even more at home. For someone who doesn't like to keep women around for very long, this is a dangerous game to play.

But we're not together, so it's fine. This is different. Sure, she's beautiful and sweet, but she's clearly got a lot going on, not to mention the fact she's so much younger

than I am. Nothing is going to happen between us—she'll basically just be like a live-in housekeeper until she has enough money to move out into her own place.

Which, ironically, is something I'd probably enjoy having a submissive do for me if I ever had a serious relationship with a woman. But I won't, and I'm not planning to.

This is just a temporary arrangement, a way to help her get back on her feet. It's not permanent, and it's certainly not personal.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

#### CLAIRE

I don't know what I just agreed to, but I'm already questioning if it was the best idea. I'm now completely at this man's mercy. The thought makes me shiver, and I'm not sure if it's a pleasant sensation or an uncomfortable one. Maybe a mix of both.

I told myself I'd never let a man have power over me again, but I just agreed to putting my paycheck, and therefore my livelihood, in the hands of a man I met a few days ago. This decision was either very smart or very, very dumb.

Steam clouds the small bathroom as I step into the shower. I scrub my skin until it's raw, trying to erase the feeling of Jackson's hands on me, but I'm unable to scrub away the memory of his predatory gaze. As the water runs down my body, my thoughts spiral. Am I trading one form of captivity for another? But what choice do I have? I can't go back to the pizza parlor, not after what happened. And living in my car again isn't an option, not with the winter still in full blast.

Even if it was nicer outside, I'd have a hard time giving up the comforts of a shower and a real bed. Maybe I'll start looking for a different job in this interim of working for Mark.

After staying in the shower for entirely too long, I towel off and enjoy taking my time getting ready for bed. But even as I relax in the silence and the routine, I can't help but wonder about what might be going on at home right now. What my younger sister Grace is going through being alone with my parents.



She's now the only one left living in the house at seventeen years old, all of our older siblings having married and made homes of their own. Our parents likely questioned her incessantly about whether she knew my plan for leaving. She didn't, though I desperately wanted to bring her with me. I ultimately couldn't risk telling her my plans, but it pains me every day to think about how I left her. Her getting punished due to my transgressions would break my heart. A part of me wishes I could go back and get her, convince her to come with me, but it's too much of a risk right now.

Maybe one day.

The next morning, I head to the kitchen in search of breakfast. The apartment is quiet, but I notice that Mark's office door is closed. He must be working.

My assumption is confirmed when I see the half-full coffee pot on the counter. I decide to pour myself a bowl of cereal and grab an apple, still hesitant to help myself to too much, but I'm so sick of the protein bars I'd brought with me that I can hardly stand to look at them anymore.

As I settle into a chair at the small table near the window, I notice a contract sitting on the counter. Curiosity piqued, I pick it up and start reading.

The contract details are straightforward but way too generous. Mark is offering me a job as a housekeeper, with tasks including cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, and any odd jobs that might fall under "household work." The work won't exceed six hours per day and will likely be much less. The pay is a ridiculous amount of money, more than it should be, but it should give me a good cushion to get out of his place within three months tops.

I scan the document again, making sure there aren't any concerning details I may have missed. This is a lifeline, a way out of the desperate situation I've found myself in, but it also means putting myself completely in Mark's hands.

However, it also means more money in less time, which means a way to get my own place faster.

I take a deep breath and sign the contract, overcome with a mixture of relief and apprehension. I've trusted my gut with him, and so far, it hasn't let me down. As long as things stay the way they are, this will go just fine.

I finish eating my breakfast, savoring the last few bites of the crisp apple. Well, I think, I signed the contract, so I may as well get started with cleaning now.

I'm halfway through wiping down the counters when I hear the sound of Mark's office door opening. He steps out, looking still in his pajama pants and his hair disheveled, but he wears a smile. "Good morning."

"Good morning." The flutter of nerves in my stomach returns. "I saw the contract and signed it after reading through it a couple times. I hope that's okay."

"Of course. I'm glad you did."

I continue wiping down the counters, taking comfort in the repetitive task. "So, what should I do during the day otherwise if there's nothing to clean or tasks to do?"

He shrugs, leaning against the counter. "Whatever you want."

"I don't know what I want. That's the problem."

He cocks an eyebrow before turning to pour himself a cup of coffee. "Well, if you were in your own apartment right now and had a steady job, what would you do with your free time?"

"I have no idea," I admit. "I've never had this much freedom before."

"Well, you can read more books," he suggests. "Watch movies, explore the city a bit, maybe take a class of some sort. The world is your oyster."

I perk up at the last option. "Taking a class sounds fun... Do you mean at a college, or are there other classes that I could take?"

"Anything, really. It's a big city. If there are any hobbies you want to try, you can find classes on those. But if you want to take a college class, that's also an option."

I've always wanted to go to college, but it wasn't allowed. Now that I'm on my own, it's an option, but...

I shake my head as the weight of reality crashes down on me. "I'm just trying to survive right now. I don't even know how I'd get started with that whole process, and I don't have the money for it." I also have no idea if my homeschool education was enough to prepare me for college.

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"I'll help you if you want. With applying and paying." He says it so casually, as if it's an offer to grab me a glass of water and not a boatload of application paperwork and money.

"Why?"

"Why would I help you?" he asks for clarification.

I nod.

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I feel like you've been dealt a tough hand in life. I know what that's like, and I also know what it's like to have someone help me make a better life for myself. I wouldn't be where I am today without my friend Shane and his parents."

A lump forms in my throat. "I couldn't possibly let you do that for me. It's too much."

"How about a couple classes at the community college? The money isn't a big deal for me, it'll get you started with your education, and I'll feel like I'm doing a good deed."

I hesitate. The offer is simultaneously tempting and terrifying. "I'll think about it." It's an incredibly generous offer, but I can't help but wonder what the catch is.

He flashes me a smile. "Good. Tell me when you make up your mind."

I finish cleaning up the kitchen, but hope has sparked within me and is growing by the second. The thought of going to college, making friends, and building a life for myself beyond simply surviving is a dream I thought I might never achieve. But with Mark's help, maybe it's possible.

Mark watches me as I put away the cleaning supplies. "You know, you're welcome to any of the books on my shelf. There's a lot of good stuff in there."

I smile. "Thank you." I don't know what else to say. Everything just keeps getting better.

But as the day wears on, doubts begin to creep back in. What if this is all too good to be true? What if Mark has ulterior motives, hidden intentions that I can't see? Can I really afford to put my faith in a stranger, no matter how kind he seems?

Regardless, I spend the afternoon exploring the bookshelves in Mark's office before grabbing a new book and losing myself in the worlds contained within the pages. It's a welcome distraction from the doubts and fears that have sprung up.

But even as I lose myself in the story, a part of me remains in the present, cautious of letting down my guard completely. I've learned the hard way that trust is a fragile thing, easily shattered by the unexpected cruelty of others. And yet, there's something about Mark that makes me want to believe in the goodness of people, in the possibility of a better life.

Eventually, I'll have to leave and go out on my own in the real world, but right now, I'll let myself believe that things are perfect for a little while longer.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

CLAIRE

I've started making a list of tasks to do around the apartment—little things to keep myself busy and, hopefully, make myself useful. Mark didn't ask me to do this, but with the amount he's offered to pay me, I'll feel guilty sitting around doing the bare minimum, and I've already managed to get a lot done in the past few days. Plus, tasks like this are comforting for me in an odd sort of way; I may not know what I'm doing when it comes to most things in the "real world," but cooking, cleaning, and housework are what I was raised to do. Back at home, there was no higher position for a woman than a docile, committed housewife.

As silly as it seems, it's one of the few things I don't resent from my past. I've always enjoyed these sorts of things—the mindless, repetitive nature of doing laundry, the satisfaction of seeing people enjoy a meal I worked hard to make well, the feeling of doing a hard day's work and seeing the efforts reflected in the clean orderliness of the house. It's something that, no matter where I am, has the same effect.

I jot down, "Clean the windows" in the small notebook I've been carrying around. In reality, there's not a ton of cleaning to do. He keeps this place surprisingly tidy, so my list of things to do is becoming more and more specific. I make my way down the hallway and open the door to the hall closet, noting the partially folded blankets and the random items scattered about—board games, empty picture frames, various knick-knacks. I add, "Organize the hall closet" to my list.

Mark's muffled voice drifts into the hallway despite his closed office door. I shut the closet door quietly, knowing I shouldn't be eavesdropping but unable to resist, especially when I hear the frustrated tone of his voice.

"I don't know what the fuck I'm doing," he says. My heart hammers in my chest as I take a small step closer to the door.

There's a pause, then a scoff. "Of course I'm not going to fuck her. Don't be ridiculous."

I hold my breath and will my pulse to slow. He can't be talking about me, right? He's probably just referencing an ex-girlfriend.

I should leave. I should stop listening. But my feet are rooted to the floor, and my thoughts spiral in a direction I can't control.

"No. She's also fifteen years younger than me. She's a lost kid trying to figure life out. I'm seriously just giving her a place to stay. That's it."

A pause.

"Yes, that matters! There's more to it than that, anyway—"

He keeps talking, but I don't stick around to listen. My stomach churns as I quickly and quietly make my way to my room, shame and embarrassment weighing down on my chest. I shouldn't feel bad about that—shouldn't care at all—but somehow, the disgust in his voice feels like a slap in the face. It's not like I want to... well, do that with him, but there's something in the way he said it, like the idea of being with me is so repulsive it's laughable. Because I'm such a lost kid, apparently.

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But what did I expect? Obviously Mark is older than me, but that never seemed like such a big deal, especially where I'm from. I'm sure it's just his excuse, an easy explanation, because he's also everything I'm not. Successful, intelligent, confident, attractive.

I know I'm a bit plain. I've never worn makeup, have no clothing that shows my shape—both were frowned upon at home—, so I have no clue how to make myself desirable because I spent my whole life actively trying to do the opposite.

So why am I surprised he's not interested in me?

I'm a broken girl, so much younger than him and so far behind people my age. If I'd had a normal childhood, I would be a completely different person right now. I'd be finishing up college in the next year or two, dating guys, probably living in my own little apartment and spending weekends going to the bars with friends. But instead, I'm living with a man I just met out of sheer desperation, with no friends, no education, and only a stubborn thread of hope.

I don't blame him for laughing at the very idea of being with me.

I pick up the pen and finish my list, ignoring the lump in my throat, then decide to cook dinner. Maybe that will help. I move around the kitchen, setting pots and pans on the stovetop before I get to work chopping vegetables.

Cooking is a safe task. It keeps my hands busy and my thoughts in check. I make mental notes about groceries we'll need as I begin mixing ingredients. When Mark finally comes into the room, I hear his footsteps before he speaks.



"It smells good," he says in a casual voice. It's a far cry from the affronted tone he used while he was on the phone.

"Thanks."

He lingers just on the edge of my peripheral vision. "How was your day?"

"It was fine." I plate our food and walk past him to set the plates on the table without meeting his eyes.

"Claire." His tone is firm.

I turn to face him, schooling my expression to one of indifference. "Yes?"

"What's wrong?"

I pause. Do I tell him the truth? He clearly notices something's off.

Before I can decide how to answer him, something shifts in his expression as the pieces click together in his mind. "Did you happen to overhear any of my phone conversation earlier?"

My heart skips. Uh oh. I nod, unable to lie but wishing desperately that I hadn't been standing in the hall.

"And you're upset by what you overheard." It's more of a statement than a question.

I glance down at the floor. "I don't know. Kind of, I guess."

He sits in his chair and crosses his arms, but he doesn't look angry. In fact, he looks almost amused as I meet his gaze.

"Are you unhappy that I said I wouldn't fuck you, Claire?"

The bluntness of his question shocks me, and I almost choke on my own saliva. "It's not that," I stammer. "Well, not exactly. I just..." I trail off, unsure how to put it into words.

He waits, his eyebrow cocked and his expression infuriatingly smug. Why does he have to be so attractive? And why does his unwavering stare after saying something so crude make my stomach swoop and my heart race?

"It's just difficult," I finally say, "to feel so undesirable sometimes."

As soon as the confession leaves my lips, I wish I hadn't said it. I brace myself for him to laugh, to dismiss me as childish and insecure, but when his low chuckle fills the room, it's not cruel. It's surprised.

"Is that really what you think?"

"Uh, yeah."

Mark closes his eyes and shakes his head slowly, like I've said something absurd. "It's not that at all."

"Then what?" I challenge.

He takes a step toward me before seeming to catch himself and stopping a couple feet away, his expression softening. "You're too desirable, Claire. I'm struggling to not want you. But you're very young—especially compared to me—and I don't want to corrupt you."

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The words hang between us, heavy with implications I don't fully understand.

"I don't know exactly what you've been through," he continues, "but I can imagine that you and I want very different things from a relationship. If I ever crossed a line with you, if I ever hurt you, I wouldn't forgive myself."

His gaze locks on mine, and for a moment, the world is still. The vulnerability in his voice catches me off guard, and I don't know how to respond.

"I see," I manage to say, though I'm not sure I do.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

#### CLAIRE

The snow outside is falling steadily, painting the world in a cold, quiet blanket of white. Inside, the glow of string lights around the living room and the faint crackle of the fireplace fill the apartment with warmth. It's so familiar yet such a stark contrast to my childhood Christmases, and I'm not quite sure how to feel about it.

On one hand, it feels so much quieter than usual. My chest aches with the absence of the chaotic joy I once knew, the laughter of my siblings as we crowded into the kitchen, bickering over recipes and sampling dishes behind my mother's back before they made it to the table. The scent of cinnamon and roasting meat would fill the air, and my father would lead us in prayer with his hands outstretched in blessing. Despite everything—the control, the restrictions—there had been moments of comfort in that simple togetherness.

But now, there's a different sort of happiness to be felt. Even though I miss my family in a complicated, undoubtedly romanticized sort of way, it's nice to simply exist without expectations. It's quiet here with just Mark and me, but there is no underlying tension or need to put on an act. Here, I can be myself without worrying about whether or not my father will get angry, and I don't have to play the role of the subservient daughter and soon-to-be housewife.

I'm starting to learn that there will always be tradeoffs between blissful ignorance and freedom, but I'd rather pay the price for liberation.

I curl up in the corner of Mark's couch. A blanket is draped over my lap, and I fidget with the fringe on the edges as Mark flips through the stack of DVDs he pulled from a nearby shelf. The tension between us has been palpable these last few days, ever since that conversation where he admitted I was "desirable." The word had landed like a spark between us, igniting something I don't fully understand but feel viscerally every time we're in the same room.

"What about *A Christmas Story*?" Mark asks, holding up a DVD case with a kid in glasses on the cover.

"I haven't seen it."

He arches an eyebrow, clearly surprised, but moves on. "Okay. *Home Alone*?"

I shake my head.

Mark stares at me. "Wait, hold on. You've never seen *Home Alone*?"

"No." I bite my lip, feeling a little defensive under his incredulous gaze. "I told you—I didn't grow up watching movies like that."

He sets the DVDs down and looks at me with a mixture of amusement and confusion. Maybe a little pity. "What did you watch, then?"

I shrug, suddenly self-conscious. "Our access to movies was limited. We didn't have normal TV channels or anything. Just an old VHS/DVD player and a stack of approved movies."

"Approved by who?" he asks.

"My father, and therefore the church." I look down at the blanket in my lap, fiddling with the fringe again to avoid his gaze. "They were mostly religious."

There's a beat of silence. "So you've never seen a Christmas movie that wasn't religious?"

"I don't think so. Definitely not any of the ones you just listed," I admit.

"What about It's a Wonderful Life? That has a religious element. Sort of."

"Nope."

Mark shakes his head, muttering something under his breath. "Alright, we're fixing this." He picks up a DVD with a black-and-white cover. "This one is a classic, and it has an angel, so it technically counts as religious... I think. We're starting here."

"Okay." I still haven't watched anything outside of our "approved" movies, so I'm not entirely sure what to expect. If my father didn't have it in his collection, it means there's something in it he wouldn't approve of, especially since it's a Christmas movie. But Mark says it has a religious aspect to it, so I'm interested to see where the divide is.

Mark heads toward the kitchen, calling over his shoulder, "Do you want a drink? Wine? Eggnog?"

"Umm, I'm not sure..."

"Oh, shit, I forgot you don't drink," he says.

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"It's not that I don't drink," I correct, feeling bold. "It's just that I haven't yet."

"Well, do you want some then?"

I pause for a moment, considering the offer. What's the worst that could happen? I'm in a safe environment with someone who I trust not to take advantage of me. "Sure." I get up and follow him to the kitchen.

"I suppose you don't have a preference," he says.

"Not really. Probably something sweet and not too strong, though."

He nods as he grabs a bottle of white wine and pours a small amount into a glass.

"Try this."

I take a sip and am surprised by how much I like it. It's sweet, bubbly, and light.

Mark takes my expression as all the confirmation he needs and fills the glass about halfway. "Be careful," he warns. "It tastes good but it'll hit you harder than you expect if you drink it too fast."

"Okay."

He hands the glass back to me and his fingers brush mine. I try to ignore the jolt of electricity his touch sends through my body.

Mark pours his own drink then settles on the couch next to me, not too close but close

enough that I can't stop thinking about how, if either of us moved just a few inches, we'd be touching. What would it feel like to lean into him, to let him wrap his arms around me?

He picks up the remote and starts the movie, the black and white picture displaying the opening credits.

I take another tentative sip of the wine.

As the movie plays, I find myself drawn in immediately. It begins with angels speaking to each other amongst the stars, so I see where Mark says there may have been a religious element to it. It tells the story of a man whose life gradually gets worse through a series of unfortunate circumstances, but he manages to stay positive throughout. But when a massive mistake puts him in dire circumstances, he almost ends his own life before an angel intervenes.

Something about it resonates with me in a way I can't quite articulate. While I've never considered taking my own life, I know what it feels like to wonder what the world would be like if I didn't exist. Would anyone actually miss me, or would they just miss the role I filled in making their lives easier?

More than halfway through the movie, I realize I've finished my wine, and when Mark pauses the movie and offers to refill the glass, I accept. My head feels light, but it seems to alleviate the constant pull of worry in my mind.

Mark returns to the living room with a refilled glass for both me and himself, and he sits back down on the couch. I can't help but wish he was closer.

"Why are you spending Christmas alone?" I ask, surprising myself with the question. It was in my mind, but I didn't mean to say it aloud.



Mark's expression shifts, just slightly, but enough for me to notice. "I don't really have any family anymore."

I want to ask more, but something in his tone tells me not to push. "I'm sorry."

He shrugs, brushing it off. "Last year, and most years, I spent Christmas with Shane. But he and Dani decided to go somewhere tropical this year. Trying to make the final decision about their wedding venue, I think."

"I see." I'm not sure how else to respond. I don't want to pry and ask about his family situation. Well, I do, but I won't, in the same way he doesn't pry about mine. "It's peaceful here, though. Watching the snow and city lights from so high up but staying warm inside. Nobody to impress or appease."

Mark's expression softens when his eyes meet mine. "Yeah. That part is nice." He resumes the movie, and I turn my attention back to the screen and watch the situation play out.

The movie makes me think in more ways than I expected it to. While it depicts angels, it's not in the typical biblical sense, which is likely why my father wouldn't show it to us. But I like the idea that there may be a guardian angel out there for me like Clarence—one who's kind but has a sense of humor, who would intervene if I ever got to that point of desperation like George does as he considers jumping off the bridge. Even if I'm not sure what to believe now, it would be nice to think that there's something looking out for me.

I sip my wine and ignore the feeling of Mark's gaze on me, watching the screen as George struggles with his situation then makes his wish. This time, his words are ones I identify more with.

What would happen if I'd never been born? It's not like I've made a significant

contribution to society. I've had a lot of lonely nights in my car the past few weeks to ponder what life means to me now that I'm not a blindly devout follower of religion. At home, they were all adamant that life was solely about following God's word, even if the things they did seemed to directly contradict it at some points.

But now that I don't really believe in God—at least in the way they do—what meaning is there to ascribe to life?

Maybe this is all there is to it, though. I'm here with someone who cares about me, warm and comfortable and relatively happy. Everyone wants something to give their life meaning. I've lost the thing I was supposed to find meaning in, so now I have the freedom to find it wherever I choose. Maybe it is simply about these little moments of connection and joy. Would it really be so bad if that's all there was to live for?

As the movie continues, my heart grows heavier as I follow along and learn the same lessons George does.

By the time the movie ends with the townspeople singing Auld Lang Syne, tears are streaming down my face and I'm sniffling in attempts to not sob. I don't know why it hits me so hard, but it does. The sudden burst of hope, the joy of a community coming together in kindness and love. It's something I've always craved, but I've never felt or seen it in this way.

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As the movie ends, the room falls into silence. The snow outside has slowed, the flakes drifting lazily past the window. I lean back against the couch, not sure if the warmth inside me is from the wine, the fire, or Mark's presence.

"Thank you," I say, breaking the silence.

"For what?"

"For this. All of it. For letting me stay. For showing me a different kind of Christmas." I look over at him. "It means a lot."

Mark's gaze meets mine, and the rest of the world fades away. "You're welcome." He gives me a soft smile.

In that moment, something shifts between us. The tension that's been hanging over us for days doesn't disappear entirely, but it feels less sharp and more... gentle. Affectionate, even.

I want to kiss him.

I want him to kiss me.

The thought hits me out of nowhere, a sudden desire that takes hold and refuses to let go.

But he doesn't make a move, and neither do I. I can't bring myself to take that step. At least, not yet.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MARK

I stare at Shane's name on my phone screen for much too long before I click on his name. The only communication between us since our phone conversation—the one Claire had overheard—was an exchange of "Merry Christmas" texts a couple days ago along with a selfie of him and Dani on the beach.

It's not rare for us to go a few days without chatting, but the times between our phone calls and his text responses seem to grow longer and longer lately. He's busy, and I know that, but there's a part of me that hopes things go back to normal after the wedding.

Shane answers on the third ring.

"Hey, man. What's up?"

"Hey, I'm sorry to bother you, but I think you said you'd be back from your trip by now. I was wondering if you could give me the contact info for that therapist you mentioned awhile back," I say. No point in dancing around the point.

"Sure. I'll text it to you so you don't lose it. Finally ready to get some professional help with that emotional constipation of yours?"

I feign a laugh, but it falls flat. Our entire friendship revolves around giving each other shit, so I know he's not actually being an asshole, but his jab hits a little too close to home today. "It's actually not for me."

"Oh?" When I don't provide more information, he asks, "Is it for that girl staying with you?"

"Yeah. She's pretty hesitant about opening up, but I can tell she's been through some shit. I think it would be good for her to talk with a professional." She's constantly writing in that notebook I gave her, and I'd venture a guess that she's made it into a journal of sorts. And while writing things out is usually a good way to manage feelings, I can't help but think that maybe she needs more.

Why I'm going out of my way to help her so much, I'm still not sure. In some way, it feels like passing on the good karma from Shane and his parents helping me out so long ago, supporting me when my piece-of-shit father was too drunk to care about taking care of his child.

Yeah, passing on the good karma. That's exactly what I'm doing, I decide.

"Hmmm, those words sound familiar," Shane teases. "It's almost like I've said the exact same words to you in the past..."

I roll my eyes. "I'm perfectly fine with how my life is going. This is different."

"Whatever you say. This must be serious between you two if you're doing all this to keep her around."

"How was your trip?" I ask, desperate to change the subject now that he's agreed to text me the therapist's information. He's already given me shit about Claire being here, and while I can't deny that I'm attracted to her, she's not someone I can fuck for a few weeks then move on from. She's clearly not the type for that, and I'm still dealing with whatever weird protective feelings I have over her.

"It was amazing. We found the perfect spot to have the wedding and the reception."

Despite my serious mood, I smile at how excited he sounds. "That's awesome. I can't wait to see it."

"You'll love it." I hear Dani talking in the background but can't make out what she's saying. "Hey, can I call you back?" Shane asks.

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"Yeah, that's fine. Just don't forget to text me that info, please."

"You got it, lover boy."

Less than a minute after we hang up, he's texted me the contact information, and I'm doing research. I could've looked for someone myself, but Shane always seems to know the best of the best in this city, so if it helps Claire, it'll be worth it.

It's not that I think she's some broken thing that needs fixing, though. She's fragile, sure, but not in a weak way. More like something delicate that's been battered and bruised by the harsh realities of life. Yet she's still fighting, making a life for herself despite whatever she left behind. I know what it's like to be in her shoes, at least in the sense of needing to fight my way to a better life, but even when I felt entirely alone, I at least had Shane and his parents. Claire doesn't seem to have anybody.

That evening, I'm mindlessly scrolling on my laptop a couple hours after dinner when Claire's voice breaks the silence.

"Hi."

I jump, startled by her presence. "Hey, I didn't even hear you come in here," I laugh, amused by my own reaction. It's not often I'm caught off guard.

"Sorry," she says, trying to hide her amused grin. "I'm used to trying to be quiet when I walk."

The way she phrases that gives me pause—why would she actively try to make her

presence unheard?—but I don't mention it.

"No need to be sorry. Is there something you wanted to talk about?" I can tell by the way she's hovering at the edge of the room and fidgeting with the hem of her oversized sweater that she's nervous and came in here with a purpose.

"I'd like to try out college if your offer still stands."

Her eyes flit to mine before falling away again, as if she's embarrassed or awaiting some sort of negative reaction. "That's a great idea." I give her a bright smile to let her know I genuinely mean it. "Have you looked at any classes yet?"

She shakes her head. "I didn't know where to look."

"I think you can just look up the course catalog. Either way, we'll have to get your application in, though there shouldn't be an issue with applying this late to the community college. Do you need help with that?"

"Yes. I don't have a laptop, and my phone is just a cheap pre-paid one." "Hmm, that might need to change..."

"Do you have your legal documents with you?"

She nods.

"Go get those and let's get this filled out, then."

She grins and scampers down the hallway before returning a few minutes later.

We spend the next hour navigating the online enrollmentsystem for the closest community college, and while a normal person might be annoyed by the tedious



filling in of boxes, Claire lights up with every new page.

I'm still sitting in the same spot, but she's been standing despite my repeated offers for her to pull up a chair. She hovers over my shoulder, accidentally brushing up against my arm more than once, and it makes my skin break out in goosebumps. She's so close, I could reach out and pull her into my lap in an instant, really feel her against me instead of these soft, accidental touches.

Stop it, Mark.Jesus.

After filling out the application, we scroll through the catalogue of courses for the spring semester, noting any of the ones she's interested in.

She settles on taking two evening classes, English Composition and Intro to Psychology, which will be enough to keep her occupied but not overwhelm her.

I create a reminder on my phone to help her actually enroll in the courses once she gets officially accepted, which will likely only be a few days at most.

As soon as we've completed everything we're able to, she looks at me with a massive grin, practically bouncing on her feet as she stands beside me. "It's only two weeks away!"

I smile back, a warmth blossoming in my chest.She's fucking adorable, I think. I shake the thought away and replace it with a more appropriate one.She's excited, and I'm happy to see her smiling about something. That's all.

Claire goes to bed soon after, and I suddenly feel the need to preoccupy myself. I head to my office, the one place that's my escape in the apartment after she's moved in because I know it's the only place I'm certain to be alone.

It's not that I want to be away from Claire; it's that I want to be around her too much. The magnetism between us is something I can't shake. Being near her, seeing her open up or watching her slowly find pieces of herself she's lost... it throws me off balance.

"I probably just need to get some of this pent-up energy out of my system," I mutter to myself as I brush aside the papers on my desk to set my laptop down. It's been a few weeks now since I've gone to the club, which is highly unusual for me. Normally, it's my way of blowing off steam—no strings, no complications. But now, the idea just doesn't hold the same appeal, and I'm willing to bet it has something to do with the sweet, petite blonde staying in my guest room.

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Maybe I just need to go to the gym more and blow off steam that way.

My phone lights up, giving me a welcome distraction. Shane.

"Hello again," I say in greeting, feeling a little more lighthearted since our conversation earlier.

"Hey, sorry I had to cut our call short earlier. Dani needed my help with something."

"Is that code for sex? Because I really don't need to know that."

He chuckles. "No. Not this time, anyway. But since we're on the topic of women..."

Here we go.

"Seriously, what's up with having this girl live with you? This goes against everything you stand for." He says it as a joke, but both of us know there's a hint of truth to his words.

"I already told you what's going on with her. I haven't so much as touched her."

Shane chuckles. "I'm just surprised you've lasted this longliving with anyone, let alone a pretty stranger. It's not like you."

"It's platonic," I argue. "That's why it works."

"So you're telling me you're not attracted to her at all?"

I sigh, and Shane's laughter only grows. "That's what I thought."

A smile pulls at the corners of my mouth. "Do you have a point, or are you just calling to be a pain in the ass?"

"I actually did call with a purpose. I have two invites for you. Number one, I'm inviting you and Claire to our New Year's Eve party, and I've also already accepted the invitation on your behalf, because you have to be there."

"Naturally," I chuckle.

"I was also wondering if you'd want to take a trip to Hawaii at the end of March. Figured you could use a break from work, and Dani and I need to nail down some wedding details that we didn't get to this time around. I'd pay, of course."

It doesn't take much for me to consider the offer. "Yeah, that would be nice. Feels like we haven't seen each other much lately." I might be a third wheel, but I'll happily accept that awkward role if it allows me a free trip to Hawaii.

Shane's tone softens. "You're right. Sorry about that. Life's been hectic. But hey, by the way, if you want to bring your not-girlfriend on the trip, you're welcome to."

"That's not a thing. So no." I'm careful with my words now, knowing from experience that Claire might overhear.

"Don't say I didn't offer."

We eventually wrap up the conversation after I catch Shane up on most of the details of what's happened with Claire—even though he's being annoying about it, he's still my best friend. As I hang up, I lean back in my chair and take along, deep breath before slowly exhaling.

A vacation is exactly what I need. And Shane footing the bill doesn't bother me much; the guy has more money than he knows what to do with. My income is more than comfortable, but it doesn't come close to touching his.

For a brief moment, I allow myself to get lost in the fantasy of bringing Claire along for the vacation. I wonder if she's ever been to the beach. Would it be a brand new experience for her, lighting up her expression the way filling out the college application did earlier? It was the first time since she's been here that I've seen pure, unadulterated joy on her face, and it tugged at my heart. I wanted to wrap her up in my arms and celebrate with her.

No. I shake the thought away. She's sweet, sure, but this isn't the kind of risk I can afford to take. The last few days have already felt too dangerous, filled with stolen glances and moments that linger just a little too long. Claire doesn't know what she needs from a relationship yet, and she's likely latching onto me because I'm the first man to show her basic decency based on the little I know of her past.

This is just a stepping stone for her. She needs freedom, not a man like me. And I need to remember that my relationships have always been simple—no strings attached, no feelings—and I'm not about to complicate that. It's my one rule, and breaking it for Claire would be a disaster for both of us.

I can't afford to hurt her. But I can't afford to hurt myself, either.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### CLAIRE

When Mark asked me to attend his best friend's New Year's Eve party, I had immediately fallen into a tailspin of panic. I don't have any clothes suitable for a party, and I surely don't have the social skills to impress Mark's freakin' billionaire

best friend or his fiancée.

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But instead of sharing my concern, Mark had simply smiled and raised an eyebrow at me, then assured me that he'd buy me a dress and shoes. When I repeated my second point about not having social skills, he seemed even more amused and promised that I'd fit right in.

I still don't believe him, but I'm going to try my hardest to make a good impression.

Mark took me to the shopping center and told me to pick out not only a dress and shoes, but some "clothes that fit," as he put it. I'm still getting used to wearing clothes that are a little less modest than what I spent most of my life wearing. The pants and sweaters I had were multiple sizes too big so as not to show off my figure. I wore a lot of dresses at home, but there was no way I'd be bringing those along with me.

It took a lot of time spent in the dressing rooms while Mark patiently waited outside, but I ended up with a few pairs of pants, some well-fitting tops, and a dress for the New Year's party that feels downright scandalous. The only reason I got it was due to the overly enthusiastic compliments from the group of women around my age in the fitting room who were also shopping for New Year's outfits. They had insisted it was perfect and a "normal" outfit for an event like this.

Now, I'm making my way to the apartment with a couple bags hung on my arms while Mark carries the other few. I had considered getting makeup, but the idea of figuring out where to start was so daunting that I skipped it. Plus, I would've felt guilty spending more of Mark's money on non-essentials. Maybe another day, when I can buy it myself.

The door shuts with a click behind me, and Mark and I go our separate ways for the

evening, already having had dinner while we were out.

Honestly, I'm looking forward to writing in my journal. Putting the words down on paper detailing my life up until this point and my feelings about everything that's happened has been therapeutic. It gives me a chance to confront all the conflicting emotions I've been having. Guilt and relief, anxiety and liberation, missing parts of my life while relieved I'll never have to go back there again.

I drop my shopping bags in my room and take my time trying on the clothes again, examining my body in the mirror. I've always felt plain and unexceptional, but seeing myself in these clothes almost makes me feel... pretty.

After my one-woman fashion show in the safety of my bedroom, I change into sweatpants, turn off the overhead light, switch on the bedside lamp, and get lost in my writing. It's over an hour later when a noise in the kitchen draws my attention. I glance at the clock, surprised Mark is still awake. Somehow over the past couple weeks, I've gone from being slightly terrified of Mark to eagerly awaiting our daily conversations. Something has changed between us, and I know I'm not the only one who feels it. There's a sort of comfort here, a mutual understanding, especially after our conversation on Christmas.

Deciding I could use a late-night snack anyway, I make my way down the carpeted hall and turn the corner when I'm met with the sight of Mark wrapped in a towel... and only a towel.

He notices me at the same time I see him, and I freeze, heat creeping up to my cheeks.

"Shit, sorry, I didn't know you were still awake," Mark says, but he makes no move to cover his bare chest or grab onto the towel slung low around his hips.



"Oh, I—um—it's okay," I stutter out. "It's your house." Even in my embarrassment, I can't seem to drag my eyes away from the soft ridges of muscle covering his massive biceps and chest. With clothes on, it's clear he's large but in good shape. But now, there's nothing left to the imagination. He's got the sort of physique that shows he doesn't just work out for show—while his muscles are huge, the prominence of them is softened just slightly. Strong, but not chiseled like a bodybuilder. I want to touch him, to run my hands along the curves of his arms, over his chest. My eyes follow the smattering of dark hair that starts on his chest and trails lower, tapering off right before—

"Enjoying the view?"

My gaze snaps up to Mark's smug expression, and my face goes red all over again. I've totally been staring and didn't even realize it. His hair is still wet and falls over his forehead, and he reaches up to push it back right as I turn and practically run back to my bedroom.

Oh my god, how embarrassing.

I flop down on the bed and cover my face with my hands. He was practically naked, and I just stood there staring like a total idiot!

But he looked so good. Sinfully good.

I wonder what his skin would feel like if he allowed me to touch him in all the ways I've never touched a man before...

Ugh. I pick up the bookmarked paperback sitting on the nightstand, attempting to stop thinking about the image of Mark standing there leaning against the counter with his dripping wet hair and that self-satisfied smirk, or the way that towel hung low on his hips in the most unintentionally provocative way. The way he seemed to enjoy my

deer-in-the-headlights stare, or the way his soft laughter followed me as I fled down the hallway.

Nope. No way. Not thinking about it at all.

After a good thirty minutes of attempting to read, I toss the book aside in frustration. I can't stop thinking about him. I've been fighting a losing battle of it the entire time I've been here, but every time I replay the image of the heated look he gave me in the kitchen, my stomach swoops and my desire grows stronger.

I'm not sure what he's doing to me, but in a twisted sort of way, I think I like it.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### CLAIRE

"What time is the party tonight?" I ask Mark. We're both sitting at the table in our pajamas with mugs of coffee, pretending like the awkward moment that went down in the kitchen last night never happened.

"It starts at eight, so we should probably leave here thirty to forty minutes before that."

"Got it." I take a sip of coffee and allow more of the tension to leave my body. If he hasn't mentioned what happened last night by now, hopefully he won't at all.

We sit in silence as he scrolls on his phone and I stare out the window at the bustling city streets below. After a few minutes, he breaks the silence by asking, "Have you ever been to a New Year's Eve party before?"

"Not really. We would celebrate the new year, but it was a lot like our Christmas

celebrations."

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"Well, just so you know what to expect, there will probably be a couple dozen people at this one and a decent amount of drinking, but don't feel pressured to drink if you don't want to."

I'm sure he's thinking of Christmas Eve when we both opened up, at least a little, over a few too many drinks. "Okay, I'll keep that in mind. I hope the dress I got is okay," I say, more to myself than to him. The more I think about wearing it in front of Mark and a whole group of strangers, the more stressed I feel. What if it's too much? I'll be mortified if I show up to a party as the least modest person there after overcorrecting my wardrobe to an extreme.

Dressing in anything modern is so far outside of my wheelhouse that I have no idea what fits these "normal" occasions.

"I'm sure you'll look wonderful," Mark says, but I know he's just saying that to calm me down. He hasn't even seen my dress yet.

"Thank you." I can only hope so.

The afternoon drags by, but after Mark and I eat an early dinner, I head back to my room to get dressed for the evening. It's not like it will take long, but sitting around any longer with this nervous energy would have driven me insane.

I pull the tags off the dress and slide the silky fabric up my legs before slipping my arms through the straps. The material is a shiny, silvery light blue, and it hugs my body in a way I'm not used to. I don't think I've ever worn anything this revealing, but I know enough to recognize that it's still somewhat tasteful, even if my mother

would tell me I look like a harlot right now.

I do my best to push the ingrained judgmental voice out of my head, and I run a brush through my hair, not knowing what else to do with it. A braid would look silly, but I don't have anything else to style it, so I just leave it down.

My small heels are the last thing to manage, and it takes me a couple minutes to get the thin straps buckled in the right place.

As I stand, my stomach is flip-flopping with jitters. I feel exposed, but not necessarily in a bad way. My arms are bare aside from the delicate straps on my shoulders, and I can't hide behind layers of loose clothing like I normally do.

Yet somehow, the feeling of being dressed up and exposed in this unfamiliar way is almost...exhilarating?

The moment I step into the living room, Mark's gaze zeroes in on me, and I stand there shifting on my feet as his eyes seem to consume every inch of my body.

"Well? What do you think?" I give him an awkward smile and twirl, trying to defuse the tension that has suddenly filled the room.

Mark stands wordlessly, his expression unreadable, and takes slow, deliberate steps toward me before stopping just short of where I stand. All the air leaves my lungs as he reaches up and brushes my hair back over my shoulder, his fingertips barely grazing the exposed skin of my neck. He's so close that I can feel the heat radiating from his chest as I stare up at him, my lips parted slightly in surprise.

"You look breathtaking," he murmurs. There's a sincerity and vulnerability in his gaze that's not normally present, but he seems to realize that the same moment I do. He clears his throat, moves a step backward to put space between us, and takes a deep

breath.

"Alright, I'll grab our coats and then we can head out." His tone is friendly, almost businesslike, a stark contrast to the intimate way he spoke to me just seconds ago.

"Oh, okay." Did I do something wrong?

He reappears a moment later with his coat on and mine draped over his arm. When I reach out my hand to take it, he shakes his head before lifting my coat by the shoulders and holding it open for me. I give him a soft smile and slip my arms into the sleeves, noting how he's careful not to touch me.

I probably look so unrecognizable in a pretty dress that he forgot it was me for a moment. Touching a pretty girl is surely something he's familiar with, but intentionally touching the needy, down-on-her-luck Claire? Yeah, right.

I try to force the thought from my head as we make our way down the elevator to the front door of the building. Mark had announced earlier that we'd take an Uber tonight instead of either of us driving, which I'm perfectly fine with.

He's abnormally quiet as he watches his phone while we stand near the large glass doors at the entrance of the building, and I fiddle with the buttons on my coat to give myself something to do. There's a sinking feeling in my gut, and I'm not sure why. Because I'm disappointed he didn't follow through earlier with whatever he was starting? Because when he came to his senses after a few seconds, he couldn't get away fast enough? Even now, he's not making eye contact or joking about something like he normally does.

He's just so confusing. Or maybe I'm just misreading things. I certainly don't expect him to fall in love with me—the thought of Mark loving someone like me is laughable even to my overly romantic self—but he could at least be consistent.

Is he interested, or is he not?

"Car's here." Mark holds the door for me as we step out into the freezing night air, and I slide into the backseat of the white sedan that's idling at the curb.

The entire drive, I stare out the window, and Mark doesn't say a word.

Mark wasn't lying when he said his best friend was a billionaire. We arrive at the penthouse in the middle of the city much earlier than anticipated, and when we step through the door, I can't seem to find the right words to express how impressed I am. It's all I can do to keep my jaw from hanging.

Eventually, I manage to say, "You have a beautiful home," so I don't make a total fool of myself the first time meeting Mark's friends.

"Thank you." Shane flashes me a genuine smile, introduces himself, and offers to take our coats. I shrug out of mine and hand it to him. "I'll go tell Dani you guys are here. She's still getting ready, but she'll be so excited to meet you."

That should make me feel better, but it only ratchets up my nerves. How much do they know about me? What has Mark told them? And why would she be excited to meet me?

Mark's stare burns into my side, but I resist the urge to make eye contact.

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"Claire—" he starts, just as Shane returns to the room.

"Dani requests your presence in the bedroom," Shane says.

It takes me a moment to realize he's speaking to me. "Me? Why?"

Shane shrugs. "Probably wants to have girl talk without us around. Mark, help me with the drinks, will you?"

Mark makes his way to the kitchen, and Shane tells me which door to go into and assures me that Dani will love me.

I sure hope so. I could use some friends.

As soon as I open the door, Dani sets down her lipstick and practically jumps off the chair to greet me. "Claire! Oh my god, I'm so excited to finally meet you," she squeals before wrapping her arms around me like we've been best friends forever.

"Oh, uh, me too," I answer, because what else can I say?

She steps back, smiling. "Sorry, I may have gotten a little too excited. Mark never brings women around, so you must be pretty special."

"Oh, no, it's not like that. We're not—"

Dani waves me off. "Maybe not, but you're clearly special to him."



I snort out a laugh before I can stop myself, but Dani just gives me a knowing look. Too bad she has no idea what she's talking about.

"Your makeup looks so pretty," I tell her, partly because it does and partly because I'm desperate to change the subject.

She beams. "Aw, thank you! It's a new eyeshadow palette, and I've been so excited to try it out. Have you ever used this brand before? Because it's so much better than I expected it to be."

Unease fills me as I'm reminded yet again how inexperienced I am, even with things as simple as makeup. "I, um, actually haven't ever used any makeup."

Her eyes widen. "Like, never?"

"No. My home was . . . very strict, even into adulthood, and I only left it a little over a month ago. So I really haven't had the opportunity to try makeup yet. I wouldn't even know where to start."

"Well, no pressure, but I can put a little on you if you want to try it. You definitely don't need it," she adds, "but makeovers are so much fun."

I give her a hesitant smile. Her energy is infectious, and she clearly knows what she's doing when it comes to beauty—her brown hair is curled to perfection and her makeup accentuates her features perfectly.

"Go for it."

The grin she gives me is enough to spur my excitement, and I follow her instructions to sit in the chair and pull my hair back into a quick ponytail.

"Can I do your hair too?"

"Sure, you're the expert." I take in the array of products strewn across the surface before me, and I'm able to figure out what some of them are for—lipstick, blush, eyeshadow—but others are a mystery. Regardless, my nerves are dissipating by the second.

Dani studies my face for a few seconds before nodding to herself and shuffling through the products. "You have such pretty skin, so I'm not even going to touch that. But a little bit of eyeliner, mascara, and lipstick will take this to a whole new level."

"Alright, let's do it." Warmth fills my chest as I sit here and close my eyes while Dani paints liquid eyeliner on my top lids. As she works, she speaks softly about how excited she is to introduce me to her friends tonight. Is this what real friendship feels like? It's similar to what I've felt with Mark, but there isn't that undercurrent of awkward attraction for me to battle with when it comes to Dani. Just a sort of giddiness that someone actually cares about me for who I am—even if she barely knows me yet.

"Keep your eyes closed for now while it dries," Dani says, interrupting my thoughts.

"Okay."

"So, what's it like living with Mark?" She asks in a lighthearted tone, but I can hear the curiosity behind it. Of course she would want to know more.

"It's very nice. He's been so kind giving me somewhere to stay and helping me get back on my feet. I don't know what I'd be doing right now if it weren't for him," I admit. "He's a really good friend."

I still can't open my eyes to gauge her reaction, but she pauses long enough for me to

know she's considering how to respond. "He is a great guy. Sometimes he pushes back when life gets too good for him, though. It's like he thinks he doesn't deserve too many good things. I'm not sure why. But that may be something to keep in mind for the future."

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I'm not sure why she thinks that has anything to do with me—all I've done is make his life more complicated—but I nod anyway. "Gotcha."

"Okay, open your eyes."

I do, and Dani clasps her hands together in excitement. "Ah, it looks perfect! Okay, now for some mascara."

After adding some pencil eyeliner to my lower lash line, she holds a wand and makes me blink a few times to coat my eyelashes with the makeup, and then she grabs a soft pink lipstick and swipes it carefully over my lips.

When she steps back to examine her work, she gives me another one of those wide grins and says, "Oh my god, you look fuckingamazing."

Her casual use of the word "fuck" startles me—I'm still getting used to hearing it, but this may be the first time I've heard a woman say it.

I turn to face my reflection, and I'm shocked at what I see in the mirror; It's still me, obviously, but with a new added layer of sultriness. Dani has swiped the eyeliner up in a small wing extending past my eyelids, and the darkness of the makeup makes my eyes seem to stand out. It's a subtle enough change, but it amplifies everything to seem more dramatic. The glossy lipstick is the perfect finaltouch.

"Hair tiiiiime," Dani sing-songs.

She decides to straighten my long blonde hair rather than curl it, then pulls the front

pieces back away from my face and clips them in the back. Whatever she sprayed in my hair makes it shiny and soft, and by the time she's finished, I feel like an entirely new person.

In the matter of twenty minutes, Dani has helped me gain a confidence I didn't know I had with just a few simple changes. I look in the mirror and I don't see a plain, awkward girl—I see a woman who is pretty and, dare I say it, even a little sexy. And not by hiding anything on my face, but by emphasizing it. It's empowering.

"This is amazing," I say, looking at Dani. "Thank you. Seriously. I didn't know I could look like this." I know I'm a bit plain, and attempting to look prettier was always regarded as vanity at home. But this doesn't feel like vanity, it feels like confidence.

She offers me her hand to stand, and I take it. "It was my pleasure. And I know you might not care to hear me say this, but Mark is going to be drooling over you even more now." With a wink, she drags me toward the bedroom door, and we head toward the living room.

A few more people had arrived during the time I'd been in the room with Dani. I'm a half-step behind her as we make our way through the living room where the TV shows a man in a coat with a microphone talking about the new year.

All eyes turn to us. Which is fair, since Dani is the host of the party alongside Shane, but there's only one set of eyes I care about. Mark's gaze is locked on me from across the room where he leans against the wall with a drink in hand. His lips are parted slightly and his stare intense, and I give him a shywave. I'm barely listening when Dani introduces me to the couple beside her, but I smile and introduce myself all the same.

Finally, she asks, "Do you want a drink?"

It'll only be my second time ever drinking, but I have a feeling that wine might loosen up the tension buzzing inside of me.

I tell her yes, and we make our way to the kitchen where she pours us each a glass of champagne. I take a sip, savoring the light, bubbly flavor.

"How are you feeling?" she asks.

I think about it for a second. "Good. Nervous, I think. I haven't ever really been to any parties like this, so this is pretty new for me."

"Well, I'm glad this could be your first," she says with a gentle sort of understanding. I can tell she's curious but doesn't want to pry, but she's been so incredibly kind that it feels less daunting to tell her a bit more.

"I'm glad, too. I come from a very religious background, hence the no makeup and no parties thing. That's why Mark took me in—I was living out of my car and delivering pizzas for a job."

"Wow." She takes a sip of her champagne. "I knew you were in a tough situation, but he didn't tell us all that. I'm really glad he happened to find you. Plus," she adds, "now I have a new friend because of it!"

People are rapidly arriving now, and pretty soon the living room and kitchen are filled with people milling about. I've been introduced to so many people whose names I can't possibly keep track of, but I manage to at least remember Dani's friend Audrey, who came alone. Her purple hair makes her easy to remember, and if that wasn't enough, she has the type of personality my mom would have called a "firecracker." She's not afraid to make herself heard, and she has an attitude that screams strong, independent woman.

I wish I could be more like her. I wonder what it's like to have that sort of easy confidence, to not be afraid to take up space or stand out.

Eventually, I make my way back toward Mark, who's standing with Shane and laughing at some story a woman is telling about her husband next to her.

Awkwardly stepping beside Mark, I insert myself into the small group of four and stay silent. Thankfully, they continue to converse and I have a moment to breathe until Mark says, "Guys, this is Claire. Claire, these are good friends of ours from the—" he cuts himself off. "Well, they're good friends that we've known for a few years now. Sarah and Quentin."

I smile and shake each of their hands. They look a bit older than Mark, but not much. "It's nice to meet you."

They both return the sentiment, and Dani sidles up to Shane's side with Audrey in tow just as we finish introductions.

"Oh my god!" Sarah exclaims, walking up to Dani to examine her necklace. "Is this a new collar?"

Audrey chimes in. "Isn't it gorgeous? Seriously, I need to find myself a man half as kind—or as rich—as Shane."

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Dani elbows Audrey and gives Sarah a sheepish smile before answering. "It's not really new, but—" she brings her hand up near her neck so her ring and necklace are side-by-side "—it was part of the engagement." She giggles in response to Sarah's excitement, and I notice Mark fidgeting at my side.

"I'm getting another drink," he mutters before turning and stalking toward the kitchen.

Shane raises an eyebrow at Mark's random bout of frustration. Why is Mark suddenly annoyed, and why does Shane find that amusing?

"I'm going to talk to Mark," Shane chuckles while rolling his eyes, as if he's dealing with a stubborn toddler rather than a late-30s, six-and-a-half foot man. "Quentin, would you like to join me and let the ladies have a moment?"

Quentin follows, and I take a step in toward the two women. Sarah is still gushing over Dani's jewelry. "I can't believe I haven't seen it yet!"

"Well, I don't wear it while I'm at school because it's a little more obvious than my other day collar, and I don't need the older students asking questions, but I've been wearing it to the club. I guess we haven't seen you two in a while, though."

There's that word again—collar. I thought maybe I misheard the first time, but apparently not. Maybe it's a brand of some sort? Because the only other collar I can think of is something that goes around a dog's neck, and this definitely isn't that. Dani's is a thin silver chain with a small circle at her throat, and a black gemstone—matching the one on her engagement ring—sits directly in the center of



the circle.

Sarah turns to me with a kind smile. "Have you been to the club?"

"I, uh, don't think so." I have zero clue what club she's referencing, so I don't know why I answered that way instead of with a simple "no."

"Oh, sorry! I guess I assumed with you being here with Mark that you were in the lifestyle."

My brow furrows. "The lifestyle? And Mark and I are just friends."

She facepalms and looks at Dani. "I'm making a fool of myself. Help me out here, because I clearly don't know how to keep my mouth shut."

Dani's expression is conflicted for a moment before she looks over her shoulder to make sure no one else is within earshot. Her eyes connect with mine as she speaks in a lowered voice. "Quite a few of the people here are friends we've made at the club Sarah mentioned. It's a club for people who practice sexual activities that are a little more...unique. That's what she was referring to with the term 'lifestyle.'"

"Oh." I nod my head, taking in the information and trying to keep my expression schooled to one of casual interest. Inside, I'm trying to make sense of this new information while also trying not to show my discomfort with sex talk. It's not that it bothers me, but the topic was so taboo my entire life that any discussion about sex for pleasure, let alone before marriage, is entirely foreign to me. Even now, I barely know the basics of it. And apparently there are clubs for it? This is definitely new territory.

"So, how does this relate to your, um, collar?" I ask.

Dani absentmindedly twists the chain between her thumb and forefinger. "I suppose the easiest way to explain it is that it's a symbol of commitment for us. Sort of like the engagement ring, but with slightly different meanings."

"What are the different meanings?" Now that I've opened the floodgates of curiosity, the questions are almost impossible to stop. Every answer she gives me makes me want to know more.

"Well, a ring is the 'normal' thing to show commitment to a relationship in a way everyone understands. But a collar is more of a symbol of commitment to our dynamic, his ownership of me as his submissive."

The words "ownership" and "submissive" make me cringe, a visceral reaction to the memories the words churn up. Why would anyone want to be someone else's property or be subservient to them? Back at home, that was exactly how women were viewed, and it was terrible. We were supposed to listen to the men without question, to serve the man as the head of the household while making ourselves small. In a world where you can be independent and equal as a woman, why would you be in a relationship where you're seen as lesser than?

Dani must see the wheels turning in my head, because she clarifies. "It's probably not like whatever you're thinking. It can sound extreme or problematic at first, especially if you're just learning about it, but it's all consensual and something both of us enjoy."

"It's a matter of total trust and communication," Sarah adds. "In a Dom/sub dynamic, the submissive willingly gives the Dominant his or her submission. It's not like our partners forced us into these roles."

"Then why? I mean, why would you want to be in a relationship like that? Also," I add, "if I'm asking too many questions, please just tell me to stop." Over Dani's

shoulder, I catch Mark watching me from the kitchen with his whiskey glass lifted to his lips.

Dani's answer forces me to look back at her. "It's a bit different for everyone, but in my experience, I've spent my whole life being the one in charge, the person making decisions on everyone's behalf. I overthink everything, and my anxiety tends to get the best of me. Shane is the only person I've ever met who can turn those spiraling thoughts off, and he does that by taking control of certain things in and out of the bedroom. I'm still my own person with my own career and freedom to live my life, but Shane helps me be the best version of myself. I give him my trust and my submission, and he gives me the safety to let go of control."

"And let's not forget what else he gives you—a whole lot of orgasms," Audrey adds with a wink, breaking the serious mood that Dani's speech conjured up. We all break up into laughter, myself included, though a small part of me still hears a chastising voice in my head telling me how wrong it is to openly talk about things like this.

"Any other questions?" Dani asks me once we get our laughter under control.

"So many, but maybe I'll save them for another day. You said that Mark goes to that club too?"

A flash of something crosses her expression, though I can't quite make out what it is. "I think that's probably a conversation I should leave to the two of you."

That's all the confirmation I need, though, considering Sarah told me earlier she assumed I'd be into it since I'm here with Mark. It sends my thoughts into a tailspin. Is he a Dominant like Dani described Shane as being? How often does he go to that club? Does he sleep with women there?

Ugh, I don't even want to imagine that. But at the same time . . .

"Your glass is empty, let's get you another drink," Sarah says. "Well, if you want one. No pressure."

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I nod in confirmation, and the four of us head to the kitchen where the men are standing around chatting. Mark raises his eyebrows at me as I pour myself another glass of champagne, and I flash him a smile.

The group disperses slowly, and I take my spot again at Mark's side.

"Have a nice conversation?" he asks.

"Yep. I like them. They're a lot of fun to talk to." I know he's fishing for information on what we talked about, but I'm not about to volunteer it. I feel like an insider now, recognizing little signs I wouldn't have noticed before. It suddenly occurs to me that Mark had walked away right as Sarah had mentioned Dani's collar, and it all clicks into place.

He was nervous that they were discussing their "lifestyle" with me present. But if that were the case, he would have tried to coax me away instead of walking away himself. So he was the uncomfortable one, for whatever reason. Hmm...

Mark takes a sip of his drink but still doesn't make eye contact as I stare up at him from his side. "What did you guys talk about?" he asks.

I have two options here. I can either continue being vague, or I can throw caution to the wind and risk making him uncomfortable. The old me would have stayed quiet and awkwardly changed the subject, but the new me feels a surge of bravery. Or maybe it's the champagne.

"They told me about the sex club."

Mark chokes on his drink, coughing and sputtering, and looks into my eyes for the first time during this conversation. I crack up at his reaction.

He studies me for a moment before asking, "And how did you feel about that?"

"It's... interesting. I never would have thought there'd be so much to learn about life and relationships like this. But I suppose I'm always wanting to know more about everything. You told me it was okay to be curious and ask questions, so that's exactly what I did."

Blowing out a slow breath, Mark closes his eyes for a few seconds too long. "Do I even want to know?"

"Probably not." And with that, I walk out of the kitchen and into the living room.

I've managed to pace myself with drinking tonight, but Mark seems to have had one too many. He's not super drunk as far as I can tell, but he's let his guard down. I've caught him staring at me quite a few times with an intensity that I'm not used to, one that makes every nerve in my body come to life. He seems conflicted about something, though it's difficult to figure out exactly what.

As the clock ticking down on the television screen approaches midnight, we all congregate in the living room with the sound of the TV host filling the room over excited conversation. An electric energy buzzes through my body as the clock crosses the one-minute mark and the seconds count down to the new year.

I know in my heart that this will be a year of firsts, a year of new beginnings, and a year of self-discovery. Change is in the air, and I can feel it with every fiber of my being. It's exhilarating. I know that the new year is realistically just another day, but something about it makes everything feel possible. Like I have a blank slate and every opportunity laid out in front of me.

Maybe it's silly, but I've never had this much hope for my future before, and that alone makes today significant.

Mark's presence is a familiar comfort next to me as we all count down.

"Five, four, three, two, one!" Cheers erupt around the room, and all the couples turn to kiss each other with beaming smiles.

I glance up at Mark without even thinking about what I'm doing, and he wraps an arm around my shoulders and squeezes me into his side in a half-hug.

"I'm glad you're here," he murmurs, his touch lingering for a few seconds before he finally lets go.

His words send a spark of happiness through me, but my stomach sinks with disappointment at the same time. I'm not sure why. Was I really expecting him to kiss me? Sure, we've gotten closer over the past couple weeks, but nowhere near that level of closeness.

Okay, maybe I have a tiny crush on him, but it's clear that it's not reciprocated. I'm too young for him, too inexperienced, and probably not his type anyway. But the more time I've spent with him these past few weeks, the more interested in him I've become. He's not what he seems to be, and it makes me want to dig further to see what lies beneath the surface.

Maybe I thought the looks he's been giving me tonight were something other than what they really are. But he said he's happy I'm here, which is at least something. So what if he's not interested in me like that? At least I have a good friend by my side.

The car ride home is thick with tension. I'm not sure if I'm just imagining it, but Mark is unusually quiet again, though that could be due to tiredness considering it's

almost two in the morning. He may be thinking the same thing about me—I'm not a particularly talkative person on the best days, but I'm at a loss for words right now. It was a fun night, but exhaustion is weighing on me along with the constant replays of tonight flashing in my head.

His lingering looks throughout the evening. The way his arm felt around me, even if it was just a friendly hug. How small and safe I felt next to him. The way I secretly wish he would have kissed me.

How silly of me.

Even though we're on opposite sides of the car, the space feels too small. Mark takes up most of his half of the backseat while I'm huddled into the door on my side and staring out the window. So when we finally arrive at Mark's building, I breathe a sigh of relief as I step outside and watch my breath come out as a thick cloud in the freezing night air.

My relief is short-lived when we're stuck together in a small space yet again during the elevator ride to the top of the building. Every enclosed space with him feels too small now, too intimate, even though we've taken this exact elevator ride together multiple times now. There's something in the air tonight that makes it feel... different.

In a good way or a bad one, I'm not quite sure. On one hand, I'm still riding the high of hope for the future, the way bringing in a new year with new friends has lit a fire inside me. On the other hand, that small thread of disappointment from wanting someone and him not wanting me back has refused to stop tugging at my heart. But I decide I'm not going to let that outweigh my happiness for the night.



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"Okay, what's got you so quiet?" Mark asks as he tosses his coat over the back of the couch.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you were talkative and outgoing for most of the night, but once midnight hit, you practically went silent and haven't said much since."

"I'm just tired."

"Bullshit."

His sharp tone startles me. He's never cursed at me like that before. So... do I tell him what's really on my mind or do I make up something else? It's not like it would be hard to lie about it, even though lying still makes me cringe internally a little every time I do it, even if it's a small white lie.

Well, I did make a promise to myself earlier tonight that I would be brave this year. No time like the present, right?

My head drops as I consider how I'm going to say this without making a total fool of myself. I take a deep breath and look up just as Mark closes most of the space between us, though he still leaves a couple feet as a sort of buffer.

"Hey, are you alright?" His tone is softer now.

I lift my head to meet his gaze and speak before I can convince myself to back down.

"I wanted you to kiss me earlier."

His brow furrows. "What?"

"Please don't make me repeat myself," I half-whisper. This is already mortifying enough.

He's giving me that same look that he's been giving me all night, so full of intensity, but it's only now that I'm up close that I see it for what it is—desire.

He's frozen for a moment before he murmurs, "I didn't realize you wanted that."

"Well, I do." I manage to keep my expression impassive despite my heart hammering in my chest.

"You're sure?"

It's only then that I realize I said "I do" rather than "I did." Present tense.

I nod.

Whatever sense of hesitation he had snaps. Mark's voice is practically a growl when he mutters, "Fuck it," before covering the space between us in two quick steps, wrapping a strong arm around my waist, and kissing me like his life depends on it. His free hand cradles the back of my neck as his lips press against my own, and I melt into his touch as I experience what I can only imagine is the most passionate kiss I will ever have in my lifetime.

His lips are demanding but gentle, his arms holding me tightly against his large body. He feels exactly how I expected him to—warm and soft and strong. Every inch of my body is alight with need for him as I kiss him back.

There is no question in this moment of what he feels—it's written in every brush of his lips and the way he holds me so tightly as if he doesn't want to let me go. Every worry I might have had dissipates, and my mind and body are consumed by him.

The kiss feels like it lasts both seconds and hours. Either way, it's not long enough. When he finally pulls away, just a few inches to look at me, I'm breathing hard and my pulse is pounding in my ears.

"You okay?" he asks with a playful half-smile.

I blush. "Way better than okay. That was... wow. I didn't know it could feel like that."

He loosens his hold on me but keeps a hand on my waist as he takes a tiny step backward. "Best first kiss you've ever had?" He's teasing now, giving me that playful smirk that makes me weak in the knees.

But his comment makes me realize that he doesn't know just how significant this is for me. "Well, you could say that..."

"Hmm, that sounds like a non-committal answer."

"It's not just the best first kiss I've ever had—it's the only kiss I've ever had."

His expression falls. It only lasts a second, but by the time he's recovered it, it's already clear that this isn't good news to him.

"Oh. Well, I suppose there's a first for everything." He's smiling again, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes this time. He takes another step backward and glances at the clock on the wall. "We should probably get to bed."

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I nod in agreement, wondering why my admission caused such a significant shift in his attitude. I don't claim to be experienced or knowledgeable in relationships, but it was my understanding that guys liked women to be less experienced. Apparently not in this case.

"You're right. It's late," I say.

"Goodnight, Claire." He's walking down the hallway to his bedroom before I can even answer, and just like that, one of the most memorable moments of my life has been tainted by confusion and worry.

Maybe I'm just not good enough for him after all.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### CLAIRE

The library at the community college has become my sanctuary. Unlike the oppressive quiet of my childhood home, where silence often meant shame or fear, this quiet is purposeful and peaceful. The afternoon sunlight beams down on the wooden table I'm sitting at, and the smells of old paper and coffee from the small café near the entrance mingle in the air.

I adjust my laptop screen, attempting to focus on the essay I'm writing for my English class. Once again, Mark's generosity came in handy; he let me borrow his old laptop for schoolwork. We haven't spoken about what happened on New Year's even though two weeks have passed now. I've thoroughly convinced myself that he thinks

it was a mistake, because he's been friendly but noticeably avoiding any deep conversations or opportunities to spend extra time together.

He's been going into work more often rather than working from his home office, and I'm not sure if it's out of necessity or avoidance. Either way, I've been keeping up with cleaning and random household tasks, and he's been leaving a paycheck on the counter for me every two weeks now.

Even despite his distance, I can't stop thinking about him. About our kiss. The way he wrapped his arms around me and held me like I was the only thing that mattered.

A notification pops up on my phone—a reminder about my evening class in two hours. As I gather my things, Perla from my psychology class waves me over from a nearby table. We're not quite friends, but there's a comfort in these casual interactions that I never had before. Here, no one knows about my past. I'm just another student trying to figure things out.

When I walk over to her, she asks me if she can interview me for an article for the school newspaper. Apparently she's doing an piece about non-traditional students, so I sit and answer a couple of her questions before heading to class.

Class flies by, as it always seems to, and I'm making a mental list of things I'll do tomorrow when I walk into the apartment and find Mark sitting at the kitchen counter.

He looks up when I walk through the door, and his expression is serious but soft, as if he has bad news.

My stomach drops.

"Claire," he says in a gentle voice. "Can we talk for a minute?"

I set my bag down, my hands shaking. What is he about to say? Does he want me to leave soon? That's probably it. "Sure. Is everything okay?"

He gestures for me to sit beside him. "Everything's fine. I just wanted to suggest something." He pauses, choosing his words carefully as I slip into the chair beside him. "I think it might be good for you to see a therapist."

My chest tightens. "Oh." The word comes out small, wounded. "You think something's wrong with me?"

"No. God, no, Claire. That's not it at all." His hand reaches for mine, then stops, hovering awkwardly before dropping back to his side. "It just seems like you've been through a lot, and talking to a professional—someone who knows how to help you process everything—could be really good for you."

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and I hate myself for being so emotional. "You think something's wrong with me?"

His expression softens. "Of course not." He stands and pulls me into a hug, one hand smoothing over my hair. The gesture is so tender it makes my heart ache. "There's nothing wrong with you," he says. "You're incredibly strong. This is just... support. Therapy is a good way to work through feelings and what you've gone through. It's a healthy thing."

I let myself lean into him for a moment, breathing in his familiar scent. It's the closest we've been since New Year's, and it makes me dizzy in a way I can't blame on wine this time.

"I guess I can try it."

Two weeks later, I'm sitting in a cozy office, perched on the edge of the seat of an

oversized armchair. Dr. Savannah Lawrence is smaller than I expected her to be. Her dark skin crinkles around her eyes with smile lines, and she has a voice that somehow manages to be simultaneously professional and kind.

Her office is inviting, with soft lighting and plants carefully placed on various surfaces. Dr. Lawrence sits across from me with her legs crossed and her fingers threaded together over her knee. I try to ground myself by focusing on the texture of the fabric beneath my fingers and not on how nervous I feel.

After explaining that this first session is mostly just about getting to know each other and figuring out what I need, she says, "So, let's talk about why you're here. Is there something specific you'd like to focus on in our sessions?"

I fidget with the hem of my sweater, gathering my courage. "I, um, grew up in a really restrictive religious community. I finally got the courage to leave, but I had to run away without anyone knowing. Someone I met here took me in and helped me, and he encouraged me to come here to see you."

She nods, her expression neutral but encouraging. There's no judgment in her eyes, no shock or pity. "That must have taken a lot of courage to leave home. How are you adjusting to life in this new environment?"

The question opens a floodgate. "It's overwhelming sometimes," I admit. "Everything is so different. I lived in my car at first, which was terrifying. Then this man—Mark—took me in as a total stranger. He's been helping me get started with school and everything."

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At Dr. Lawrence's prompting, I explain more about how Mark offered me shelter from the storm while still respecting my space, then I tell her about how much he's helped me begin to build a life in this city.

"Tell me more about that transition," Dr. Lawrence suggests. "What's been the most challenging part?"

I pause, considering her question. "Learning to trust, I think. Back home, everything was about control—what we wore, what we thought, who we talked to. But Mark just helps without expecting anything in return. His friends seem to be the same way. It's confusing."

"Confusing how?"

"Because..." I struggle to find the words. "Because I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. For him to reveal what he really wants from me. But he just keeps helping, and I don't know why."

Dr. Lawrence makes a note on her clipboard. "And how do you feel about your relationship with Mark? Are you worried he'll expect something from you in the future?"

I think for a moment before answering. "No, I don't think so. When I asked him why he's helping me so much, he told me that he knows what it's like to be in my position, and he had someone to help him in the way he's helping me now. He's shown me nothing but kindness and respect."



"It sounds like he's been a significant source of support," she observes.

"He is, but sometimes I feel guilty," I confess. "Like I'm taking advantage of his kindness. And sometimes..."

She looks at me, waiting for me to finish my sentence.

"Sometimes I catch myself wanting more," I say, dropping my gaze. "Which is silly, but it's true."

"Why do you think that's silly?"

"Because he's got his whole life figured out. He's so confident and always knows what to do. Meanwhile, I have no clue what I'm doing."

Dr. Lawrence leans forward slightly. "I think you know a lot more than you give yourself credit for, but that's definitely something we can explore together. This is all a part of your journey of discovering who you are outside of the constraints you grew up with. We can work on understanding them together, at your pace."

Tears prick at my eyes, but they're not entirely sad ones. There's something freeing about sitting here, being able to voice these thoughts without fear of judgment.

"Thank you," I manage to say. "I've never been able to talk about any of this before."

She smiles. "That's what I'm here for. Would you like to meet regularly? We can work on processing your past experiences and navigating your new life."

"Yes, I'd like that."

As the session wraps up, Dr. Lawrence schedules our next appointment. Walking out

of her office, I feel lighter somehow, as if sharing even this small portion of my story has lifted some of the weight from my shoulders. Maybe, with time and help, I can figure out who I am beyond my past.

Later, in my evening class, my mind is still spinning from the therapy session. I barely notice when someone sits down next to me until they speak.

"Hey, are you okay? You seem kind of out of it."

I look up to find Chris, a guy from my study group, watching me with concern. He's nice—the kind of guy I probably should be interested in. Clean-cut, close to my age, always ready with a friendly smile.

"I'm fine," I answer, managing a small smile. "Just tired."

"Well, hey, we're supposed to partner up for the group project," he says. "Want to work together?"

I agree, partly because it's easier than saying no, and partly because I should be making more connections outside of Mark's apartment. But as Chris talks about meeting up to work on the project, I can't help but compare his eager, boyish enthusiasm to Mark's quiet intensity.

The class passes in a blur of discussion about theme, figurative language, and structure in poetry. Chris and I exchange phone numbers at the end of class, but I can sense the way he's trying to steer the conversation toward more personal things. Unfortunately, I have no emotional energy left today, so it's difficult to participate in even friendly, surface-level conversation. His face falls a little when I make an excuse about needing to head home, but it's so quick that I think I may have imagined it.

On the drive home, I wonder what Dr. Lawrence will say when I explain more about the complexities of my relationship with Mark. About how I'm trying to build a normal life while living with someone who makes my heart race every time he looks at me. About how I'm keeping perfectly nice guys at a distance while dreaming about a man who probably sees me as nothing more than someone to help.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### MARK

The club is humming with its usual energy, though a little less busy than usual, but it's not giving me the same buzz it usually does. Probably just because it's a weeknight, I tell myself. The pulsing music and the couples filtering in and out of the back room only serve to remind me what I'm here for. I lean against the bar, nursing a drink and scanning the crowd for any familiar faces.

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This is my normal routine, my way of blowing off steam and avoiding the complications of deeper relationships. There are a handful of women who frequent the club who have been casual play partners that understand my stipulations. But tonight, being here feels more like going through the motions rather than actively looking for fun.

Claire's face keeps popping up in my mind, and it's incredibly frustrating. What's even more annoying is the thread of guilt tugging at my chest for even being here.

What would Claire think about this?

It shouldn't matter, I tell myself. Sure, we kissed, but it was a one-time thing brought on by heightened emotion due to the holiday. Everyone wants someone to kiss on New Year's Eve. It doesn't mean anything.

And even if it did, it's not like we're dating. She never brought up the kiss in the two weeks since it's happened, so we didn't talk about it.

So why do I feel like I'm doing something wrong by being here?

Andrea, a woman I've known for a while, sidles up to me, a seductive smile curving her lips. Her dark hair is tied back in a ponytail, and her full hips sway as she approaches. She's one of the few who understands the rules—no strings attached, no emotional ties, just fun.

"Hey, stranger," she purrs, brushing her fingers over my shoulder.

"Hey there. Want to have some fun tonight?"

She steps closer, and I catch a whiff of her perfume. "Of course I do. You always make me feel so good." Her voice is low and sultry in my ear, and despite the worry weighing down on me, my dick reacts to her in the way it always does.

"I know we usually stay here to play, but would you want to go back to my place instead? I'd prefer a quieter, more private environment tonight." It's a half-truth, but I'm not even entirely sure of what the full truth is. All I know is that I don't want to be around more people tonight, and even a private room here doesn't feel quite private enough. I need to blow off some steam in a place that's comfortable, and where better than my own apartment?

Andrea agrees, and I leave my mostly empty glass on the bar before we head toward the exit. Normally, I wouldn't bring a woman home, especially with Claire around, but Claire is just starting her night class, so she won't be home for at least another two hours.

Smiling, Andrea links her arm through mine as we make our way to my car. She's not a very talkative woman, so the car ride is silent. I try to push aside any thoughts of Claire that pop into my head.

This is probably exactly what I need. To release some of the tension I've been feeling with a woman who wants the same things I do.

I lead Andrea to my bedroom, though a pang of unease shoots through me as I shut the door behind us. This is supposed to be simple and straightforward, but everything feels weird right now. Different.

Andrea slips off her coat with her eyes locked on mine. "I've missed this," she says as she peels off her shirt. "You haven't been around in a while."

"I've had a lot going on."

Her fingertips trail down my chest, and I reach for her waist, but I hesitate, and my hand falls away.

"Well, hopefully we can get you to forget about all of that for a while."

Her words make me feel even worse. A sense of revulsion grips me, not toward Andrea, but toward what I'm doing. No matter how I twist it in my head, this feels like I'm using her to fill a void that Claire has unwittingly exposed. What the hell is wrong with me?

"I'm sorry," I say, stepping back. "I can't do this."

Her brows furrow in confusion. "What do you mean?"

I blow out a slow breath. "I thought going to the club and finding someone to have some fun with would help this, but I don't think I'm in the right headspace. I'm sorry."

She shrugs but huffs a small sigh of frustration. "It's okay," she says, plastering on a fake smile. "I just wish I would've known before I left the club to come here."

"I understand. I'll pay for your ride back to the club and buy you a drink next time I'm there as penance for my stupidity."

The smile she gives me this time is a bit more genuine as she pulls her shirt and coat back on. "There's someone else, isn't there? That's what has you all up in your head."

How do women always seem to have a sixth sense about these things? I swear. The resigned look I give her is enough of an answer for her to not push it.

"Well, I wish you the best of luck. Truly. Though I will say that I'll miss our arrangement if you're taken off the market for good."

Chuckling, I hand her a hundred-dollar bill to cover the Uber ride back to the club plus some, and she opens my bedroom door to leave. "Bye, Mark."

"Bye, Andrea." I give her an awkward wave as she heads out and sit on my bed, taking a moment to gather my thoughts. What is wrong with me? First I kiss Claire, then do my best to get things back to normal because lord knows I don't need to be corrupting her any more than I have, and now I'm turning down perfectly good—well, really good, if I'm being honest—sex. And for what? Because I have fleeting feelings for some girl I'm never going to actually be with? Because I'll feel guilty for sleeping with someone after kissing Claire even though I have no real reason to be guilty?

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Sighing, I decide I'll make myself some dinner to keep my hands and mind occupied. The front door latches closed, signaling Andrea's departure. But when I step out into the hallway, I see a swish of blonde hair followed by Claire's bedroom door closing.

Fuck.

I had planned on cooking something for dinner, but a knot formed in my stomach when I saw Claire rushing into her room at the same time Andrea left. So I decide to heat up some Spaghetti-O's instead of cooking real food, because apparently that's the kind of man I am now. Too anxious about a woman to focus on cooking anything, and instead microwaving fake-ass tomato soup with cute little circle noodles.

But seriously, what terrible luck that Andrea left right then. There's no way they didn't see each other, and I don't know why the idea of Claire interacting with one of my fuck buddies fills me with such dread.

Andrea and I didn't even do anything, but the thought of Claire assuming we did makes guilt eat away at me.

But why? It makes no fucking sense. That is why I brought Andrea here in the first place, after all.

That little voice in my head is screaming at me to go knock on her door and explain things to Claire, but what do I say? Hey, I brought that woman over to have sex with her because I wanted to distract myself from constantly thinking about you. But don't worry, I kicked her out before we fucked.



Yeah, that'll go over really well.

I eat my dinner without really tasting it then rinse out my bowl in the sink. Making my way into the living room, I decide to turn on the TV and stake claim on the couch for the evening on the off chance Claire comes out of her bedroom.

I doubt she will, though. It was evident from the first week of her living here that she isolates herself when she feels unhappy. Even with as much progress as she's made, she still doesn't like me to see her in any emotional state that shows vulnerability or hurt. And I'd be willing to bet that she's not exactly happy right now.

And it's all my fault.

God damn it, I never should have kissed her. I don't regret it, exactly, but... it was her first kiss for fuck's sake. She'll never forget that. Which means she has a lot of firsts still to come, and I hate the sick thrill that gives me—that I could be a lot of her firsts.

But no, I can't do that to her. Good things never last—at least not as far as people or relationships are concerned—and I refuse to put Claire in a situation like that. My one rule is to keep things temporary and strictly physical, and she's the type of girl who deserves love and commitment.

And I can't be the one to give her that.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### CLAIRE

"Is it okay if my classmate Chris comes over to work on our project?" I ask Mark. He's sitting at his desk with his laptop open and a cup of coffee beside him. His

office door was open, so I don't feel too bad about interrupting his work. "We need to finish our poetry analysis, and the library at school is closed for renovations tonight."

Mark looks up from his computer screen. "Chris?"

"From my English class," I explain. "We're partners for the group project."

He takes a long sip of coffee before answering. "Sure, you live here too. You don't need to ask me for permission. When is he coming?"

"This evening. We'll work in the living room."

Mark nods, but something in his demeanor shifts. "I'll be around if you need anything." Neither of us knows how to act after I ran into a woman in the apartment last night, but the awkward tension radiates between us as I do my best to disguise my unwarranted sense of disappointment. I choose to ignore it for now and focus on the tasks at hand for the day. I need to go grocery shopping, so I shower and get dressed before making a list of all the items that we need from the store.

Since I'm in no hurry to get back to the apartment with the weird energy and unspoken words between Mark and me, I take my time perusing the aisles at the grocery store and wonder what it would be like to live like this all the time—not worrying about money (since Mark insists on me using one of his credit cards for the groceries), being able to spend my days cooking and housekeeping while pursuing my education and eventually my career—whatever that ends up being. I know this isn't a forever thing, obviously, but it's nice to play pretend for a little while, imagining this could be reality for more than just a few months.

But I'll be out of Mark's place as soon as I can, so he can go back to his nighttime flings and I can do things for myself instead of relying on someone else. I can still live a life like this, I tell myself, just with a tighter budget. I don't need much—just a safe

place to live, the ability to afford food, and the freedom to live my life how I choose. I don't allow myself to consider how much I might miss Mark. Thinking about that will only hurt me in the long run, and I need to be able to gain some independence eventually. I only lasted three weeks on my own before he took me in, after all.

Later that evening, Chris arrives, wearing a bright smile and carrying his backpack. His enthusiasm is infectious, and I return his grin as I let him inside. He's always been kind to me in class, offering help when I need it and making friendly conversation.

"Wow, this place is amazing," he says, looking around the apartment. His gaze lands on Mark, who's inexplicably decided to station himself at the kitchen counter with his laptop. "Is that your dad?"

Heat floods my cheeks and I don't know whether to laugh or hide my face. My eyes flit to Mark, who thankfully is just far enough away to be out of earshot. "No, he's my, uh... friend."

"So, like, a roommate? Not your boyfriend?"

I snort at that. "Not my boyfriend, so yeah, like a roommate I guess."

We settle on the couch with our books and laptops, and I try to focus on outlining our compare/contrast analysis of two poems by Edgar Allan Poe. But Mark keeps moving around the kitchen, making more noise than I've ever heard him make before. Every few minutes, he's opening cabinets, running water, or reorganizing something.

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"So," Chris says, leaning closer than necessary to look at my laptop screen, "I think we should really focus on the theme of grief in both of the poems we chose. That will also tie into the tones as well since they're both hella depressing."

I laugh internally at the thought of putting the words "hella depressing" into our essay, though Chris does have a point. Poe was apparently not a very happy guy, at least based on what I can see from his writing.

Before I can answer, Mark's voice cuts in. "Anyone hungry? I'm making dinner."

I glance at the clock—it's barely 4 PM. "Already?"

"It's a slow-cooker recipe," he says, pulling out what seems like every pot and pan we own. "Takes time to prepare."

Chris brightens. "That's so nice of you! I love cooking too. What are you making?"

"Chicken gnocchi soup."

"Oh, sweet! Like Olive Garden?"

Mark lets out a noise, something between a scoff and a laugh, and answers, "Sure, kid. Something like that," as if he's offended by such a comparison. He turns his back to us and starts chopping an onion.

I turn back to our work, trying to ignore the rather aggressive vegetable chopping in the kitchen. "Anyway, yes, I think using the theme of grief as a common ground

between the poems will be perfect. For the contrasting elements, maybe we can talk about how the tone of 'The Raven' is more fearful, while Annabel Lee is sort of somber?"

"Yeah, totally," Chris agrees, though his attention keeps drifting to the kitchen where Mark is now sautéing garlic and onions, the sizzling so loud we have to raise our voices. "By the way, there's this great coffee shop downtown where we could work next time if you want."

Mark's stirring pauses, but he resumes within a second or two.

"Oh, um, maybe," I say noncommittally. "We might even be able to finish this tonight if we can focus."

For the next hour, we manage to make a good amount of progress despite Mark's periodic interruptions to ask if we need anything whenever he's transitioning to a new cooking task. And when he's not hovering, he's making way too much noise in the kitchen, and irritation pulses within me.

"He's—" Chris pauses, trying to find the right word "—intense."

Before I can respond, Mark appears with two glasses of water. "Here. Thought you might need to hydrate."

"Thanks," I say, increasingly confused by his behavior. "But we're okay—"

"Thank you," Chris says. Then, turning to me, he adds, "It's awesome that you have such a thoughtful roommate."

Mark's jaw tightens at the word 'roommate.'

"We should really focus on finishing this outline," I say, trying to steer us back to work. "The thesis statement still needs—"

"Are you staying for dinner, Chris?" Mark interrupts, his tone suggesting the opposite of hospitality.

"Oh, wow, really? That would be—"

"Actually," I cut in, finally finding my voice, "I don't think that's a good idea. We need to focus on the project, and Mark—" I turn to face him directly, "—you're being very distracting right now."

The room goes silent. Chris looks between us, clearly sensing the tension. Mark's expression cycles through surprise, indignation, and something else I can't quite read.

"I'm just trying to be hospitable." He crosses his arms.

"No, you're hovering," I reply, surprising myself with my firmness. I've never actually stood up for myself like this before. "And it's making it hard to work."

We stare at each other for a long moment, neither backing down. Finally, Mark nods and quietly returns to the kitchen, though I notice he stays within earshot.

Chris clears his throat. "Maybe I should go..."

"No," I say, turning back to my laptop. "We need to finish this outline at the very least."

We work for another hour, making real progress now that Mark has retreated to a sullen silence in the kitchen. When Chris finally leaves, declining Mark's dinner invitation with an awkward laugh, I close the door behind him and turn to face Mark.

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"What was that about?"

He's stirring the soup in the slow cooker, not looking at me. "What was what about?" His tone is infuriatingly aloof.

"You know what. The interruptions, the hovering, you making as much noise as you possibly could in the kitchen."

"I was just being nice," he says.

"No, you were acting weird, and I don't know why."

He finally turns to face me, his expression intense. "He was flirting with you."

"What? No, he wasn't. We're just project partners." I want to say more. I want to ask Mark why it even matters if Chris was flirting with me. He's the one who brought a woman home, presumably to have sex with, after kissing me a couple weeks prior and walking away before either of us could talk about it.

Even though I knew it wouldn't be likely we'd ever be more than friends, it still hurts like hell that he would move on so quickly after kissing me. Sure, it was spur of the moment, but did it really mean so little to him even when he knew it was a big deal to me?

Mark laughs, but it's not a happy sound. "He asked you to go out for coffee, but really, it was the way he was looking at you. He's into you."

"That wasn't..." I trail off, thinking back not only to that but the way he always seems a little too eager to talk to me after class. "Oh."

"Yeah.Oh." Mark smirks, but it doesn't hold the same playfulness it usually does.

We stand in silence for a moment, the tension between us thick enough to cut with one of the knives he's been aggressively chopping vegetables with all evening.

"Well," I say, "even if he was, I'm not interested in him like that."

"No?"

"No, I'm not." I want to say, I'm interested in you, you idiot, but I don't.

Another long moment passes, filled with all the things we're not saying. Finally, Mark turns back to the stove. "Dinner's ready if you're hungry."

"Sure."

But as we eat, there is no polite conversation like normal—or any conversation, for that matter. Something has shifted between us irreparably, and I don't know what to do about it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### CLAIRE

The weeks pass quickly despite the way time seems to stand still whenever Mark and I are in the same room. We still haven't spoken about the kiss or the aftermath, but I can feel the conflict bubbling just underneath the surface for both of us. I should bring it up and get it out of the way, but despite the progress I've made in therapy



lately, I still have a difficult time speaking up for myself.

After a lifetime of being silenced and avoiding making waves, it still feels impossible to do what's best for me sometimes. Would it help me to get things off my chest and talk to Mark about what happened? Absolutely. Does the idea also send me into a tailspin of worry? More than I'd care to admit. Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever be able to let go of all the fear and negativity that's shaped me.

But I was raised on fear. Even though my father preached about following God's word, it was the fear of eternal damnation that seemed to motivate everyone to listen. But fear is a powerful thing, and I suspect that, on some level, he knew that. If you make people afraid, they'll do whatever they can to avoid whatever perilous fate you've made them believe awaits them. They're easier to control that way. Go figure.

It worked on my older brothers and sisters, and it easily could have worked on me if I hadn't had so many questions—ones I was repeatedly chastised for asking. In a roundabout way, I'm grateful they refused to cater to my curiosity, because it led me to seek out my own answers instead of taking everything my parents and the church said at face value.

I could never understand why curiosity would be punished until I finally realized that I was asking questions they didn't know the answers to, and deep down, that scared them. It's much easier to believe what you want with unquestioning loyalty than it is to think critically about the fact that you could possibly be wrong about something. Indoctrination is a hell of a drug.

When I had explained a little bit more about my life to Mark a couple weeks ago and told him how I was chastised for asking questions, he had said, "If someone gets mad at you for asking questions, they probably have something to hide. You wanting to know more about something is only threatening to those who want to keep you in the dark." His words have resonated in my mind constantly, reminding me what I left

behind.

The topic is still weighing heavy on my mind when I go to see Dr. Lawrence on Wednesday afternoon. It's my fourth meeting with her, and I already feel like I've made so much progress in just this short time. I'm opening up more and more, and I'm starting to remember little things about my past that I had completely forgotten about. Things that once seemed insignificant or normal are coming out, only for me to realize how odd they were.

One in particular seems to grab Dr. Lawrence's attention.

"Could you tell me more about that?" she asks when I mention the ceremony that would mark our transition into adulthood.

"Well, they said that getting closer to God and becoming enlightened was the most important part of becoming an adult. You know how people do fasts because it makes them feel more connected to their spiritual side?"

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She nods, her eyes kind as she listens.

"Well, it was sort of like fasting, except for food and sleep. We got water, but it was limited. It was supposed to strip us of our worldly needs so that we could better hear God's word. The entire forty-eight hours were filled with sermons and prayer, and we weren't allowed to sleep. The adults traded off shifts, but the small group of us were forced to stay awake. When we were instructed to pray on our own, we had to do it aloud so they knew we weren't sleeping while our eyes were closed."

"And what do you think about all of this? How did you feel about it when you went through it yourself?"

"I was terrified," I admit. "I watched three of my older siblings go through it when they turned seventeen, and they seemed... different when they came out of it. Like it was the final push they needed to be fully immersed in what they were supposed to become. It was presented to us as this massive milestone, but I was so scared that somehow, once I went through it, I'd turn out just like everyone else."

Dr. Lawrence nods sympathetically.

I continue. "By that point, I was already questioning my beliefs, but nobody knew that, and I didn't have the option to refuse the ceremony. But I knew the basics of what to expect based on whispers I'd overheard from my peers one day after church. So I mentally prepared myself, and when the time came, I managed to get through even though it was the weirdest experience of my life. Sleep deprivation is no joke."

My eyes drop to the floor as the memories come flooding back. Sitting there in a

hard, uncomfortable pew with only my thoughts to keep me company, starting to fall asleep only to be woken by the infuriating voice of one of the church elders. "I know it probably sounds silly that that experience was so hard on me."

"That does not sound silly. Your feelings of fear were completely justified. All of those things are tell-tale signs of cult behavior and attempts at emotional control and manipulation."

"Oh." My brow furrows. I know things were a bit extreme at home, but a cult? The word brings to mind images much harsher than what I experienced. Sure, the community was isolated and selective, and the religious beliefs were on the more severe side, but there were also so many little moments of love and happiness. My mind is whirling when Dr. Lawrence interrupts my thoughts.

"That statement seems to have a strong effect on you."

I nod.

"Would you like to explore that a little more?"

This is the hard part—putting my thoughts into words that might make sense to others. "Sure. I just...I was surprised by the word 'cult' because it seems a bit extreme. What I went through feels unfair, but acult?"

"It's understandable why you would feel that way. We're often so desensitized to the way we grew up that it's difficult to step back and see just how serious things were. I don't claim to be an expert on this sort of thing, but I'd be happy to give you some resources if you feel comfortable reading more on the topic."

"Sure, that would be great."

"So, how are things going as far as school and your living situation?" she asks. I know she's sort of asking about Mark without making it too obvious, but that's fine.

"I love school. Being able to challenge myself intellectually and read thought-provoking literature is a dream come true." Even though I don't participate much in class conversations, listening to others debate about things like morality and nature versus nurture between my English and Psych classes is enlightening. I never thought I'd see the day where I could sit in a room of people not only questioning things, but being encouraged to think critically. It's everything that my church wasn't.

"That's wonderful to hear. And your living situation?" she prompts, sensing my hesitancy to talk about that.

"That's a little more complicated."

"How so?"

I've told Dr. Lawrence about Mark—obviously, since he's the reason I'm here in the first place—and I told her about the kiss and how confusing his reaction was, but I somehow managed to skirt around the topic of me running into the woman he brought home two weeks later. We've been focusing more on my upbringing and current moral and religious struggles during our last few sessions.

"Well, two weeks after he kissed me, one of my night classes had been canceled, but I didn't tell him because I assumed he'd just be home when I got back. So I went grocery shopping and had just finished putting groceries away in the kitchen when a woman walked out of his room and left. She was adjusting her shirt in a way that made it clear she had just put it back on."

"And how did you feel about that?"

"It hurt more than I expected it to. I didn't think he'd actually want me for a real relationship or anything, but I felt sort of used after he kissed me and then acted like nothing happened. But then he was being so weird when I brought a male classmate over to work on our group project, like he was jealous or something. It makes no freaking sense," I huff, annoyed all over again at Mark's mixed signals.

"Have you talked to him about how you feel?"

I shake my head.

"Why not?" Her voice is soft, the question sounding more curious than judgmental. Which, I suppose, is her job, but she's still great at giving me the space I need to talk like this.

"I'm just scared, I guess. What if he gets mad at me or thinks I'm too needy if I ask him about it?"

"Has he ever given you any indication that he would get angry with you for how you feel?"

"No."

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 7:41 am*

"Do you think that may be a false belief you're carrying from your upbringing? That having difficult conversations may be a bad thing instead of acting as conflict resolution?"

Damn. She's right. I voice my agreement, and she gives me a kind smile but continues. "As far as you worrying he'll think you're needy... There is nothing wrong with asking for what you want. And if you want to pursue a relationship with him, that's nothing to be ashamed of. Maybe his desires are different from your own, and maybe you don't end up being compatible, but that's not your burden to bear. All you can do is make yourself heard, but if you don't voice it, you can't expect him to read your mind just as you can't expect to read his."

Something clicks into place as she speaks, and I realize that, once again, she's telling me exactly what I need to hear. When I don't speak, she continues.

"I think you've become so averse to voicing your wants and needs because of the environment you were raised in, but it's important to understand that you shouldn't feel the need to minimize yourself to avoid potential conflict. Regardless of the outcome, you are not responsible for his reaction to you voicing your feelings."

"Thank you." It's all I can think to say.

"No need to thank me. I'm just glad to talk through this with you, and I think you're taking great steps to become who you want to be."

Glancing at the clock, I realize our session is already coming to an end, so I stand and sling my purse over my shoulder.

"I'll email you those resources we talked about," Dr. Lawrence says as I make my way to the door.

"Thanks again!" I call out.

A couple hours later while I'm sitting in the school library waiting to head into my Psych class for the night, I check my email. When Mark loaned me his old laptop, I made a personal email in addition to my school one, but I can't remember which I gave to Dr. Lawrence's office.

I check my personal email first and find nothing important. But when I open up my school email account, it's not Dr. Lawrence's message that grabs my attention, it's the one just below it with a subject line reading, "Come Home, Claire."

What the actual hell?

With shaking hands and my heart hammering in my chest, I click on the email.

"Please come home, Claire. We miss you. We understand that you've been tempted, but it's never too late to repent and return home where you belong. We will forgive you for abandoning us, just as God will.

'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'

-Romans 3:23

'For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

-Romans 10:13"

A million thoughts race through my head at once. One of my family members clearly



sent this, but which one? And more importantly, how did they get this email address? What if they find me?

The guilt crashes on my chest as I imagine my younger sister being the one who sent the email. She's the only one I truly feel guilty about leaving behind because she's the only other one I could imagine feeling the same way as I do about life at home.

But ignoring the fact that my sister likely would have no means of emailing me, the guilt trip disguised as concern has the markings of my mother all over it. I know her intentions are in the right place—it's kind of hard to blame her for worrying when she's fully convinced I'll be damned to hellfire for eternity—but she's always been too intent on smoothing things over, especially when it comes to my father's anger.

My older siblings seem to have taken the same path as her, placating my father and trying to be the best they could in my parents' and the community's eyes. For my sisters, that meant dedicating their lives to having babies and being subservient housewives who couldn't possibly think for themselves, and for my brother, it meant becoming an important figure in the church.

I decide that not replying is the best action to take. She can email me all she wants, assuming it is my mother, but she'll have no way to argue if I give nothing in return. I refuse to let myself be guilted into going back. But even more than that, I refuse to go back to hiding behind a mask, being the pliant girl with a fake smile eternally plastered on in the hopes that hiding my misery will earn me a spot in Heaven.

My thoughts are still spinning as I make my way to class and take my usual seat. Between my talk with Dr. Lawrence today and this strange email, so many memories are flooding back.

The word "cult" threw me for a loop in therapy earlier, but the more I think about it, the more I feel it might fit.

I open up a Google search and type in "signs of a religious cult." The results that pop up make my stomach churn, and each link I click on gives more proof that I've been living in something so much worse than I realized.

Isolation from people outside of the organization and punishment for leaving.

Unquestioning loyalty to the leader and/or the cause.

No tolerance for criticism or questioning; discouraging critical thinking.

Using interpretations of religious texts to invoke fear and manipulate members.

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An "us versus them" mentality.

It all fits perfectly.

The class lecture starts, but I'm falling deep into the rabbit hole and have no plan to pay attention tonight. I think about how my father would preach about how the worldly, secular people were damned and would happily drag us away from God if given the chance; how we should avoid them if unable to convert them (not that we had much contact with the outside world anyway). The Bible was used practically as law, but when I would ask about certain passages in a critical context, I was brushed off.

I click on a related article, the voice of my psychology professor lecturing about operant conditioning somewhere in my periphery.

But what I read next makes my blood run cold. An article about methods of brainwashing used in cults. It lists the same things that were practiced in our enlightenment ceremony: sleep and food deprivation, isolation, repetition through prayer.

It's so much worse than I thought.

It's hard to know what's considered "normal" in the outside world when you've been so isolated your whole life, but this transcends any beliefs I had about my previous situation being normal or acceptable.

Part of me wants to break down and cry, but to my surprise, my body floods with

something else: anger. Pure, burning rage. At my parents, at my community, at the fact that my entire childhood was lost to this screwed up way of living. Those are years I'll never get back, and I spent them keeping my head down, staying quiet, and fearing punishment.

How could any parent put their child through something so terrible in the name of love? It's like a knife in my chest knowing that the people who were supposed to protect me and love me managed to become so entrenched in their belief systems that they'd rather oppress me instead of allowing me to grow into my true self.

I close my laptop, knowing that if I think about this anymore right now, the tears pricking at my eyes will start to spill.

I force myself to focus on the lecture with the comfort of knowing that I'll be writing about this and letting the tears out later in the safety of my bedroom.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### MARK

I'm sitting on the couch watching a basketball game on TV when Claire gets home from class. Over the past few weeks, she's retreated a bit emotionally again—undoubtedly my own fault—but right now she's wearing an expression that's charged with emotion. Frustration, maybe even anger. She makes no effort to hide it when she pins me with a stare before walking down the hall to her room.

To my surprise, she returns a few minutes later after having taken off her shoes and jacket, and she passes me on her way to the kitchen.

"I'm cooking dinner. Do you want some?" she asks. We still eat meals together most nights, but sometimes I end up eating on my own before she gets home from class,

especially lately now that things have been more awkward between us.

"Sure, I'd love some," I tell her.

"Is it okay if I drink some of your wine as well?"

Now that's a new development. I don't think she's drank at all aside from the couple times we've drank together on holidays. Something must really be bothering her.

"Of course. Is, uh, everything alright?"

She huffs a sigh, pops the cork on a bottle, and fills a glass. After a moment, she appears around the corner.

"Actually, no, everything is not okay." She takes a sip and stares me down.

Shit, I didn't think she'd admit to anything. And as much as I want to know what's wrong with her, talking about feelings is sort of uncharted territory for me.

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that you kissed me then ran away all pissed off, and I have no clue what I did to make that such a terrible thing for you! And, as if that wasn't enough, I ran into one of your hookups in the hallway and felt even more like an idiot, because of course that kiss didn't mean anything to you and—"

"I didn't hook up with her," I interrupt, because she's starting to ramble and I'm a little worried about what might come out of her mouth if she continues. She's already so wrong, though I can't blame her for assuming any of those things.

"You're telling me you didn't have sex with the woman who was still fixing her

clothes as she came out of your room?"

I blow out a slow breath. "Yes, that's what I'm telling you. I did have intentions of sleeping with her because I desperately needed to blow off some steam and thought that would help, but I couldn't go through with it. I asked her to leave before anything actually happened."

"Why did you need to blow off steam?"

Fuck, here we go. "Because I kissed you."

Her eyes narrow in confusion.

I continue, "I didn't realize you had never kissed a man before, let alone anything else, so you telling me that after we had kissed was a bit of a shock."

"Oh." Her gaze drops and her cheeks redden in embarrassment.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about," I assure her.

"Then why are you making it out to be such a big deal then?" She's feisty now, challenging me in a way she hasn't before, and as inappropriate as it might be in this situation, I'm fighting to keep my blood from rushing to my cock. Does she really have no idea how tempting she is?

"Because the idea of my lips being the first to touch yours has me wanting to do so much more than kiss you."

She blushes again, and I want nothing more than to thread my fingers through her hair and show her just how good I could make her feel.

"But, I already told you—I don't do relationships. So, as much as I would love to show you all the filthy ways I'd love to touch you, I won't, for your sake. You deserve someone who can give you the kind of relationship you want, Claire. I'm not that guy."

"Why? Why can't you be that guy? Why are you so against relationships?"

As much as I'm sure she'd love for me to spill my secrets about my past, I'm not about to turn this into a fucking therapy session. The last thing I want to do is to tell her that I learned a long time ago, much earlier in my life than anyone should, that the more significant a relationship is, the worse it hurts when you're fucked over. If I couldn't rely on the woman who gave birth to me to love me enough to stay, why should I expect it from anyone else?

So instead I say, "They don't really work out for me. I like keeping things solely physical. It's a lot less complicated."

She shakes her head. "I'm not sure what you've been through, because it's clearly something, but relationships don't have to be complicated or filled with drama."

"And you would know, right? Tell me, what healthy representation of relationships have you seen in your own life? Because from what you've told me, it's not anything better where you come from. The only difference is that I'm open about what I want."

She steps back as if she's just been slapped. "So what? You're going to compare one unhealthy relationship dynamic to another? The ones I've seen may be on the complete opposite end of the spectrum from what you do, but that doesn't make one better than the other."

I take a step toward her, my voice dangerously calm despite my racing heart. Why the hell does this girl get under my skin so much? "What I do is not unhealthy. You want to know why? Because everything is consensual, and everyone participating is clear and open about what they hope to get from it, myself included. Women want me to make them come until they can't think straight, and I happily oblige. Everyone walks away fulfilled and well-fucked." I've gotten closer to her as I've been speaking, and now we're only inches apart. "Does that clear things up for you?"



Her eyes are wide as she stares up at me, and she swallows hard but maintains eye contact. "Partly."

"Partly?"

She nods and absentmindedly bites her lower lip.

"What part of that is still unclear to you?" I can't resist the urge to touch her—I lift my hand and run a strand of her soft blonde hair between my fingers, loving the way her breathcatches on a sharp inhale.

I can tell she's intimidated, but she still holds her ground, her eyes connected with mine while she wears a look of frustration. It's a stark contrast to the quiet, scared woman I took in a couple months ago.

"It's unclear why you'd still ignore feelings you have for good sex. I can't claim to know what good sex is like, but I know you're not immune to emotion even though you might act otherwise, and I'd be willing to bet that letting go emotionally would be more of a release for you than an orgasm is."

To my surprise, she takes a step backward, putting a few more inches of distance between us. And even though she's dead-on in a way that's kind of freaky, I can't bring myself to fight back. She sees right fucking through me, and I have no rebuttal.

Gone is the meek, shy girl who was afraid to step a toe out of line, and in her place is a woman who is making herself heard despite how much it scares her. If her hands weren't shaking right now, I'd have no clue she was nervous about this conversation, but I see through her act just as much as she apparently sees through mine.

I don't even realize I'm smiling until she cocks an eyebrow at me. "What's so funny?"

Despite the tension still thick in the air from our argument and our close proximity, I can't help but fire her up just a little more. "I'm just proud of you. You said the word 'orgasm' without so much as blushing."

She rolls her eyes but ducks her head in an attempt to hide her flustered expression. "I'm going to make dinner. Are you going to stop being weird around me now that we got this out in the open?"

"Yes. I apologize for kissing you and making things weird."

She opens her mouth to say something else but snaps it shut again. "Okay," she says in a weirdly formal tone before spinning on her heel.

I chuckle and shamelessly watch her ass as she walks back toward the kitchen, though I immediately miss the heat of her small body so close to mine. I'll at least admit to myself that I want this girl and would be more than happy to show her all the ways her body could feel pleasure. I'd fucking love to see her come apart over and over again under my touch.

However, I'm not willing to push her for any of that; It needs to be a decision she makes on her own. She knows my stipulations and my feelings about relationships, so unless she makes it clear that's what she wants, I'll be here acting like a respectable gentleman while spending my nights fucking my fist and imagining it's her wrapped around my cock.

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A minute later, while Claire's in the kitchen cooking, a text comes in from Shane.

"Still on to go to Hawaii with us in a couple weeks?"

Shit, I had forgotten all about that. I've been so caught up in everything with Claire that the vacation had somehow entirely slipped my mind. But considering Shane's one of my higher-ups at work, taking off for a week won't be a problem. And hell, I could sure use a break from real life right about now.

"Absolutely. Do I need to get plane tickets or anything?" I'm sure he's already handled it, but I still feel the need to ask.

"Nope. Renting our own jet for the trip. Are you planning on bringing Claire?"

Fuck. I can hear his laughter in my mind and the words "I told you so." I had assured him before that there was no way I'd be bringing her, but now...

"Hey, Claire?" I call out from the living room.

She peeks her head around the corner, her blonde hair now fashioned up into a messy ponytail. "Yeah?"

"Shane and Dani invited us to go on a trip with them to Hawaii in a couple weeks. They need to go to figure out some wedding details and wanted some company. Would you like to go?"

Her eyes light up. "Really?"

I nod, unable to keep my smile at bay.

"I'd love to go. What dates are we leaving and coming back?"

I tell her, and she beams. "Yay, that's perfect! I'll be on spring break, so I won't even have to take absences from my classes."

"That's great," I agree before she pops back into the kitchen.

I unlock my phone again to text Shane back. "She said she'll come. Convenient how the dates just so happen to align with her spring break perfectly..." It's not like I'm sure he planned it that way—after all, he had asked me about going before he even met Claire at the New Year's party—but I also wouldn't put it past him to meddle in shit he shouldn't be. Especially now that he has Dani, who is annoyingly perfect for him and no doubt encourages his shenanigans.

"Wow, that IS convenient..." He adds a smiley face to the end of the text, which only solidifies my suspicions. Asshole. Another text comes through a second later that says, "We'll swing by and get you guys that Saturday morning. I'll give you a specific time when it's closer."

I send back a thumbs up and fall back into the plush seat of the couch, knowing that I'm royally fucked.

I'm going on vacation with the girl I'm desperately trying to ignore my attraction to, and my mischievous best friend and his soon-to-be-wife will be plotting and conniving to make me fall in love or some bullshit. If they hope that I'm going to suddenly change my entire life outlook and be the next to get married, they're out of their minds, but I wouldn't put it past them to try to make it happen anyway.

Regardless of what happens, though, I know I'm going to need to steel myself for

whatever they're about to throw my way.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### CLAIRE

The four of us make our way onto the small jet, and my heart is already about to beat out of my chest. I haven't traveled more than a few hours at a time in a car, let alone on a plane, and I could hardly sleep last night with my anxiety about this whole endeavor.

How in the world do these things even fly? It still makes no sense to me, even though Mark kindly explained the mechanisms yesterday when I voiced my concern about flying.

Thousands of people do it every day, he had told me. If I was worried it was unsafe, even for a second, I would never let you step foot onto the plane.

Somehow, that last statement had made me feel better than any of the technical explanations or statistics about plane safety.

But now, standing at the base of the steps leading into the jet, that comfort feels distant. My stomach churns, and my knees are weak as I follow Dani up the small set of steps. Mark's large hand presses gently on the small of my back, not to push me along but to remind me of his presence.

"You've got this," he murmurs, his voice reassuring.

I glance over my shoulder at him and give him a weak smile. It's all I can manage.

The interior of the jet is sleek and surprisingly spacious, but I barely register the

luxurious leather seats or the calm, pleasant demeanor of the flight attendant. All I can focus on is the sudden awareness of being in a metal tube that's supposed to defy gravity.

Dani plops down on the couch stretching alongside the long end of the plane, chatting with Shane about something I can't quite catch over the roaring in my ears. She's practically bouncing with excitement while I'm over here wondering if I'll make it through takeoff without throwing up. I take a seat and buckle my seatbelt, attempting to breathe evenly. We haven't even moved yet and I'm already starting to freak out.

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A small moment of reprieve comes to me as I watch Mark's massive figure while he attempts to maneuver through the plane without hitting his head or running into anything. It must be annoying to be so large in such a small space.

Mark slides into the seats facing my own, his bulk taking up most of the double seat. Apparently deciding to bear witness to my impending freakout, he leans back, looking entirely too at ease, as if this were just another car ride.

But instead of feeling cramped or claustrophobic, I'm comforted by his presence. For now, anyway.

The flight attendant gives us a quick safety rundown, but I barely register her words, and I'm left with the distinct impression that I'm missing something important. My palms are clammy, and I can't seem to catch my breath.

As the engines start to hum, a low vibration courses through the plane, and my panic spikes. The knot in my chest tightens. Every instinct screams at me to get off the plane, but it's too late now. The door is closed, the engines are roaring louder, and I'm trapped.

I'm vaguely aware of Mark's eyes on me, but I continue staring down at my feet and attempting to stop the spiral of dread.

The plane moves, and my body tenses, every muscle locking up as if that will somehow protect me.

"Hey," Mark says gently, his voice cutting through the haze of panic.

I glance up at him, and I'm sure my fear is written all over my face.

He leans forward and holds out his hands in silent offering. Releasing my grip on the seat, I extend my arms to take his hands. They envelop mine almost entirely, and the difference in size would be almost comical if I weren't seconds away from launching into the air.

"Are you okay?"

I nod even though I'm not sure I am.

The engines roar louder, and the plane starts to accelerate, pressing me back against my seat. I let go of Mark's hands to grip the armrests for dear life and squeeze my eyes shut, willing this to be over.

"Would me holding you make you feel better or worse?" he asks over the sound of the accelerating plane.

The question catches me off guard, but I don't have to think long. "Better," I manage to whisper around the painful knot in my throat. I doubt he hears me, but he sees the movement of my lips and quickly unclasps his seatbelt, covering the space between us in one step and squeezing into the seat beside me.

Without hesitation, he wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me against his side.

"You're safe," he murmurs, his lips close to my ear. "I've got you. Nothing's going to happen, I promise."

The plane lifts off the ground. My stomach drops and I huddle into Mark's large, warm body. It provides a small amount of comfort to know he cares, even if my fear



is unwarranted.

"Breathe, Claire," he coaxes as the plane climbs higher. "In through your nose, out through your mouth. Just like that. You can do this."

I try to follow his instructions, but my breath is shaky and shallow.

Mark's arm tightens around me, and he shifts slightly, his body angled toward mine as if to shield me from the experience. "You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you. Just keep breathing. I'm right here."

The plane jolts, and I clutch at Mark's forearm like it's the only thing keeping me from falling.

"It's just like going over a bump in a car," he reassures me. "That's all it is."

I keep my eyes shut, focusing on the sound of his voice instead of the unsettling sensation of the plane climbing higher and higher.

"You're doing so well," he continues. "Just a little longer, and we'll level out. The hardest part's almost over."

His words are a lifeline, pulling me back from the brink of panic. Slowly, my breathing evens out, and the tightness in my chest eases when the plane levels out. I open my eyes but don't dare to glance out the window. Instead, I look up at Mark.

"You're okay," Mark reassures me, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "In twenty minutes, you'll forget you're even on an airplane."

This gets a snort out of me. "Yeah, right."

His smile expands. "Are you scared of heights?"

"I don't think so."

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"Look." He points to my other side, out the window, and keeps his arm wrapped around me.

I take a deep breath and look out the window, and my breath is stolen from me again, but not out of fear. The city is disappearing in the distance, the massive skyscrapers looking like nothing more than toys on the ground from this angle.

I turn to Mark. "Thank you."

"Anytime," he replies with a soft smile. His finger traces slow, soothing circles on my arm. I'm not even sure if he knows if he's doing it.

I turn to look back out the window, but before I do, I catch sight of Shane smirking from the other side of the plane and Dani sitting next to him with an excited smile. To them, it probably looks like Mark and I have started dating or something.

Fat chance.

But even despite my brushing off that possibility, there's a part of me that wishes it could be true. I won't push him, mostly because I know he won't budge on it, but my feelings for him are growing stronger by the day. I'll just have to do my best to hide them and hope that things work out until I inevitably find my own place to live.

Two months ago, that thought would have excited me beyond all reason—being able to afford my own apartment, having friends in the city—but now the idea of moving out of Mark's leaves a hollow feeling in my chest.

After thirty minutes or so of staring out the window, I lean my head back against the cushion of the seat and close my eyes. The adrenaline rush I just had combined with my lack of sleep last night have left my body weighed down with exhaustion.

I don't even realize I've fallen asleep until I wake to Mark's hand gently shaking my shoulder.

"Sorry to wake you, but we'll be descending soon, and I didn't want you to wake up scared that we were falling or anything." There's a tiny, playful smirk on his lips, but I can't find myself to be annoyed with him. He's been so gentle with me today in a way that makes me feel closer to him. Maybe too much closer to him.

"Thank you," I manage to say through a yawn.

He was right—the descent isn't quite as terrifying as the ascent was, but the way my stomach drops as we go lower is still nerve-wracking.

But we're slowly getting closer to the ground, and I can now fully see the blue waters, sandy beaches, and vivid green palm trees. I don't even realize I'm smiling until I turn to Mark to find him already watching me with something like affection in his eyes, and suddenly my heart is beating faster for an entirely different reason.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### CLAIRE

There's a driver already waiting for us when we exit the plane, and as we step onto the asphalt, I couldn't be more grateful for steady ground. I don't even want to think about the fact that I'll have to do that all over again a few days from now.

Shane whispers something to Dani then smacks her ass as she climbs into the sleek

black SUV, and she giggles and feigns protest. Mark rolls his eyes at them, but his lips quirk up at the corners. We follow suit, slipping into the car, and I spend the entire ride marveling at the scenery as we head to the hotel.

I knew places could look like this, if only from photographs or illustrations, but experiencing it is entirely different than what I expected. It's not just the scenery—it feels different, too. The climate is obviously warmer, but the air is filled with a calm energy that's opposite the hustle and bustle of Chicago. It could just be all in my head, but from the content smiles on the faces of people we pass on the street, it seems I'm not alone.

Since it's still mid-afternoon, we all grab lunch at a small local restaurant while the driver brings our luggage to the hotel Shane booked. Afterward, Dani declares that she's taking me shopping with her while the men "do their own thing." It's clear that neither of the guys expected that, but Shane simply shrugs and says something to Mark about grabbing a drink.

After lunch, Dani and I head to a cute downtown area to do some shopping. She seems like she's up to something, but I can't exactly straight-out ask.

So instead, I ask, "What are we shopping for?"

"Well, I need a new swimsuit and maybe a couple sundresses, and I figured I'd treat you to a shopping trip for being nice enough to join us on this trip."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," I say. "I brought a swimsuit and enough clothes. You guys already paid for everything else, which was already way too generous."

She frowns. "Please? I haven't been shopping with a girl friend in soooo long, and it's no fun if I'm the only one getting things."

"Fine," I concede. "But only one or two things."

"Yay!" She grabs my hand and leads me into the first shop that catches her interest. After perusing the racks for a few minutes, she asks me, "What does your swimsuit look like?"

"It's a one-piece but with shorts that go over it. It's light purple." I shrug. It was something I had bought not long after Mark had told me we were taking this trip. It's cute but a little boring, especially compared to the wide range of options here. But swimsuit shopping in Chicago in early March isn't exactly the easiest feat, and I've never worn anything so exposing, so I played it safe.

Dani makes a disapproving sound before saying, "Well, that won't do."

"What do you mean?"

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"I mean, you're absolutely gorgeous, and you need something that's going to complement your looks, not hide them. A vibrant-colored bikini is what you need."

She notices the look of mortification on my face when she says the word "bikini" and adds, "If you're too uncomfortable with a bikini, we can find something that covers more skin."

"I'll have to see how I feel when I try them on," I admit. Growing up, the importance of modesty was ingrained in me constantly, and even though I'm making strides to deconstruct all of those ridiculous ideas about not being too "tempting" so as not to lead the men into impure thoughts, it's still difficult to shake the discomfort even when my logical mind knows the truth; I'm not responsible for anyone else's thoughts or actions, and what I do with my own body is my business.

Wow, maybe I've been making more strides in therapy than I thought.

Dani takes that as all the permission she needs to start pulling swimsuits from the racks with reckless abandon, handing me some and keeping others for herself.

We both have close to a dozen items in our hands by the time we head toward the fitting rooms, a combination of swimsuits and cover-ups ranging from cute to somewhat obscene. Dani and I are ushered to rooms directly next to each other, and thankfully, we're the only ones back here.

"Soooo," Dani's voice sounds from the stall next to me, "not to be nosey—" a surefire sign she's about to be nosey "—but what's up with you and Mark? Any developments there?"

I'm grateful she's not able to see the embarrassed smile that comes to my face. "Well, we might have kissed..."

"Oh my god!" she squeals, and my smile grows.

"But we're not together," I add quickly to quell her enthusiasm. "Like, we kissed and it was amazing, but then he got weird about it and it was just awkward for weeks while we sort of skirted around the issue. And then I saw a woman coming out of his bedroom one night when I was supposed to be in class, but when I confronted him about it later, he says he didn't sleep with her." The words all come out in a rush, and there's a beat of silence before Dani speaks.

"God, he's such a dumbass. I love him to death, but he needs to get his shit together."

I huff a laugh as I pull off the swimsuit I had just tried on and hang it back up before picking up the next.

"Well, we're back to normal now... I think."

"So is 'normal' him holding you while you're afraid and then looking at you every thirty seconds while you're sleeping? Because that's exactly what I saw on the plane."

"I guess not. But he's made it very clear that he, quote, 'doesn't do relationships.'"

"Ugh, I could kill him," Dani mutters, just loud enough for me to hear over the clanking of hangers.

I'm not sure what else to say, so I stay silent, trying on yet another swimsuit. I haven't felt comfortable in any of the ones I've tried on so far.



"Well, regardless of the fact that the dumbass is determined to get in his own way," Dani says, "I'm glad you're here. You're good for him."

"How so?"

She pauses for a moment, considering her words. "He has the tendency to push people away when he starts to get close to them, but I can see he's letting his guard down more and more around you. Shane told me that Mark had a rough childhood and generally has a hard time trusting others for that reason, though I'm not entirely sure of the details. But I've seen the way he looks at you, and you clearly mean more to him than I think even he realizes."

I don't know why the admission has my heart feeling so heavy in my chest. Maybe it's the idea of Mark suffering as a child, or maybe it's the fact that everything now seems ten times more complicated. I know that I have feelings for him, but after our conversation about the kiss and everything that happened after, I had assumed things would go back to how they were before. He hadn't responded to my accusation about him having feelings for me, and he had made a joke to divert the conversation immediately after. That had seemed like a gentle letdown to me.

But if what Dani says is true, that he has a hard time trusting others, then maybe...

"I want to see that red swimsuit on you," Dani says, interrupting my thoughts. "I think I'm going to get this black bikini."

I eye the red two-piece on the hanger—it's one I haven't been brave enough to try on yet. "Okay, I'll try that one on next," I tell her, grateful for the change in topic.

As soon as it's on, I know she was right to pick this one. The bright red color is stark against my pale skin and blonde hair, but not overpowering. The bottoms are somewhere between a bikini and shorts, so they cover more than a lot of the others,

but the top is made up of criss-crossed straps that end right at my waistline, leaving little triangles of bare skin visible around my ribs and chest.

It covers more than the last couple I've tried on, yet it feels so much sexier. The only other time I've felt this attractive was New Year's Eve, and the memories of that night almost make me want to experience it all over again, even despite the disappointing ending.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

Dani and I both slide the curtains to the side at the same time and step out, and her jaw drops.

"You look fucking hot," she says with a grin. "Mark is gonna lose his damn mind."

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I laugh awkwardly. "That one looks really good on you too." She's wearing a black bikini that accentuates her curves in all the right places. Her silver collar, which I don't think she ever takes off, lays against her bare skin and makes me wonder again about the whole sex club thing. My curiosity has only grown over the past few weeks, but I'm still too afraid to ask them. "And, I mean, I guess I wouldn't be unhappy about him noticing me..."

"Then let's get these, find ourselves a dress or two, and give these men a sight they won't be able to forget tomorrow." With a wink, she disappears back behind the curtain, and I take a deep breath as I imagine how Mark might react when he sees me in this.

But really, there's only one way to find out.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

#### MARK

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

"What's wrong?" Claire asks. I gesture to the room in front of us, and after a few seconds, understanding falls over her expression. "Ah."

Our bags have already been brought up courtesy of the bellhop, and they're propped against the far wall under the window. I can't make out the view past the window with it being so dark now, but I'd be willing to bet it'll be beautiful when the sun is up.

"I'm going to go downstairs and see if they have a room with more than one fucking bed," I grumble. As much as I'd love to believe this was a simple mistake, I know in my heart that it was Shane's doing. He's always been too concerned about my love life, so here he is, trying to force me to share a bed with Claire.

Claire, who has never kissed a man before me. Claire, who's certainly never shared a bed with a man. Hell, seeing me shirtless was scandalous for her; she had literally ran from the room when it happened.

No. There is absolutely no way can I share a bed with her. If not for her honor, then for the fact that I won't be able to think straight lying next to her.

I make for the door when Claire's small hand rests on my arm, stopping me. "No, it's okay. It's late, and we're both tired. I can sleep on the floor."

I scoff. "You're not sleeping on the floor. That's ridiculous."

"Seriously, it's fine," she argues.

Like hell I'd let her sleep on the floor. "No, it's not." I go to take another step toward the door, but this time it's the pained tone of her voice that stops me.

"Is the idea of sharing a bed with me really that awful?"

God damn it. Taking a deep breath, I turn to face her, and the hurt expression she's wearing is a knife through my chest. "No, of course not, Claire."

"Then why are you so angry?"

"I'm not angry, I'm..." I'm already imagining how fucking difficult it's going to be to control my thoughts with our bodies so close. I'm annoyed that my best friend has

spent all day telling me about how great you'd be for me, but I'm even more annoyed that he's right. I can't stop thinking about how your lips felt when we kissed and how perfect your body feels tucked into mine. "I just don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable," she says. "If it's still a big deal, just go down there tomorrow and ask to switch rooms. But right now, I'd love nothing more than to take a shower and get some sleep. And I'm sure you're just as tired as I am."

"Fine," I concede.

Claire unpacks her suitcase, using up exactly half of the dresser space, and goes to shower. I dig sweatpants and a t-shirt out of my bag, grateful I decided to bring the sweatpants on a whim considering I usually sleep in just my boxers. Changing quickly, I throw my dirty clothes in one of the empty dresser drawers and lay on top of the blankets in the bed.

Ugh, I'm going to have to share a blanket with Claire too.

Once she finally emerges from the bathroom, I get up to take my turn and have a thought. I open the armoire near the door, and there it is—a spare blanket folded up on the highest shelf. Thank God. It's a bit scratchy, but it'll work. One blanket would have meant being even closer to each other with nothing between us. That could've been dangerous.

I toss it onto the bed and tell Claire I'll use it and that she can have the comforter before making my way into the bathroom and taking a shower of my own.

The hot water is soothing after the long day of traveling and enduring Shane's constant questioning sandwiched by his chattering about wedding details. I never thought I'd say this, but I think I'd prefer to hear about the wedding details.

Even when Shane and I finally started talking about something interesting, I could hardly stop wondering what sort of ideas Dani was putting into Claire's head while they were shopping. Dani is Shane's match in every way that counts, which means that if he's been plotting to get me into a relationship, she'd be entirely too enthusiastic about making it happen.

I take my time washing myself, letting the water cascade down my large frame and pull away some of the tension in my muscles.

I also know that as soon as I crawl into that bed, the tension is going to come right back. I'm a big guy—I take up a lot of room. Even with a king bed, we're going to be way too close.

Fuck. This really shouldn't be bothering me as much as it is, but it's not that I don't want to feel her body close to mine; It's that I want it too much, and that scares the fucking hell out of me.

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When my fingers are wrinkled, I take that as a sign that I need to stop hiding from my problems under the hot water.

I toss on my sweatpants and a clean t-shirt, hang my towel up on the hook behind the door, and mentally prepare myself for whatever awkwardness awaits me.

But when I make my way into the room, the lights are off and Claire is wrapped in the comforter and breathing steadily.

She's already asleep.

I let out a sigh of relief and crawl into the bed beside her, careful not to wake her up and especially careful not to touch her.

The first thing I notice when I wake up is how warm I am, and the second thing I notice is the soft, small body curled into my side. Claire's breathing is still steady as she sleeps, but the thin beams of light bordering the edges of the curtains tell me it's morning.

I try to keep still as I figure out what the hell to do. If she wakes up like this, is she going to think I did this? No, I'm simply lying on my back with an arm behind my head, and I'm still on my side of the bed. But what if she wakes up and takes this to mean something more than it does? Maybe I should get up...

No, I argue with myself. It'll be fine. From our positions, it's clear she snuggled up to me in her sleep without realizing it. Honestly, it feels nice to have her here lying against me, even if unintentionally.

My body tenses for a second, and I think again about shifting away, but she stirs slightly and nestles closer into me. Her hair, wild from sleep, tickles my arm, and a sudden pang of affection shoots through me.

God, she looks peaceful.

Her lips are slightly parted and her cheek is pressed against my chest. There's a calmness in the way she's curled up beside me, as though it's the most natural thing in the world. I don't dare move, not yet. Instead, I let myself enjoy it—just for a little while. Half an hour, maybe.

But the longer I lie here, the more conflicted I feel. I'm not used to this kind of closeness. It's dangerous. It makes me imagine what could happen if things were different, makes me want things I shouldn't.

When Claire finally stirs, it's gradual, her head shifting slightly before her eyes flutter open. It takes her a moment to realize where she is—and who she's lying against.

Her face goes red almost instantly. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry!" she blurts, scrambling to sit up and put space between us. She smooths her hair with trembling fingers, not meeting my gaze. "I didn't mean to... I must have rolled over in my sleep or something—"

"It's fine," I interrupt, trying and failing to keep the grin off my face at the sight of her mortified expression. "Don't worry about it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," I chuckle. "I only woke up a few minutes ago, and you were still sound asleep. It wasn't like it was intentional."



That earns me a small smile, and some of the tension leaves her shoulders.

She scoots to the edge of the bed, muttering something about needing to get ready for the day, then retreats to the bathroom, her hair a mess and her eyes still half-lidded from her abrupt wakeup. Something in my chest twists. I ignore the feeling and get up to get ready for the day.

By the time Claire emerges, dressed in a light yellow sundress and looking hesitant as she ties her hair back into a ponytail, the tension from earlier has mostly dissipated.

Shane had told us last night that he and Dani would be occupied for the first half of the day doing wedding stuff—checking out their venue again to plan for decor and doing a food tasting, I think. Claire and I decide to grab some coffee from the cafe in the hotel lobby then walk around to find a place for an early lunch.

It's a small city, especially compared to Chicago, but Claire's eyes dart from one thing to another in constant wonder.

I get a call from Shane letting me know they're on their way back not long after our lunch at a local family-owned restaurant, so Claire and I head back to the hotel. It's been a relaxed morning of walking around and enjoying the sights with no particular destination in mind. In all honesty, I'm surprised by how much I've enjoyed the morning. Claire is easy to be around, even if she's the exact opposite of the type of woman I usually go for. Or maybe that's why everything with her feels so effortless. She's different.

Shane and Dani are waiting for us in the lobby when we return, and Shane gives me a knowing look as soon as he sees us. Claire is already chatting animatedly with Dani about our morning.

"Hey, asshole," I say in greeting. It's a common way for us to greet each other, but

today there's an accusatory edge to my words. Not much, just barely enough for him to catch, even though I'm not actually mad.

As expected, he notices the slight shift in tone and raises his hands in mock surrender. "What did I do?" He's already grinning, knowing exactly what he did.

"Oh, I don't know, maybe booking a room for Claire and I with one bed?" I speak in a low voice so Claire doesn't hear me, but thankfully she's still too distracted by Dani to listen in on our conversation.

He simply shrugs, but the mischievous smile on his face gives him away. "When I first asked you if she was coming, you insisted she wouldn't be. Sorry for trusting your word."

I roll my eyes and jab him in the side with my elbow even as I smile. "I hate you."

"No you don't. You'll thank me for this one day." He claps me on the back, as if he's doing me some great favor by meddling, then asks, "You ready to hit the beach?"

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"Absolutely." Now more than ever, I'm grateful for his company, even despite his antics. I'm enjoying my time alone with Claire more than I should, and even though we've spent plenty of time together over the past couple months, it feels different here. There's an air of excitement and possibility that always seems to accompany a vacation. But even knowing that, I can't fight the heat humming through my veins when she turns her sweet smile on me from across the room.

Any hope I might have had of resisting temptation and looking at Claire in a platonic light has gone out the fucking window.

First, her excited squeals and wide eyes as we came into sight of the beach were fucking adorable. Her smile was infectious as she marveled at the ocean and how it was even more beautiful up close.

But when we settled in our spot, claiming four of the reclining plastic chairs in the private beach area, she had timidly looked around before shedding the sundress she wore, and I couldn't keep my jaw from falling to the floor.

My sweet, shy Claire now stands in front of me wearing a sexy red swimsuit that criss-crosses over her skin, and dear God, her body is fucking perfect. Not to mention, the layers of red fabric crossing over each other immediately remind me of the ropes in Shibari demonstrations I watch at the club.

It takes me a few seconds to realize just how much I'm staring, made evident by Dani clearing her throat and smirking at me when my eyes dart to her. Honestly, I don't even care. How could I not look at Claire when she's the sexiest fucking thing I've ever laid eyes on? I thought her outfit on New Year's Eve was hot, but this...

"Do you like Claire's new swimsuit? I told her it was perfect on her," Dani asks me, her tone taunting. I should've known this was her doing.

Like a blubbering idiot, I can barely get words out. "I, um, yeah. It looks great." Seriously, what's wrong with me? It's not like I don't see half-dressed (or entirely naked) women on a regular basis when I go to the club.

"Thanks," Claire says in response to my stuttered compliment. She tugs at one of the straps on her shoulder like it's suddenly uncomfortable, her shyness resurfacing.

I want to say something to ease her nerves, but my brain is short-circuiting. Every inch of her—every curve, every freckle—is etched into my mind now, and I can't seem to get a grip on myself.

Dani gives me a knowing look, her smirk widening as she leans back in her chair. "See? Told you it'd be a hit," she says to Claire.

"Okay, okay," Claire mutters, waving Dani off with a small laugh. She grabs a towel and spreads it out over her chair. "I'm going to get some sun." Her eyes flick to mine for the briefest moment.

Dani and Shane start chatting about something—plans for dinner, maybe—but I can barely hear them. My attention is glued to Claire as she stretches out on the beach chair, leaning back and tipping her face toward the sun. The way the light hits her, catching on her golden hair and glinting off the sheen of sunscreen on her skin, is mesmerizing.

I force myself to look away, shifting in my chair and grabbing a water bottle to give my hands something to do. This is ridiculous. I'm ridiculous. Claire deserves better than to be ogled like this, especially by someone like me.

But even as I try to focus on anything else—the waves crashing on the shore, a couple of kids building a sandcastle in the distance—my eyes keep drifting back to her. She looks so free, so happy, and it hits me how much she's changed since the day I first saw her. Back then, she was like a shadow of herself, skittish and silent, afraid to take up space or make herself heard. Now she's laughing, joking with Dani, and stretching out on the beach like she belongs here.

And she does belong here. I've never seen anyone more beautiful in my life.

I get up abruptly, the need to move overwhelming. "I'm going for a swim," I announce, not waiting for a response before striding toward the water.

The cool waves are a shock to my overheated skin, and I dive in headfirst once I've walked in deep enough to do so, hoping the cool water will knock some sense into me. When I resurface, I see Shane jogging toward the shoreline to join me, and right behind him, the women are whispering to each other and giggling while darting frequent glances in our direction.

Claire sits cross-legged on her chair now, her head tilted slightly as she follows my movements and a smile curving her lips. Even from this distance, I can see the happiness glowing in her expression.

It's like the sun itself just flared in my chest.

Somehow over the course of a few months, she's become everything I never knew I needed. I used to cherish my alone time, my lack of attachments, but now I can't possibly imagine not having Claire around.

But I'll never admit that to anyone but myself. No matter how much I care for her, she has such a full life ahead of her. I think about all the life I've lived since I was her age, and it feels like such a significant amount of time. The experiences I've had

between my early twenties to my almost-forties have shaped who I am—all the joy and pain, the love and loss, the millions of decisions for better or worse. I can't take that away from her.

But maybe I can give her some of those experiences before she goes off into the limitless world on her own...

Shane splashes me, rousing me from my daydreams of just exactly what I could show Claire.

"You're staring," he says matter-of-factly.

I splash him back, and he laughs.

We stay in the water for a while, mostly chatting about our mornings, and the conversation is thankfully free from insinuations about Claire and me since I steer it toward wedding details. I've got enough going on in my head; I don't need more of Shane's taunting.

When we finally decide our wrinkled skin is a good indicator to get out of the water, we head back to where the girls are sitting with their chairs pushed together. Dani has her phone in front of them, and as I get closer, I hear a woman's voice on the other end. It sounds familiar, and it's not until I sit down and see a flash of purple hair on the screen that I see it's Audrey. I had met her once or twice before the New Year's party, and she seemed nice, if not a little feisty.

"So, we were totally flirting and he told me to get on my knees for him, so obviously—" Audrey draws out the last word as if it's the most evident thing in the world "—I said 'make me,' because I'm not about to go easy on him just because he's hot. He has to earn it, ya know?"

Dani laughs, and I don't know if Claire's pink cheeks are due to her embarrassment with sex talk or simply too much sun, but regardless, Audrey has her enraptured with the story. "So what he do?" Dani prompts.

"He fucking left!"

Dani gasps. "No!"

"Uh-huh. He stood up, said he 'didn't have time for this,' and walked away. Itoldhim I was a brat beforehand, that it's just how I play, and somehow it'smyfault that he didn't like it?"

"Ridiculous."

That familiar feeling of discomfort threads through my body, the same way it has every time I've caught Claire in the midst of a conversation involving Club Caliber, BDSM, or sex in general. But she's clearly getting a little more comfortable with it, because she laughs along with Dani, and I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse.

I'd give anything to know what goes on in her mind when she sits in on those conversations. Is she embarrassed but too polite to walk away? Is she curious? Is she fantasizing aboutwhat it might feel like to be in such a sexual relationship?

As if my curiosity was a beacon, Claire glances over and catches my eye. She smiles shyly and quickly looks away, like she's been caught doing something she shouldn't. It's adorable and weirdly hot. Her sweet, innocent demeanor combined with that sexy-as-sin swimsuit might be melting my brain a little.

Dani hangs up the call with Audrey a moment later and looks over at Claire with a grin. "Race you to the beach?"



"You're on."

They both pop up and sprint across the sand toward the water, and my traitorous eyes watch every inch of Claire's exposed skin as she runs.

She and Dani make it to the water at the same time, and as they fall down laughing and grabbing at each other, another part of the wall around my heart comes crumbling down.

I push the feeling aside, but deep down, I know that there's no way things will be the same between us after this vacation.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### MARK

After a long, relaxing evening of dinner and drinks, we finally arrive back to the hotel room and I realize that, once again, I forgot to talk to the front desk about getting a larger room. But tonight, it doesn't seem like such a big deal.

Or maybe that's just my dick talking.

Either way, the bed somehow feels even smaller than it did last night as I climb in next to Claire after my shower.

Unlike last night, she's still awake, which makes the whole thing ten times more awkward. The curtains are still parted slightly, the moonlight casting a soft glow over the room and providing just enough light for me to see Claire's silhouette. She keeps shifting as she tries to fall asleep, and I lie there staring at the ceiling and willing my mind to stop imagining her in that goddamn swimsuit.

What a day it's been. Waking up to Claire's head on my chest, spending the morning with her, going out of my mind watching her at the beach this afternoon, and now back to lying in bed with her and desperately trying not to think about touching her.

This morning was a mistake, though. Waking up to her snuggled against me, her hair tickling my nose, her body fitting perfectly into the curve of mine—it was too much. Too real.

Now, as we lie here in the dark, the memories of the day replay in my head. The beach, the sunshine in her hair, the laughter with our friends. It all felt so normal. And yet, here I am, feeling anything but normal. I'm acutely aware of every inch of space between Claire and me, my heart beating too fast and my breathing quicker than it should be.

As if reading my mind, Claire speaks softly beside me. "Today was fun."

I turn my head to look at her, even though I can only see the outline of her face in the dim light. "It was," I agree. "You seemed to enjoy the beach."

"I did. I never thought I'd get the chance to see the ocean."

I smile at the memory of her running through the waves. "I'm glad it made you happy."

She shifts onto her side, facing me, and I turn my head to look at her. We're close now, too close, but I can't bring myself to move away. "It did. Thank you for bringing me."

We lie there in silence for a moment, the air thick with unspoken words. Gratitude fills her eyes, and I have to clench my fists to stop myself from reaching out to touch her.

"Can I ask you something?" Her question is hesitant, which only makes me more curious.

"Of course."

She inhales and asks, "Is it normal for so many people to be involved in a Dominant and submissive relationship, or does it just seem that way because of the people you hang outwith?"

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Jesus fucking Christ. That is not where I expected this conversation to go.

How do I explain this to her without letting my personal experiences get in the way? The last thing I need to do is corrupt her any further. Though, at this point, her ignorance about sex seems to be diminishing every day, and not by my own doing, so I can't exactly let the responsibility of preserving her innocence fall to me.

"There are a lot of people that engage in that sort of dynamic, but probably not as many as it might seem if you're only considering my friend group as a sample size," I explain, choosing my words carefully. "I wouldn't call it common, but it's not a rare thing either. A lot of people who are into that sort of lifestyle tend to flock together."

She's quiet for a moment as she digests the information. Then she asks, "So are you into that sort of lifestyle?"

I groan internally, fighting every urge in my body that's telling me to touch her, to show her, to teach her. Kill me now. But even despite how fucking insane this conversation is already making me, I can't lie to her.

"Yes, but not in the way Shane and Dani are. How much has she told you?" I know Claire has heard snippets about things from Dani and the ladies at the New Year's party.

"Enough for me to know the basics of what their relationship entails and why she likes it. Enough for me to be curious..." she trails off.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. This is dangerous territory. This is the line I

swore I wouldn't cross with her, but she's tiptoeing dangerously close to the edge of it.

"I don't know if I should be the one answering your questions," I tell her.

"Please," she pleads. "I've been kept in the dark my entire life. I'm sick of being treated like I'm too fragile and innocent to know about certain things. It's not my fault that I was controlled and repressed for so long, and the last thing I need is to feel guilty for wanting to learn."

Damn. She's got a point. "Okay. What do you want to know?"

She's silent for a few seconds before asking, "You said you were into similar things as Shane but in a different way. How is it different for you?"

"Well, we're both Dominants and enjoy being given control. He's very focused on the rules and protocol, taking control in and outside of the bedroom. It's a very strict dynamic. Whereas I..." Ugh, how do I say this without sounding like a total sex fiend to her?

"You what?"

"I'm more focused on having that control only in the bedroom and using it in a different way."

"How so?"

Well, I guess there's really no way to talk around the topic now. She's curious enough that she won't settle for vague answers. Fuck it. "I'm a pleasure Dom. That means I'm focused more on my partner's pleasure than anything else, and I love to push those limits, seeing how much pleasure I can give my woman before she

breaks."

I can barely make out her expression in the dark, but I'd be willing to bet anything that she's blushing. "Oh."

"Any more questions?" I ask.

There's a too-long pause, and I worry that maybe I've crossed a line. Was that too much for her?

"I want you to show me."

Holy fuck. "That's not a question."

"Please," she whispers. "Teach me."

The words hang in the air between us, and my last remaining thread of hesitation snaps. I can't pretend anymore, can't act like I haven't been dying to feel every inch of her skin, can't resist the way she seems to want me almost as much as I want her.

But I need to take it slow—much slower than I'm used to. She deserves that buildup of pleasure, of learning the basics before I can give her what I truly want to.

I turn so I'm mirroring her position, on my side and facing her, and lean forward just slightly as I reach out and brush her hair back over her shoulder.

"Okay, but we're going to take it slow, and I need you to tell me if you change your mind. Communication is the most important thing here, and you need to speak up for yourself. Understand?"

She nods. "Yes."

I take a deep breath, preparing myself for what's to come. For the world I'm about to drag her into.

"Have you ever made yourself come before, Claire?"

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There's a hitch in her breath. "I—I don't think so."

"You would know if you had," I tell her.

"Then no."

"Alright," I say. "I want you to touch yourself for me."

She looks at me, confusion and embarrassment warring in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

I reach out, gently pushing her from her side onto her back before taking her hand and placing it on her stomach. "I mean, I want you to touch yourself," I say. "I want you to explore your own body. I want you to find out what feels good, and I want to have the absolute pleasure of watching you make yourself come for the firsttime."

She swallows hard, her eyes never leaving mine. "I... I don't know how."

"That's the point. You're going to learn. And I'm going to help you."

I shift so my palm is against the top of her hand, and I help her guide it down her stomach, over the waistband of her pajama pants, and between her legs. She gasps softly, and that little sharp intake of breath makes me wonder how she'll look the first time I'm inside her.

"That's it," I say. "Now, rub yourself slowly. Move your fingers like this." With my hand over the top of hers, I'm careful not to touch her anywhere else as I guide her



hand in small, slow circles. "Try out different pressures. Find out what feels good."

She hesitates for a moment when I let go, then begins to move her hand on her own, adjusting her fingers until I catch another gasp coming from her lips. Her eyes flutter closed as her head falls back against the pillow.

"Mmm, seems like you found the spot," I murmur, my mouth only inches from her ear.

She nods.

"Now, I want you to move your hand under your pants and underwear and rub that same spot for me."

She follows my instructions perfectly, letting out a soft whimper as she touches herself again.

"Are you wet for me?"

"Yes," she breathes.

"Good." My cock is hard as a fucking rock as I watch her, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have to not take over. I do, however, lean over to cover her lips with my own, unable to fight the urge to kiss her any longer.

"That's it, baby. You're doing so well. Tell me what you're feeling right now."

Her voice is breathy when she answers, "It's like a... pressure. But a good one."

"Good. Keep going, and do what feels good, whether that's the same pace or harder and faster. That pressure is going to keep building the longer you touch yourself until

you come."

Her breathing picks up and her hand moves faster, and I can tell she's close. God, she's so fucking sexy lying here touching herself, with her hair splayed out across the pillow and her eyes scrunched shut. Her breaths turn into soft whimpers and moans.

"Don't stop touching yourself until you know it's over," I murmur in her ear. "Come for me, Claire."

She does only a few seconds later, crying out as her hips move against her hand and her head falls to the side, pressing against my chest.

"That's right, baby. Let me hear you." She comes so beautifully. My own lust grows almost unbearable as I watch her fingers work her clit under her pajama pants as she rides out her first orgasm ever. God damn, what a sight to see.

Finally, her touch slows and she pulls her hand out of her pants. Her head stays against my chest as her breathing slowly returns to normal.

We lie there in the dark, lost in the moment, and it hits me that I'll do anything to see her fall apart from my touch.

But as the moment fades, reality sets in. The realization of what I've done, of what I've started. The knowledge that I can't take it back, that I can't undo it. There's no turning back from here.

She looks up at me with those big, brown eyes and gives me a shy smile, and it temporarily washes away my worry. I can stress later about what this might mean for us, but right now, I'm going to enjoy every second in the afterglow with her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CLAIRE

"Well," I say, breaking the growing silence between us after I've managed to catch my breath, "I definitely see why people enjoy doing that so much."

Mark's low laughter vibrates through my body as he pulls me in close to him. I lay my head on his chest and drape an arm over his midsection, though it's hard to ignore the bulge at the front of his sweatpants.

"Do you, um, want me to—" I'm not exactly sure how to ask my question, so I simply gesture toward his lower half.

Thankfully, he understands without asking for clarification. "No, I'm okay. Tonight was about you." I nod against his chest, the rest of my body feeling limp. His large hand spans across my lower back, and I feel like I'm right where I belong.

I never would have imagined I'd be in a position like this—curled up against a man I'm not even dating, let alone one I'm not married to, after he talked me through how to make myself orgasm. It was, without a doubt, the hottest thing I've ever experienced. But alongside the afterglow of the pleasure, another feeling creeps in, and it takes me a moment to place it.

Guilt.

With as much progress as I've made in my personal journey these last few months, it's still difficult to extricate myself from the teachings I grew up with—that what I just did is dirty and shameful, that I should repent and do better. That I'll face eternal

damnation for giving in to the desires of the flesh. It's so messed up.

Another couple minutes pass in comfortable silence before Mark asks, "How are you feeling?"

"Good. And weird," I admit.

"Why weird?"

Do I dare tell him about the warring emotions in my head? I decide that yes, I will, if only because we seem to be reaching stronger levels of connection and he deserves to know since he was a participant in all of this too.

"I guess it's just difficult to reconcile the new me with who I was before. It's hard to get the religious programming out of my head sometimes. Like, I don't even think I believe in God anymore, but for some reason, I still feel a little guilty for what I just did. It makes no sense."

Mark squeezes me, just a quick one-second motion, but it eases the worry just a little bit knowing he's here for me. "It makes perfect sense," he says. "You spent your entire life being told you should be ashamed of things that are perfectly natural. Shame and guilt have a way of manifesting into something that's more deeply rooted than a simple change in beliefs can fix."

"That's true. I just don't understand why that's the case. If I don't believe I'm going to hell anymore for doing things like that, why is my subconscious still screaming at me that I'm dirty and impure?"

Mark is silent for a moment before speaking, but I take comfort in being pressed against his warm body, in feeling safe and wanted. "I'll tell you a secret—human beings are wired for conformity. We do what we need to do to fit in with the people

around us because long ago, isolation from a tribe meant death. It's ingrained in our psyche that we need to think and act like others. You spent your life surrounded by a community of religious extremists, and your brain did what it could to survive. Breaking away from the pack and leaving was the biggest act of bravery you could have taken. You still just have a bit to unlearn."

I'm pretty sure my jaw is hanging open by the time he finishes speaking, and unwanted tears prick at my eyes. "When the heck did you get so smart?" I laugh, because if I don't laugh, I'll cry, and the words he just spoke were more revelatory than anything I've been told, even in therapy. It's like he's shining a light on something so obvious that I never would have realized myself.

Mark's gentle laughter rumbles in his chest. "I've had a lot of time in my life to think about why people do the things they do. And I've seen enough to know that everyone's fighting their own battles, even if they look perfectly fine on the outside."

"That makes sense. It's really hard sometimes to unlearn all the things I grew up believing."

He strokes my hair gently and says, "It is hard, but you're doing it. Every day, you're discovering more about who you are, and that's a wonderful thing."

I smile at that. "Thank you for helping me see things differently. And for everything else you've done for me."

We lie in silence for a while until another question comes to the surface.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Why did have me touch myself instead of you touching me?"

"Because your body belongs to you first and foremost, and I wanted you to take ownership of your own sexuality before anyone else could touch you like that, myself included. You deserve to have pleasure, and you now have the knowledge that you can give yourself that pleasure all on your own."

I doubt he has any idea just how much his words hit their mark. I know all those things, but hearing them spoken aloud gives them weight.

"Thank you for that," I whisper. "But you do want to touch me like that, right?" Because if I was misreading all those stolen glances and touches, then this is going to be really awkward.

He sighs, his chest rising and falling beneath my head. "I want to touch you so badly it hurts."

"Well, on that note," I say, "can we do this again at some point?"

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Mark grins. "How could I say no to you?"

I smile back at him.

"But—" his expression turns serious "—we need to lay some ground rules."

"Like what?"

"I told you before that I don't do relationships. I'll teach you everything you want to know about sex, but you need to promise me you won't decide you want a 'normal' relationship, because that's not something I can do. We can stay friends, and we can keep doing things like this, but it's not going to last forever."

My heart aches at his warning, but I still want it. I want whatever he'll give me, whatever moments I can get even if he doesn't want me in the same way I want him. It'll be enough to spend the nights like this, lying in his arms after he makes me feel good in ways I never thought possible.

"Okay. I understand."

"Perfect." He kisses my forehead and squeezes me again before adding, "We should probably get some sleep."

"We should." Even though I don't want to. I want to stay in his arms and stare at him all night, to feel his hands explore where no other man has touched me.

"Goodnight, Claire."

"Goodnight."

But despite my exhaustion, I can't fall asleep, because as much as Mark says he doesn't do relationships, the way he's acted this weekend makes me think otherwise. I'm not sure if it's some sort of mental block for him or if he's been hurt in the past, but regardless, I'll play by his rules, even if a small part of me thinks that maybe he's wrong about what this could be.

I won't keep my hopes up, but with the way my feelings have grown for him, I already know this won't be a clean break for me. And I think he feels the same, even if he'd refuse to admit it.

Because if I'm being honest, I love him. I love him so fucking much it hurts. My whole life, I thought I knew what love was, but it's only now that I realize how misguided I was. Love isn't something molded by fear, conformity, and purity; instead, it grows in safety and acceptance, not because of perfection but despite it. Mark has shown me that regardless of my flaws, I'm worthy of love.

Even if he hasn't said it yet. Even if he never will.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### CLAIRE

Mark and I managed to keep our hands to ourselves for the rest of the vacation, which was thankfully only two more days. He claimed he wanted me to experience things in a comfortable environment where we wouldn't be interrupted by the sounds of people stomping past our room and where we wouldn't have to worry about others hearing us.

The idea that we would need a place where we could make noise had made me even



more curious about how all of this will go...

The plane ride home hadn't been nearly as bad as the one there now that I knew what to expect, but Mark still made sure to sit next to me and hold my hand during takeoff and landing. He may say he's not cut out for relationships, but all of his actions seem to suggest otherwise.

When we finally step through the door of Mark's apartment and drop our suitcases, everything seems almost awkward as it did the first time I came here. We're looking at each other, gauging the other's interest while trying not to be too obvious about it.

"I'm going to put my clothes in the washer if that's alright," I say, because standing here pretending we're both not thinking of tearing each other's clothes off is torture.

"That's fine. I'm going to take a shower." He sounds about as awkward as I feel as he runs a hand through his hair before heading down the hall.

It's been two whole days since he showed me how I could make myself feel by touching myself, and all I can think about now is how it will feel when he touches me instead.

A couple hours later, the apartment is quiet aside from the distant hum of the dryer and the soft tapping of rain against the windows. I heard Mark getting out of the shower over an hour ago, and he hasn't emerged from his room since.

Assuming he must be sleeping when I don't notice any light coming from under his door, I tiptoe into the kitchen for a late-night snack. We had eaten on the way home, but the time difference from our trip must be messing with my hunger cues.

The small light above the stove provides just enough illumination for me to find my

way around the kitchen. I decide to keep it simple and make myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, which I take to the small table near the window, and I sit in the dark watching as the drizzle outside turns into sheets of rain whipping in the wind.

A dark form appears in my peripheral vision, and I jump at the sudden intrusion. Mark stands there, his hair still slightly damp from the shower, wearing nothing but a low-slung pair of sweatpants. My breath hitches at the sight of his bare torso illuminated by the soft yellow light coming from the kitchen.

"Sorry," he says. "Didn't mean to startle you."

I swallow hard and force myself to stop staring. "It's okay. I just didn't realize you were still up."

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His dark eyes are locked on mine as he steps closer to where I sit. "I couldn't sleep," he admits. "Too many thoughts running through my head."

I know the feeling. My own mind has been a whirlwind for the past couple days, desperate for his touch yet curious about his aversion to relationships.

Instead of saying that, I reply, "I understand. I was just getting a snack." I gesture to the now-empty plate on the table in front of me.

"I see." The air between us is thick with tension, the same electric energy that's been building since the moment we met. It pulses through my veins even stronger now that we've crossed the line of physicality.

"Claire," he says, "About what happened on vacation..."

"What about it?" If he tries to tell me it was a mistake or that he doesn't want to explore things with me anymore, I might implode. Especially after opening my eyes to the possibilities, letting me hope, and then—

"Are you sure you want to continue that?" he asks, interrupting my concerns. "I just want to make sure you don't feel pressured to do anything you don't want to."

Oh, thank God. "Yes, I do want to, and I don't feel pressured. I want to explore everything with you." My instinct is to look away, to hide my embarrassment at speaking my desire, but I don't. I hold his gaze, knowing how important it is for him to see that I mean what I say.

"And you're okay with this arrangement being purely physical?"

"Yes," I whisper, even as I secretly hope more might come of it.

His eyes darken as he takes a step closer. He towers over me as he reaches out to cup my cheek, and I stop breathing when he brushes his thumb against my lower lip.

His expression shifts into an approving but predatory smile that sends shivers down my spine. "Good," he says. "I want to teach you something else if you're up for it."

"What's that?"

He takes my hand, lifts me to my feet, and leans in so his lips are brushing against the shell of my ear. "I want to teach you how to suck my cock."

My eyes widen, heat rolling through my body at his words. Not knowing how else to respond, I simply nod as I stare up at him. Lying in bed with him on our vacation, it was clear how vast our size difference was, but standing here pressed against him and craning my neck upward to look into his eyes, it's even more pronounced.

Better yet, I love the way that it makes me feel. Small but protected, delicate and at his mercy. But the best part about it is I know he'll show me the utmost respect, so I don't have to be afraid by giving him control.

He takes my hand, guiding me toward the living room, and I can't help but love the way his hand envelops mine. Sitting down on the couch, he pulls me to sit beside him and keeps his eyes locked on mine.

"First," he says, "I want you to understand that this is about pleasure, for both of us. If you stop enjoying this at any point, don't continue. Say 'stop,' and we will stop. I will never get upset with you if you change your mind about what we're doing, and I trust

that you'll speak up for yourself. Okay?

"Okay."

He smiles, his hand reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Good. Now, I want you to touch me. Explore my body, the same way you explored yours the other night. However and wherever you want."

I hesitate for a moment then reach out to trace the line of his jaw, down the curve of his neck, over the muscles of his chest. He's warm and solid beneath my touch, and the way his breathing picks up as my hand moves lower and lower affects me just as much as it seems to be affecting him.

It takes a moment before I work up the courage to trace my fingers down to the waistband of his sweatpants, and it's impossible to ignore the massive bulge just below.

My heart races, and, as if sensing my hesitation, Mark says, "Go ahead. Touch me, baby." He hooks his fingers over the waistband and slowly pulls down his pants, exposing inch by inch of muscular thighs, and then...

His erection springs forth past the tension of the fabric. Oh. My. God.

My hand glides over the hard muscle of his thigh before I gingerly wrap my fingers around his erection. It feels... different than I expected, hard and sturdy but with thin, soft skin. His breath catches in his throat as I move my fingers, and I pause to look up at him.

"Does it hurt?"

He smiles softly. "No, it feels amazing. Here," he says, wrapping his hand over my

own. "You can squeeze a little harder, then move up and down." I let him guide me, showing me exactly how he likes to be touched, until he lets go and allows me to continue on my own.

He groans as I stroke him, his head falling back against the couch. "That's it. Just like that."

Emboldened by his response, I continue to stroke him, my confidence growing with each passing moment. I look up at him to gauge his reaction under his hooded gaze.

"Can I do more?" I whisper.

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He smiles and reaches out to brush my hair back over my shoulder. "Use your mouth," he says. "Kiss, lick, suck, but be careful with your teeth. Take your time to explore. There's no rush."

My heart pounds in my chest as I lean down and press my lips against the tip. He's soft and smooth, and I can taste a faint saltiness. I do what he said, kissing and flicking my tongue out to explore the ridges of sensitive skin.

When I wrap my lips fully around the tip and use my tongue to lick up the line on the underside of his cock, Mark groans again, his hand tangling in my hair. "That's perfect," he says. "Now, try to take me in further and suck in the same way you were stroking me before. Up and down. Slowly. Just a little at a time."

I do as he says, my lips parting to take him in. He's big, though I have no prior experience to compare him to anyone else, and I don't think I'll be able to take him all the way. I suck him in slowly, inch by inch, my tongue swirling around his shaft as I go.

"Fuuuuck," he half-whispers, threading his fingers through my hair but not putting any pressure on my head. He's still letting me go at my own pace, which I appreciate. "You're so fucking good at this."

I moan with my lips around his cock, partly in acknowledgment and partly because his words turn me on much more than they should. The desire to make him feel as good as I felt the other night overwhelms me, and I attempt to take him even deeper.

Needing to take a breath, I pause to look up at him, my eyes watering slightly. He's

watching me with dark eyes and parted lips. I can see the effect I'm having on him, and it spurs me on, making me want to give him more.

"You can use your hand at the same time," he says. "Stroke me while you suck me. The tip is the most sensitive part, so you can focus your tongue there and use your hand for the rest."

I do as he says, wrapping my hand around the base of his cock and stroking him in time with my mouth. The combination of sensations seems to drive him wild, and his hips lift in rhythm with my strokes.

"God, that feels good," he growls.

I continue to stroke him, my confidence growing with every soft moan and gasp that escapes his lips. It's a heady feeling, knowing that I can bring this powerful, confident man to his knees with just my mouth and hands.

"Claire," he warns, his hand tightening in my hair. "I'm close. If you don't want me to come in your mouth, you should pull back now."

Moaning again to let him know I heard him but am not stopping, I continue to work his cock with my hand and mouth. I want to taste him, to know what it's like to feel him come undone beneath my touch.

He stills a fraction of a second before groaning and pulsing in my mouth. I'm not sure what to expect, but it isn't unpleasant, and I swallow it down quickly while keeping my lips wrapped tightly around his cock.

When I'm sure he's finished, I sit up and wipe my mouth with my sleeve, grinning at him when he catches my eye.



"I'm not gonna lie, I'm really fucking impressed." He grins back. I'm not sure if he means it sincerely or if it was just because that was my first time sucking dick, but either way, I'll take it.

"I have a good teacher," I quip. "So, do you want to watch a movie or something?"

He raises an eyebrow, pinning me with a stare that makes my stomach flip. "Oh, I'm not done with you yet."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

MARK

Claire falls back against the couch beside me, back to her shy, adorable self but with a self-satisfied smile.

After a few seconds of silence, she asks, "So, do you want to watch a movie or something?"

"Oh, I'm not done with you yet," I tell her, tracing a finger up her thigh.

Her eyes widen and her head snaps to me. "There's more?"

"You didn't think I was just going to have you suck me off without me getting to return the favor, did you?"

"I, uh, I didn't think—" she stutters, trying and failing to find the right words. Her awkwardness is so fucking endearing, and I can't help but smile.

"No need to think," I interrupt, if only to put her out of her misery of trying to string together a coherent sentence. In an instant, I stand and lift her from the couch, and

she squeals and giggles as I carry her down the hallway.

"What are you doing?!" she laughs.

"You got a taste of me, so now I get one of you. It's only fair, right?" I toss her onto my bed and wink when she stares up at me.

Surveying her expression, I step between Claire's legs and hook my fingers over the waistband of her pajama pants before tugging them down. In response, she lifts her hips, giving me permission to pull her pants off.

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Fuck. I've always been a visual person, but the sight of her bare and exposed for me is almost too much to handle. Each inch of her skin that I reveal is a testament to the trust she has in me, and because of that, I'm determined to give her an experience she'll never forget. Knowing that I'm the first man to touch her like this stirs up a primal need in me, a desire to possess her entirely.

I sink to my knees and place a gentle kiss on the inside of her thigh just above her knee.

"Is this okay?" I whisper.

"Yes."

Taking my time despite my burning need to taste her pussy, I kiss up her thigh, and when I almost reach the apex, I start all over again with her other one. The entire time, I revel in the feeling of her soft skin beneath my hands as I explore her legs and hips.

As much as I'd love to bury myself inside her right now, this is the part that I really love. Building up the tension, turning my woman into a needy, desperate mess before I give her so much pleasure she can't think straight.

I encouraged Claire to give herself an orgasm before anyone else could, but now, I want all of her orgasms to belong to me, to be coaxed out from my fingers, my tongue, or my cock. Every time she comes, now and in the future, I want it to bemyface that appears in her mind. I won't deny that I'm a selfish bastard for wanting to give her the best orgasms of her life, but I can't exactly feel bad for it, either.

Claire is writhing beneath my wandering hands, so I firmly grip her hips and give her one last chance to change her mind.

"You ready for my tongue, baby?" I can already see just how wet she is.

She whimpers out a soft "yes," and that's all the permission I need.

I flatten my tongue and slowly lick up her slit, easily finding her clit and enjoying the way her whole body jolts when I make contact.

I do it again and again, enjoying the sweet little gasps that leave her lips each time, before I suction my lips around her clit. She arches her back and moans at the new sensation, and it only spurs me on as I swirl my tongue over her clit again and again at a slow but steady pace.

Her breaths become quick and shallow. She's close. I pause, kissing the inside of her thigh again and letting her come down from the brink of her orgasm.

"You taste fucking divine," I tell her. "I could do this all night and never get sick of it." I look up at her, seeing the desperation in her expression, and it just might be the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

I want to do more, but I know I need to make sure it's okay with her first considering how little experience she has. "Can I use my fingers inside you?" She hesitates, so I add, "You can say no. I still plan on making you come so hard you see stars either way."

She asks in a timid voice, "Will it hurt?"

"It might, but it shouldn't last long if it does."

She thinks for a moment before answering, "Okay, go ahead."

Ever so slowly, I go back to using my mouth to build her back up before slowly pressing my finger to her entrance. She stiffens slightly, and I pause to give her the chance to change her mind. When she doesn't say anything, I push my finger into her tight pussy inch by inch, moving it back and forth in a gentle crooking motion.

My cock is rock hard again, reminding me that if I'm ever going to fuck her—which I fully intend on doing someday soon—she'll need to be ready for the much bigger intrusion. As it is, my finger seems to be more than enough for her right now, especially with our size difference.

She cries out as I find my rhythm, fucking her sweet pussy with my finger and giving her clit all my attention with my mouth. Her body trembles beneath me, responding to my touch in a way that makes me heady with the power I have over her. She's so responsive, and I love that she's showing me exactly how I make her feel.

"I'm getting close," she breathes.

"That's my girl." I use my thumb to rub her clit where my mouth had been so I can speak. "Let me hear you fall apart for me."

As her orgasm approaches, her body tenses and her breathing becomes rapid. I know she's close, and I redouble my efforts, my tongue flicking against her clit with increased urgency. Her pussy clenches around my finger, and with a cry of ecstasy, she comes, her body shuddering and convulsing as waves of pleasure wash over her.

I moan against her, noticing in my peripheral vision how her fingers grasp the bedsheets in a tight fist.

I don't stop. I ride out her orgasm with her and draw out everylast drop of pleasure

until she's limp and panting beneath me.

Only then do I slow my movements as I bring her down from her high. I'd love to keep going, to push her to her limits, but tonight is the first time a man has ever made her come, so I figure I should take things slowly, at least for tonight. So instead, I crawl up onto the bed beside her and wrap her in my arms, whispering words of praise.

Now, she knows exactly what I'm capable of, and I'm more eager than ever to show her everything she's been missing.

Because even though I selfishly hoped earlier that she'd never come again without thinking of me, I think I may have just damned myself to the exact same fate with her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CLAIRE

Going back to real life is an odd feeling after spending a week in a tropical paradise and the past few days under Mark's touch. It's as if the floodgates have been opened now and there's no going back to how we were before. We haven't had sex yet, but we've been taking it slow, exploring each other's bodies late into the nights.

I had agreed to his stipulation that this doesn't turn into a "real" relationship, but a part of me wonders where he draws that line. Is it just the idea of labeling it that bothers him? Because, as of right now, we do basically all the things that a couple would do; we eat dinner together most nights, I do the housework while he works, he kisses me constantly now that we've established our boundaries, and we often spend the nights curled up on the couch watching movies together. What difference would there be in him calling me his girlfriend? I'm not really sure, but the last thing I want to do is scare him away by asking, so I'll keep my mouth shut for now.

But maybe one day...

No, I can't even let myself think that way. Hoping that one day he'll change his mind about what he wants from me is a surefire way to get my heart broken. I try to remind myself that there's a whole world full of people out there, that most "normal" people go through multiple relationships before they find their forever partner. Even then, the idea of leaving Mark's apartment—leaving Mark—makes my heart ache in ways it never has before.

One day at a time, I remind myself. There's no use in worrying about the future if there's nothing I can do about it right now. Still, that's easier said than done.

Classes are back in full swing, and I'm just about to walk out of the building after Psychology class when my phone alerts me of a new email.

When I see the message, my blood runs cold. It's the same sender as before—someone from home, though I'm still not entirely sure who.

"Claire,

I'm begging you to come home. Everyone misses you so much. I know that you're probably experiencing a lot of new things, but none of those worldly things will ever come close to God's love for you or your family's love for you. If you continue to live in sin and reject the teachings of the church, you will regret it. It's never too late to repent.

'Let the wicked forsake their ways

and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them,

and to our God, for he will freely pardon.'

-Isaiah 55:7"

I lean back against the cool brick wall and slide down until my bottom hits the floor. This can't be happening. I had almost managed to forget about the first message, having been knee-deep in schoolwork and then going on vacation with Mark, but I apparently couldn't escape for long.

Based on the phrasing of the messages, I'm now almost certain it's my mother. I understand why she'd want me to come home—I'm sure I messed up their whole



plan for me to serve as another testament to their parenting by doing my good Christian duty of marrying a man of God and having a bunch of babies for them to add to their collection of grandchildren.

I just wish they could understand that I want to build my own life, make my own mistakes, and follow my own dreams. That will never be good enough for them, though.

My heart won't stop racing as I stare at the message, seeing the words but not really reading them anymore. Dread sits in my stomach like a dead weight. I could block the email address, but something tells me she'd make another and keep contacting me. My mother is nothing if not persistent in her lifelong quest to maintain her image, which includes making sure all her children are just like her. Me disappearing in the middle of the night and leaving the community was the worst thing I could have done to her because it wrecked her image of our perfect little family.

Sucks for her, but I couldn't give a damn about any of that now.

Except my chest is still tight with anxiety even while knowing there's nothing she can do but continue to try to guilt trip me. I'm safe, I'm okay. I repeat those four words over and over in my head until I manage to calm down enough to drive home.

When I make it home, I'm grateful to find that Mark is busy with something in his office, so I quietly head to my own room and shut the door.

A part of me wants to collapse in his arms and cry, and the other part wants to stay in here by myself until I can think straight. I know he'll worry like crazy if I tell him what's going on.

Actually, my next appointment with Dr. Lawrence is tomorrow, so I'll just ask her what I should do.

I change into my pajamas, flop down on the bed, and send Mark a text, not wanting to face him tonight. "Not feeling well tonight. I'm going to sleep, so don't wait up. See you tomorrow." I add a smiley emoji to the end of the message to make it sound less serious before tossing my phone on the nightstand and cocooning myself in my blankets.

Fifteen minutes later, his voice sounds outside my door. "Claire?" It's just loud enough for me to hear, but I lay there in silence and pretend to be asleep even though I want nothing more than for him to come wrap me in his arms.

But I can't escape from all my problems just by letting his presence suppress them until I can pretend they aren't there. I need to deal with this on my own. I'm just not sure how.

After a mostly sleepless night of tossing and turning, I drink way too much coffee before making my way to Dr. Lawrence's office. The little sleep I did get brought me no relief. My dreams were hazy and disjointed, snippets of scenes and images—me lost in an old building that resembled the back hallways of my old church, the lighting dim and illuminated only by flickering candles glinting off stained glass windows. I remember desperately trying to find my way out, but the hallways seemed to change every time I turned a corner. Something was chasing me, though I didn't know what. All I knew was that I had to get away.

I had woken in the morning with my heart racing and my chest tight, but the relief that it was only a dream quickly took away most of the anxiety. Still, a tiny piece of it has lingered throughout the day, no doubt due to the email from yesterday.

It only takes a couple minutes for me to get called into Dr. Lawrence's office, and she can immediately tell something's wrong.

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As soon as she asks, I tell her about the emails. Dr. Lawrence has a way of making me feel like I'm the only person in the world when I'm in her office, and today, I need that more than ever.

When I finish explaining, she leans back in her chair and studies me for a moment. "I can see why this is upsetting. Receiving those emails would be difficult for anyone, especially given your history with your family and their expectations."

I swallow the lump forming in my throat. "I thought I was doing better dealing with the guilt. But these emails make me feel awful. I feel like I'm right back under their control."

"That's a natural response," she says. "Their words are designed to evoke guilt and fear—two very powerful emotions that you associate with them and their way of life. But I want you to consider something: do their words hold any power over you now, or is it the memories of the past that give them power?"

The question catches me off guard. "I... I don't know. Maybe both?"

"That's fair," she says. "But the fact that you recognize what they're trying to do is already a sign of your growth. You're not that same person who felt trapped and unable to make her own decisions. You've taken control of your life in ways they couldn't have imagined. This is your space now—your life. They can send a hundred emails, but they can't make you go back unless you choose to."

Her words are comforting, but they don't completely ease the tension in my chest. "I know you're right, but it still gets to me. It feels like I'll never really be free from

them."

"Freedom isn't always about distance," Dr. Lawrence says gently. "It's about finding peace with your decisions and learning to separate who you are now from who they tried to make you. The emails are a reminder of where you came from, but they don't define you."

I try to internalize her words, but a part of me just wants some actionable advice. "So, what should I do about them?"

"That's your choice," she says. "You could block the sender, but as you said, they might just create another email account. You could reply to the email if you think it might help the situation. Or, you could write a response—not to send, but for yourself. Sometimes putting your thoughts into words can help you process them."

"I like that last idea. I write in my journal all the time anyway, so that could help."

Dr. Lawrence smiles. "Good. And remember, it's okay to feel unsettled. Healing isn't linear. You've made so much progress, Claire. Don't let these emails make you forget that."

Her reassurance lightens the weight crushing my chest.

We spend the rest of the session unpacking my feelings about the emails, and not long before the session is over, I mention my vacation with Mark. A small smile creeps onto my face as I describe the days we spent in the tropical paradise—the sunsets, the laughter, and the way we seemed to fit together so effortlessly.

"Things sound like they're going well with Mark," Dr. Lawrence observes. "How are you feeling about the relationship?"

I hesitate. "It's... complicated. I know he doesn't want anything serious, and I agreed to that, but it feels like we're more than just casual. It's confusing."

"Have you talked to him about how you feel yet?" she asks.

"No," I admit. "I'm afraid to. I don't want to scare him off."

She nods thoughtfully. "It's understandable to feel that way, but relationships thrive on communication. It's okay to take things one day at a time, as you've been doing, but it's also okay to want clarity. What's important is figuring out what you need and whether the relationship, as it stands, fulfills that."

I sigh. "I don't know what I need yet. I just don't want to lose him." I don't bother correcting her using the term "relationship," since I'm not exactly sure what to call my arrangement with Mark.

"Just remember, don't put your own feelings on the back burner in order to keep the peace. Sometimes things need to be discussed and brought into the open, even when it's a difficult conversation."

Ugh. She's right again. Of course I'm used to putting my feelings aside to keep the peace. It's how I was raised and is my natural reaction to any sort of relationship, whether it be family, friends, or more.

We wrap up our conversation, agreeing to dive more into what Dr. Lawrence refers to as my "anxious attachment style."

I spend the drive home playing over the session, trying to internalize everything she told me about my feelings being valid and how communication is important. Maybe I should journal about this when I get home. Writing everything down always helps me gather my thoughts and untangle them into something that makes a little more sense.

Maybe I will talk to Mark about my feelings, if not tonight then possibly this weekend. It's times like these that I wish I could see inside his mind.

I punch in the code to open the apartment door, lost in my own thoughts. But there's no time to think anymore, because Mark is sprawled out on the couch when I enter, and the grin he gives me melts away every worry I'd had.

And more than anything right now, I want him to touch me and make me forget every concern plaguing my mind.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

CLAIRE

"Hey, you," Mark says. His smile makes my stomach flip—he's so damn attractive, and that radiant smile only amplifies his charm. He pats the couch beside him, beckoning me to join him.

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I drop my bag by the door and make my way over to him. When I go to sit beside him, Mark pulls me onto his lap instead. Letting out a surprised giggle, I wrap my arms around his neck for support.

"Hi," I say.

"How was class?" he asks as he rests his hands on my hips. His thumb traces small circles on my skin. It's a seemingly innocent touch, but it only makes me want more.

"It was good," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. His touch is entirely too distracting.

"That's good. Are you feeling better?"

It takes me a second to figure out that he's referring to last night when I avoided him by telling him I wasn't feeling well. "Yeah, I'm good now."

Mark's hands begin to move, tracing the curve of my waist, the flare of my hips, the line of my thigh. His touch is gentle, but it seems to set my skin on fire all the same.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you today while I was trying to work," he says, leaning over slightly to press a kiss to my neck.

"Me either. It's weird going back to real life after everything that's happened in the last week or two."

"Agreed. Guess I'll just need to take advantage of all the alone time I get with you in

the evenings, then."

I bite back a smile as his fingers dip beneath the hem of my shirt, slowly pulling it upward to reveal my bare midriff.

"I like the sound of that." I lift my arms so that he can pull my shirt off, and he tosses it unceremoniously to the floor when he does. Seconds later, he's doing the same with my bra.

"You're so goddamn beautiful," he breathes, staring down at my bare torso as he traces the curves of my body. He studies my expression as his thumb flits over the peak of my nipple before pinching it between his thumb and forefinger, eliciting a gasp from me as the sharp sensation shoots straight to my core.

I lean forward and press my lips against his in a soft, tentative kiss. He responds immediately, his mouth moving against mine. His tongue slips past my lips as he takes what he wants and deepens the kiss, and I melt into him as one of his hands threads through my hair.

His erection presses into my ass, and it only amplifies the need coursing through my body. Now that I've had a taste of him, I can never seem to get enough. I want him. I need him.

He breaks away from the kiss, trailing his lips down my neck, nipping at the sensitive skin. The stubble on his face scrapes against my skin, and the heat of his breath raises goosebumps wherever his lips pass.

Without thinking of what I'm doing, I grind my ass against his erection beneath me, and he lets out a low groan.

Suddenly, he stands, lifting me in his arms as if I weigh nothing. I grin up at him,



tightening my arms around his neck as he carries me down the hallway to his bedroom. He kicks the door shut behind us and the sound of it clicking closed echoes through the room.

Fire burns between us, setting my every nerve on fire with the knowledge of what's to come.

Mark sets me down gently on the bed with his body hovering over mine. His eyes search my face, looking for any sign of doubt or hesitation. "Are you ready for this?"

"Yes," I whisper. Butterflies take flight in my stomach. "I'm nervous, but I'm ready."

He smiles softly, brushing my hair away from my face. "That's normal," he says. "But I promise we'll go slow. And if you want to stop at any point, just say the word."

I nod, my trust in him outweighing any other feeling I might have. I want him in every way I can have him, and I trust him with everything in me. He leans down, pressing his lips against mine again. This time, the kiss is soft and slow, different from the heated, passionate one we had only moments ago on the couch.

"You're perfect," he whispers as his hands begin to explore again, covering every bare inch of my body. He leans down to close his lips around my nipple, sucking just hard enough to make me whimper.

His dark chuckle at my response only turns me on more. He's so confident, so in control, and it allows me the vulnerability to trust that he'll take care of me.

He reaches down to unbutton my jeans then stands to pull them off, followed quickly by his own clothing.

My eyes zero in on his hard cock jutting out before him, and as sexy as it is, I can't

help but wonder how that's going to fit inside me. He's prepared me the past few days with his fingers, but likely not to that extent.

Mark must notice the concern in my eyes, because he says, "Don't worry. I promise I'll make you feel good, baby."

I know realistically that this will probably hurt a little, but I believe him. I trust him.

Towering over the bed, he covers the space between us then pushes me back against the pillows before moving lower on the bed, trailing his lips down my bare skin until he reaches my pussy.

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He hovers over me, looking up as he slips a finger through my wetness before slowly pushing it inside me. "God, you're so wet for me already," he growls in appreciation before lowering his head and flicking his tongue against my clit. His finger moves inside me, and he gently pushes another in, the stretch slightly painful but sending my already sensitive body closer to the edge.

I can tell he's been holding back with me this week, careful not to push me too far too fast, but I have a feeling that tonight, that's all about to change.

Mark licks and sucks, all the while moving his fingers inside me, and I know I won't last long at this rate. In the matter of a week, he's managed to learn my body in a way I never knew possible, knowing exactly where and how to touch me. The tension inside me builds and builds until I know I won't last any longer.

"I'm close," I whisper. He moans against me in response, never letting up. I should have known he'd make me come twice tonight. He did it for the first time a couple days ago, and it was mind-blowing. I didn't even know that was possible.

It only takes a few more moments before I fall apart from Mark's constant movement, the friction pushing me over the edge and causing me to buck my hips against his greedy tongue. I fucking love it.

He keeps going until I push his head away, too sensitive to take any more. The smile he gives me is satisfied yet mischievous, as if that was only the beginning.

I don't have a chance for my breathing to return to normal before he's crawling up the bed over top of me and kissing me. I can taste myself on his tongue, and it's

strangely erotic.

My head is spinning as I run my hands over his tattooed, muscular arms. He's careful not to put his weight on me, but the heat radiating from his body envelops me and his thick cock is pressing against my thigh as he gives me a moment to catch my breath.

The hunger in his eyes is enough to have my stomach flipping again. He wants me just as much as I want him. Even though he doesn't express his affection as much in words, it's evident in his actions, in the way he looks at me as if I'm the only thing that matters.

Mark props himself up on one forearm as he leans over to grab a condom from the nightstand, then sits up to put it on. Straddling my legs, he rolls the condom down over his hard length then pins me with a look of barely controlled lust.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he says.

"I—I want to feel you."

His chest rises with a slow inhale before he leans back down and positions himself at my entrance.

I wrap my arms around his massive shoulders and close my eyes as he presses against me.

"Try to relax," he murmurs.

I do as he says, willing my tense body to relax as much as possible.

He shifts slightly, pushing inside me. I gasp at the feel of him stretching me, the burning sensation uncomfortable but not entirely unpleasant. He rocks his hips

gently, going deeper inside me inch by inch, until I'm so full I don't know how he could possibly go any further.

With one final push, he stills, giving me a chance to adjust to the foreign sensation. It doesn't hurt as bad as I expected it to, likely due to him preparing me this past week with his fingers and tongue, but it's still uncomfortable. I take a few slow, deep breaths to center myself.

"You okay?" Mark asks.

I nod. "Yes. Just... adjusting."

"When you're ready, move your hips for me."

I take a few more seconds before I move my hips forward. Oh. I do it again and again, rocking slowly back and forth as the uncomfortable fullness morphs into something else entirely.

"Fuuuuck," Mark groans. He begins to match my rhythm, thrusting his hips in time with mine, his cock withdrawing almost entirely before pushing into me again. "You feel so good."

"So do you," I stutter out, my words punctuated by his thrusts. It's true. Every worry I'd had is now gone and replaced by the overwhelming thrill of him fucking me, claiming me as his. The connection between us is even more intense than I could have expected, tying me to him on some primal level that I'll never be able to forget.

I lift my legs, wrapping them around his large body, and the shift somehow makes it feel like he's even deeper inside me.

I must make a sound without realizing it, because his low, dark chuckle vibrates in

his chest. All I can focus on is the heat of his skin against mine, the tension in his muscular arms as he strains to hold himself up over me, the increasingly rapid pace of his thrusts.

And at this angle, I can feel that now-familiar sensation building inside me again, bringing me higher and higher.

Every touch, every moan, every thrust sends me closer to the edge until I'm dangerously close to coming again. I don't warn him this time. Instead, I ride it out, my inner muscles tighten around him as I fall apart.

"That's it, you're doing so fucking well for me," Mark praises. He keeps going, pushing me past my limit until everything is a blur of pleasure and heat and all-consuming lust.

As I come down from the high of my second orgasm of the night, he leans down to rest his forehead against mine. It's a surprisingly affectionate, intimate gesture, and my heart lurches in my chest at the rush of affection it brings me.

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"Mark..." I whisper his name, even though I don't have anything else to say. I just need to say something to convey the affection blooming in my chest, and his name passing my lips holds the weight of all the things I can't tell him right now.

"I'm here," he whispers back. An acknowledgment. A promise.

He fucks me slowly through the aftershock of my orgasm, then flips over to lie on his back, moving my body easily so I'm on top of him.

When I give him a questioning look, he flashes me a devilish grin. Biting back a smile, I situate myself on top of him and sink down slowly on his rigid cock.

"Oh my god," I whimper. The new angle gives me more leverage but also makes everything feel impossibly deeper.

In response, Mark lifts his hips in a small but quick motion, bouncing my body on him and eliciting a sharp gasp from me. He looks entirely too pleased with himself when I feign a glare at him.

Leaning forward to rest my hands on his chest, I slowly rock back and forth, making his cock go in and out of me the same way it did when he was on top. I'm rewarded with a low groan from him. Picking up the pace, I watch as his breathing mimics my own, growing faster and shallower by the minute.

To my surprise, he reaches forward and uses his thumb to circle my clit.

"I don't think I can do it again," I whine.

"Yes you can, baby. I've got you."

Sure enough, the pleasure builds and heat spreads through my veins. I chase the orgasm, riding Mark at a desperate, almost frantic pace. He matches my rhythm, thrusting into me from below with as much urgency as I'm feeling. Then, I'm coming again, falling apart around him for the third time tonight. My core tightens, and I cry out as my body bows forward and I catch myself on Mark's chest.

Seconds later, he groans with his own release, pulsing inside me. It's all so sensual, so overwhelming, so perfect.

For a long time, we don't move, and it's silent aside from our heavy breathing. I'm on top of him, chest-to-chest, my eyes closed and my body weak after the roller coaster of emotions and sensations. Finally, Mark gently rolls me to his side and presses his lips against mine in a chaste kiss.

"How do you feel?"

Speaking feels next to impossible right now in this headstate of bliss, but I manage to answer, "So good."

"Good." Even though my eyes are closed, I can hear the smile in his voice. He rolls away from me for a moment, presumably to discard the condom, then returns a few seconds later. His arms envelop me, warm and strong and gentle, and I've never felt happier.

Even though I know I'm probably setting myself up for heartbreak by falling for him, I'm too far gone to care. It's painful to think he might not feel as strongly about me as I do him, but right now, I can enjoy pretending if nothing else.

Because the way he holds me feels a lot like love, even if it's not.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

MARK

The office feels quieter than usual, though the noise level hasn't actually changed. Phones ring, keyboards clack, and voices hum in conversation, but it all sounds muffled. Or rather, I'm too lost in my own head to register most of it. I've been rereading the same email for the past five minutes, skimming over the words but failing to register their meaning.

I came in to the office hoping to focus on work, because I knew if I stayed home, the only thing I'd be able to focus on is the sweet, beautiful blonde in the other room.

Claire's face flashes in my mind for the millionth time today—not that it's ever really left for more than a few seconds at a time. The way she had blown my mind on vacation the first time I saw her in that swimsuit, the way everything had felt brighter when we spent the days together, the beautiful sight of her coming apart under my touch.

Focus, I tell myself.

It's not working.

She's everywhere in my head, permeating my every thought because of how constant her presence has become in my life. It's not even just the memories from vacation or the blissful few days I spent making her come over and over again. As incredible as those things were, there's more to it than that. I've always been able to separate sex from emotion, but it's almost impossible with Claire. It's like a positive feedback loop where, no matter what she does (whether sexual or not), I want her more in every capacity.

And even though the sex is fucking incredible, it's the things she does in the small, quiet moments that really get to me. The way she holds her coffee cup with both hands because she likes how warm it feels. The way her nose scrunches when she's writing in her notebook and trying to think of a word. The way she dances around the house as she cleans when she thinks I'm not looking. All of it flits through my mind like a movie reel.

It's frustrating.

I told her from the start this was supposed to be simple. No strings attached, no commitment. Two people who needed an escape, nothing more. We were on the same page.

Then I went and complicated it by doing everything I shouldn't have. Touching her like she means something. Holding her like she's not just temporary. Kissing her like I'm trying to memorize the taste of her for when she's gone.

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Because she will be.

People leave. It's just what they do. After all, the brightest flames burn the fastest. Sure, she might have feelings for me now, but once she realizes just how much opportunity is out there for her, she'll be gone. I won't let myself get hurt by hoping she'll stay.

I've learned that lesson, having been stupid enough to believe in people before, to let myself think I'm worth sticking around for. And every damn time, I've been proven wrong. Even the few people who were supposed to love me unconditionally were sick of me within a few years. My mother first, then my father a few years later, and my grandmother only took me in out of obligation once my father passed. Now, she's gone too. Shane is the only one who's stuck around, and even he is getting more distant by the day.

Claire's here now, but she won't be forever.

Anyway, she deserves better than me, someone who doesn't carry this much baggage. Someone who doesn't always assume the worst, who doesn't keep people at arm's length because he's scared of how much it'll hurt when they're gone.

It's a frustrating way to live life, but a necessary one. Besides, there's a lot more room for fun and excitement when attachments are temporary.

But God, I want her. I want her so bad it causes a literal ache in my chest. Every time I tell myself to let go, to pull back before I get too far in, she does something that pulls me in closer. She'll smile at me unexpectedly, or come out of her shell a little

more by making an inappropriate joke, or dance around the living room while she's cleaning without knowing I'm watching—and it's like gravity itself is pulling me toward her. Like I couldn't walk away even if I wanted to.

Which, clearly, I don't. The idea of her not being in my life anymore makes my stomach twist. But wanting her and keeping her are two very different things. And if I let myself believe I could actually keep her, I'm just setting myself up for the kind of pain I've spent my whole life avoiding.

"Mark?"

I blink, realizing that one of my coworkers is standing next to my desk, holding a stack of files. She's been trying to get my attention, apparently, and I didn't even notice she approached.

"Yeah," I say, clearing my throat. "Sorry. What's up?"

She raises an eyebrow. "You okay? You've been staring at your screen like you forgot how to read."

"Fine. Just a lot on my mind." It's not exactly a lie.

"Uh-huh," she says, not buying it for a second. But she doesn't press. Instead, she says, "Well, we've got a couple new hires on the software development team, so you'll need to give them the rundown later this week after they've finished onboarding."

"Got it," I say, writing it down on a sticky note so I don't forget.

She walks away, and I prop my head up on my hand. I need to get my shit together. I'm not the kind of guy who lets his head get clouded by feelings.

I keep things compartmentalized. Clean. Simple. And this is a fucking mess.

It would be easier if she were wrong for me in some obvious way, if she were selfish or shallow or argumentative, but she's not. She's kind and intelligent and funny in an understated way that catches me off guard. She's so much better than what I deserve, Maybe that's why I can't stop thinking about her. Because part of me, no matter how much I try to shove it down, wants to believe I could be good enough for her. That just maybe she'd choose to stay with me if I asked her to.

But that's not how this will end. She'll move on and find someone who's more suited for her new life than I am, and I'll be left wondering why I ever let myself think otherwise. I can't do that to myself. Or her, for that matter. There's so much opportunity out there for her that she'll miss if she stays holed up in the apartment with me.

I should put those boundaries back firmly in place while I still have the chance, but it's not that simple. And if I'm being honest with myself, I'm already in too deep.

My phone buzzes on the desk, and a smile tugs at the corners of my lips when I see her name on the screen.

"Hey, hope your day's going okay. Miss you."

She misses me. That should be annoying considering we literally saw each other last night, but somehow it's not. After spending so much time together on vacation, it feels weird to be apart now.

Which is half the reason you came into the office today, I remind myself. I need to have some space from her because I'm apparently losing myself in the temporary bliss of being with her. I can't let that go too much further.

I type out a response that's safe and casual, then delete it. Then I type another and delete that too. Finally, I settle on:

"Busy day here, but I'll see you later."

It's short, borderline cold, and I hate myself a little for sending it. But my mind is reeling between wanting her so badly it hurts and knowing that it'll hurt even more if I let her in fully. It's a situation of bad versus worse.

The rest of the day drags on in a blur of half-hearted work and frequent glances at my phone, even though I know she's not going to reply. I've given her nothing to respond to, and that's for the best. That's what I keep telling myself, anyway.

By the time the work day is over, my head is pounding. Ironically, the one person stressing me out is also the only one that could make me feel better right now. But just because my heart is apparently trying to cross lines right now doesn't mean that we can't keep up our arrangement, because God knows I won't be able to stop touching her now that I've started.

I drop my bag by the door and head straight for the kitchen, grabbing a bottle of my best whiskey and pouring more than I probably should into a glass before collapsing on the couch.

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This is why I didn't want to get involved. This feeling, this mess, this... whatever the hell it is, isn't worth it. But even as I tell myself that, I know I'm lying. Because if I had the chance to go back, to undo meeting her, I wouldn't.

I'm screwed, and I know it. But for now, all I can do is hold on to what's left of my self-control and hope like hell it's enough to keep me from falling any further.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

#### CLAIRE

The restaurant is bustling with the brunch crowd as I step inside, where the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and baked goods fills the air. I spot Dani waving at me from a table in the corner with Sarah and Audrey already seated beside her. Making my way over, I try to ignore the flutter of nerves in my stomach. I've never been great with new social situations, but I remind myself I've met these ladies already, and they were perfectly friendly before.

"Hey, Claire!" Dani stands and pulls me into a side hug when I approach the table. "You remember Sarah and Audrey from the New Year's party, right?"

I nod, smiling at the two women. "Of course. It's great to see you both again."

Sarah smiles back, her short blonde hair swishing over the tops of her shoulders. She has an air of elegance about her, a confidence that comes with age and experience. Audrey, on the other hand, has a mischievous glint in her eye, her purple hair pulled back in a messy ponytail.

We settle in, and the conversation immediately resumes. "So, Dani," Sarah says, turning her attention to her friend. "You were saying about your trip?"

"Oh, it was amazing. We had such a great time, and the wedding planning is finally coming together. It's a lot of work, but it'll be worth it in the end. And I can't exactly complain about getting to go to Hawaii," she laughs.

Audrey chimes in, looking between Dani and myself. "So, any juicy details from the vacation? Anything interesting happen?" Since she had video called Dani while we were on the beach, she knows I was there, and I can only imagine she's asking more about me than Dani.

Dani smirks, her gaze flicking to me. "That's not my question to answer."

Audrey's attention zeros in on me as she prompts, "Well? Anything happen between you and Mark? Don't think I didn't notice how cozy you were getting at the end of the New Year's party." She winks, and all eyes turn to me.

My cheeks flush at the mention of Mark's name, the memories of everything that's happened over the past few weeks coming back full-force. I'm not sure how to respond, so I just smile and shrug, trying to play it cool.

"Oh, come on," Sarah teases, joining in on the fun. "You gotta give us something."

But what do I tell them? That we're together but not actually together? I take a sip of the mimosa Dani had offered me from the pitcher and say, "Well, I mean, we did get a bit closer. But it's not like we're dating or anything serious."

Audrey leans in, her voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper. "So, have you slept with him yet?"



I swallow wrong and cough hard, making a total fool of myself.

Dani giggles, coming to my rescue even though I can tell she's just as curious. "Leave her alone, you two. I like her, so don't scare her off."

Sarah smiles apologetically. "Sorry, Claire. We can be a bit much sometimes. But seriously, if you ever need to talk or have questions about anything, we're here for you. I know we started to get into some heavier topics at the New Year's party."

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

Audrey, clearly the most curious of the group, asks me, "So, have you been to the club yet?"

"No, not yet. I don't know if we will..."

Sarah says, "Well I won't prod by asking what sort of activities you and Mark engage in, but if they're relevant to what goes on at the club, you totally have to go."

The idea is both terrifying and exhilarating. It's not like I haven't wondered what it would be like, after all, and I trust Mark to take care of me in a place like that. "I don't know," I say. "I have final exams coming up in a few weeks. I should really be focusing on studying." It's a terrible excuse, and they immediately call me out.

Dani speaks first, saying, "You can't study all the time, Claire. You need to have some fun too. And trust me, the club is definitely fun. If it's something you're interested in, you should just look into it, or ask Mark about it."

The other ladies nod in enthusiastic agreement.

I laugh and put my hands up in mock surrender. "Alright, alright. I'll think about it."

Dani turns her attention away from me and to Sarah. "Speaking of the club, I haven't seen you and Quentin there in a while. What's up with that?"

Sarah shrugs, her eyes falling to the table as she fiddles with the wrapped silverware. "Oh, you know. Just been busy with work and getting the youngest kid ready for college and stuff. Haven't really felt like going out."

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Dani hums, a sound that says she doesn't quite believe her. But she drops the subject, and the waiter arrives a few seconds later to take our orders.

As I sit there with these women, a sense of contentment and belonging washes over me. I've never been part of a group like this before, a group of strong, confident women who support and uplift each other. It's a new experience, but one that I'm quickly growing to love.

We spend the better part of the next two hours sipping on mimosas and chatting about anything and everything. Sarah and Dani talk about the school that they both work at while Audrey vents about some drama that's going on at the store she manages. They ask me questions about my classes and what I have planned for the future. I'm not sure how to answer the last part, so I give a vague answer before leading the conversation back to them.

By the time we leave the restaurant, my head and heart feel lighter than they have in a while. I got both Sarah and Audrey's phone numbers, and they've permanently invited me to their monthly brunch get-togethers.

Not only that, but the idea of going to Club Caliber has been lingering in my mind since they brought it up again, and I've decided I'm going to be brave and ask Mark about it as soon as possible. If I'm in the process of reinventing myself, I may as well take all the experiences I can get, right?

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

MARK

This is a terrible idea. Seriously, how did I even get roped into this?

Because Claire's sweet little pout made me crack after the third time she asked me to take her here, I remind myself.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" I ask her. "We can always come back another weekend."

"I'm ready," she answers, as if she didn't just lose her virginity a couple weeks ago and that going into a BDSM club isn't a big deal. She has a good poker face, I'll give her that much.

The issue is, I'm not sure if I'm ready. I've never been nervous about walking into Club Caliber—it's my happy place full of kinky fuckery, after all—but with Claire on my arm, my mind won't stop spinning. What if she freaks out? What if she sees all this, hates it, and thinks I'm some sort of degenerate freak for indulging in it?

Realistically, I don't participate much in the public aspects of the club; I enjoy meeting like-minded people here, having a couple drinks, and occasionally watching a demo. Usually if I hang around long enough I'll run into one of my play partners, and we'll both have some no-strings-attached fun until we happen to run into each other again.

Tonight's different. As I watch Claire fill out the paperwork required for entry, looking sexy as hell in a little black dress that flares out at the waist, I wipe my clammy palms on my pants and will my heart to stop racing. I don't even understand why it's such a big deal to me—she and I are having fun, and I'm teaching her everything she wants to know about sex. That's what we had agreed on in the first place, after all.

So why the fuck am I so nervous that she'll hate this?

After Claire finishes her paperwork and the woman at the front desk gives her spiel, we walk through the second doorway into the club. Her arm is wrapped around mine, her small hand gripping on my bicep. I spot an empty couch on the far side of the room and lead her in that direction, eager to sit somewhere where she can take things in at her own pace. It can be overwhelming at first, even just here in the front lounge area. Out here, people still have to stay somewhat clothed and aren't allowed to participate in anything more than you'd be allowed to at a normal club. However, things get alotmore intense in the back.

I sit on the couch, pulling Claire to the side so she falls onto my lap instead of on the seat beside me. The need to touch her, to claim her in front of all the eyes glancing in our direction, is overpowering. I want everyone to know she's mine, and I'm not sharing.

My hand rests on Claire's exposed thigh as she settles onmy lap, and her eyes meet mine. There's no trace of disgust on her face like I had worried there'd be, only nervous excitement.

"While we're here, ask me anything," I murmur in her ear. Goosebumps rise on her skin as I place a gentle kiss on her neck following my words. "I'll tell you anything you want to know, and I don't want you to be embarrassed about any of it, okay?"

She nods, her gaze slowly taking in the room around us. It's still early in the night, so things are fairly tame for now. Claire's attention catches on a couple in the corner—they're regulars that I recognize from my many nights spent here, though I've only spoken to them a couple times.

"What's that guy wearing on his face?" Claire asks in a hushed tone. "And why is he on the floor?"

How the fuck do I explain pet play to someone who only learned about sex in the past

few months?

"It's a leather mask made to look like a dog," I tell her. "You know how we talked about what a Dom/sub dynamic is?"

"Yes."

"Well, these two do something similar, except she's the one in charge, and there's an added element of him being... pet-like."

Claire's head tilts with curiosity as she tries not to stare. "I don't get it." She says it without judgment, which I appreciate. So many people are quick to judge what they don't understand.

"When they're in a scene—which just means the times they're both participating in the dynamic—he's like her dog and she's his owner. In their particular case, he stays on all fours, isn't allowed to speak, and follows her commands. In return, she takes care of him and is in charge for all intents and purposes. I'm sure there's more to their dynamic that I'm not aware of, though."

"Hmmm, interesting." And just like that, Claire moves on, her gaze shifting around the room again.

Well, that was an easier conversation than I expected. I really thought I'd have to give her the lecture about not judging others' kinks even if they're very different from our own, but apparently I was wrong. She's taking this all in stride way better than I anticipated.

After close to thirty minutes of simply sitting and observing, we decide to grab a drink from the bar. Claire has been mostly quiet as we've sat, and I'd give anything to know what's going on inside her head.

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The bartender delivers our drinks, and I turn to Claire.

"So, what do you think?"

"It's not what I expected," she admits. "But I'm wondering if the back area is going to be more like how I imagined this place."

"It probably will be, but this space is more for people to socialize and get into the right mindset. Back there—" I gesture to the black door on the far wall "—is where things get more intense."

"That makes sense." She sips her wine. "It's amazing that people can feel so free and unashamed about their desires," she says in a softer, more contemplative tone.

I study her expression and realize that this must be an incredibly eye-opening experience for her. She spent most of her life so repressed, completely surrounded by judgment disguised as morality, and the life she knew before is entirely opposite from where she is now. This is one of the few places I've found where people are free to express themselves without fear of being judged, while Claire spent a good portion of her life in a place where everyone was judged to the harshest degree.

It's ironic, really, that a sex club encompasses the sentiments that so many churches preach but don't follow: accepting people for who they are, caring about others' well-being.

Hell, there are even quite a few people on their knees here...

Okay, definitely not going to make that joke out loud. If God is up there, hopefully he has a sense of humor. I'd almost feel guilty for that thought if not for the look of pure awe in Claire's eyes right now.

"Any more questions for me?" I ask her as I finish my drink.

Her wine is almost gone, and she absentmindedly swishes around the remaining liquid in the bottom of her glass. She looks up at me, pauses, then looks away again. "Umm, how involved are you with all of this stuff? I know you said before that you were a Dom, but from what I've learned, there are a lot of different variations of that."

My lips lift with something between a smile and a smirk. I've been taking it easy on her, easing her into sex and all the fun that comes with it, but I've been dying to show her just how intense it can get.

"I'm a pleasure Dom," I tell her. I had mentioned it when we were in Hawaii, but she probably forgot about the terminology since she didn't know about any of this then. "I get off on giving my partner pleasure."

"Well, you do a good job of that," she giggles.

I grin. "Oh, baby girl, you haven't seen anything yet."

"What do you mean?"

"We've only had sex a few times, so I wanted to ease you into everything," I explain. "But I've been dying to give you so many orgasms in one session that you can't think about or feel anything other than me or the pleasure I'm giving you."

Her eyes are wide. "Did you not already do that a few nights ago? You gave me three



and I thought I might pass out!"

"And I intend on finding out just where that limit is." I grin at her shocked expression.

"Tonight?" She takes her last sip of wine and sets the glass on the counter behind her.

"If you're up for it, I would love nothing more."

She thinks for a moment, then answers, "Okay. Let's try."

My mind immediately conjures up an image of me pushing her to her limits, making her come so hard that she falls apart entirely. It was a beautiful sight the other night when she lost all sense of modesty and insecurity and fully let go.

My cock jumps in my pants, and I take a deep breath, willing myself to keep a handle on my erection at least until we go to the back rooms.

Before I can say anything else, Claire speaks again. "So, if you're a pleasure Dom, does that mean you don't do the painful stuff?" When I look at her in surprise, she adds, "Audrey said something about pain being involved when we were at brunch."

"No, I don't care much for anything that causes pain. However, I do like experimenting with sensation in other ways."

"What does that mean?" Her brow furrows in confusion.

I flash her a sly smile. "Do you trust me?"

She nods.

"Then you'll have to wait to find out."

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

#### CLAIRE

Walking through the black door on the back wall feels like yet another step away from the girl I was before and one step closer to who I have the opportunity to become.

The hallways are dark, but there's an undercurrent of muted sounds and energy filling the space that leaves no question about what's back here. My head is on a swivel as we pass different rooms without stopping, but I'm trusting Mark to lead me to places I'll enjoy or at least appreciate.

We stop in front of a window that shows not just a couple, but three people in the room on the other side of the glass. Two men and a woman, all of them a tangle of limbs, touching each other with reckless abandon. They don't seem to care that anyone else is watching as they pull clothes off of each other in a slow, sensual sort of way. It's raw and intense and erotic.

After quite a few minutes of watching, Mark leads me to a larger room. It's like the previous scene we watched times ten. There are multiple couples and groups all playing together in various states of undress. Some people linger along the edges of the room, simply watching.

Nobody is ashamed about owning their desire, though. Whether participating or watching, it's clear that this is a safe place for everyone to express themselves sexually, and it warms my heart in an odd sort of way. I probably shouldn't be feeling

a sense of profundity at watching groups of people have sex, but it's enlightening to see evidence of sexual liberation in so many forms.

Again observing but not participating, we move on down the hall, occasionally stopping at a window to watch people.

"What's that room?" I ask as we pass what looks to be a larger room filled with different items that I can't quite identify.

"That's the dungeon," Mark says. "A lot of what happens in there is heavier pain play. If that's something you're interested in seeing, we can go watch."

I shake my head and shudder involuntarily at the idea of being hurt for sexual reasons. "No thanks." He said a little while ago that he's not interested in any of that, which was more relieving than it should have been. "Though," I add, "you did say something earlier about showing me different 'sensations.'"

He smirks. "I remember."

"And do you plan on actually showing me?" I challenge, giving him a sweet smile when he looks down at me and raises an eyebrow.

"I didn't know you could get so feisty," he teases. "I think I like it. Come on, let's find a room."

We pass a couple of occupied rooms until we find a small, simple one that doesn't have a window for others to watch. Mark sets his drink—now empty aside from the ice cubes clinking around the bottom—on the bedside table as I take in the dimly lit room. There are a few implements on the walls that look intimidating, but I have a feeling Mark won't be using those. At least, hopefully not.

My confidence that he won't use any of those items is shattered when he makes his way over to the wall and grabs something, though his body obstructs my view of whatever he takes off the wall. My heart rate ratchets up as he turns back toward me with a mischievous smile.

"Turn around."

I do as he says, turning to face the bed. A pair of padded leather cuffs lands on the bed in front of me, along with a small, black candle and a blindfold. Interesting. The cuffs, I can handle. The other two items, I'm a little wary of.

Mark brushes my hair over my shoulder and slowly pulls down the zipper of my dress, his fingers trailing behind it on my bare skin. I shiver in response, goosebumps forming on my arms. Once unzipped, my dress falls to the floor, and I gingerly step out of the circle of fabric at my feet.

"So perfect," Mark breathes, taking in my exposed skin. "Lie down on the bed for me and let me look at you."

Following his directions, I climb onto the bed and lie back as his gaze consumes me.

"Good girl. I'm going to put these cuffs on you now."

I nod.

Mark loops the chain between the cuffs behind the bar of the headboard before securing each one to my wrists. I pull against them once he's done, testing the strength. As expected, it holds.

"Are the cuffs too tight?" he asks.

"No, they're fine."

Content with how I'm restrained and at his mercy, Mark traces my bare skin with his fingers, following the dips and curves of my collarbone, my breasts, my waist.

I close my eyes and surrender to his touch.

Moments later, it's gone, and I open my eyes to see him reaching to the side of the bed and sipping an ice cube from his drink before setting the glass back down with a softclink. He sucks on the ice cube for a moment before pulling it from his mouth between his thumb and forefinger and looking down at me.

I realize what he's about to do seconds before he does it.

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His fingertips drip with water as he brings the ice to my skin. My breath hitches as the sharp coldness hits the place where my neck meets my collarbone before trailing down over my chest. Mark circles the ice around my nipple, and my back arches off the bed as I squirm beneath the frigid touch.

"You like that?" Mark asks in a low, taunting tone.

My voice is breathy when I answer, "Yes."

"Good." He moves the ice again, dragging it to my other nipple and repeating the process on this side, hardening both nipples to sensitive peaks. The cold is intense but not painful, bringing every nerve in my body to life.

The ice melts quickly as he traces it down over my stomach, and I tense as it gets closer to the space between my thighs. Is he really going to...?

He answers my unspoken question by popping the cube back in his mouth and sucking before leaning over and using his mouth to cover my pussy. I cry out at the tingling cold, though it quickly morphs to warmth as the ice melts and his tongue keeps working my clit.

When he pulls away, his breath is warm on my skin. He blows softly on the trails of water left by the ice, sending another shiver through me.

"How did that feel?"

"Different... but I liked it."

He chuckles. "It gets better."

He reaches over to grab the candle he had tossed at the foot of the bed earlier, then pulls a lighter from his pocket.

He lights the candle with a soft snick of the lighter, and the flame flickers, casting a glow in the dim room. I watch as Mark tilts the candle back and forth, letting wax pool in the middle before he blows out the flame.

His eyes glint as he looks down at me. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

He tips the candle, letting the melted wax drip onto my chest, and I gasp at the sensation, the heat a stark contrast to the coolness of my skin where the ice had been only a minute ago. I tense, waiting for the burning sensation to come in full-force, but it doesn't. It's hot enough that it feels like an almost-burn, but it cools quickly, hardening into a small, smooth dot that stands out against my pale skin.

Mark continues to drip the wax over my chest, my stomach, my thighs. Each drop puts me on edge, the anticipation building with each passing second.

Just as I'm beginning to grow accustomed to the droplets of heat falling across my body, Mark sets the candle aside and picks up the blindfold. He slips it over my eyes, and everything goes dark.

The bed dips as he moves again, and I hear the clink of the ice in his glass seconds before he sends a shock to my system by using it in the places he had just dripped wax.

But then, there's the tell-tale click of the lighter. A pause. Something hits my skin,



and for a half-second, I'm not sure if it's the cold bite of the ice or the subtle burn of wax.

It keeps me on edge, wondering what's coming next as he alternates between wax and ice, heat and cold, sending my mind and body into sensory overload. Every sensation is heightened by awaiting whatever comes next, every shift in temperature, every slight touch from Mark. Every time he stops, I'm buzzing with unbearable anticipation.

I don't even realize I'm shaking until Mark points it out, asking if I'm okay. I assure him I am, but my voice sounds just as tremulous as I feel.

Seconds later, Mark pulls off my blindfold and cuffs after setting his implements of perfect torture on the bedside table.

My skin is dotted with dried wax, and Mark kisses me gently before getting up, walking across the room, and coming back with wipes.

I reach for one, but he pulls back.

"I got it," he says. "Let me take care of you."

I lean back and watch, though I do pick some spots of wax off with my fingernail.

Mark speaks again as he finishes cleaning me up. "You did so well for me. Did you enjoy that?"

"It was a lot," I admit. "But I really liked it." I don't add the fact that I'm incredibly turned on right now, because I'm sure he knows. The bulge in his pants tells me he's on the same page I am.

Once the wax is mostly off my skin, Mark explores my body with his hands once again. He lingers on the sensitive skin of my inner thigh, trailing slowly to my center.

I gasp as his fingers slip through my wetness and find my clit, circling slowly and emphasizing the desperate need I'm feeling. After the intensity of everything tonight, it doesn't take much to get me close to coming.

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Then, he pushes two fingers inside me without warning, the sensation so quick and intense it sends me spiraling over the edge. I cry out as I come, my body convulsing and my inner muscles clenching around his fingers. I'm overcome by the suddenness of the orgasm, rolling my hips against his hand until I'm a limp, whimpering mess.

But Mark isn't done with me yet. He continues to stroke me, his fingers moving in and out, his thumb circling my clit. The sensation is almost too much, the pleasure bordering on pain. He doesn't let up, doesn't stop. He pushes me, driving me higher and higher, forcing me to ride the wave of warring sensations.

"It's too much," I gasp. I'm shaking more than I was even before the orgasm.

"Tell me to stop," he growls.

I shake my head. It's all-consuming, and I'm so sensitive I can hardly handle it, but I still don't want him to stop.

"Good girl. You can take it."

His words spur me on, pushing me closer to the edge once more.

He withdraws his fingers, and I hear the rustle of fabric then the tear of a condom wrapper. And then Mark is back, his body covering mine, his cock pressing against my entrance. He slides into me slowly, inch by inch, filling me completely.

He begins to move his hips, thrusting at a quick, rhythmic pace. It's less gentle than he has been before, and I love it.

I wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck, my body moving in time with his. He fucks me harder and faster, and his breathing become erratic. Heat spreads through my veins as tension builds, and I wonder offhandedly how anyone might ever possibly be able to live up to this. I could do this for the rest of my life and never get tired of it.

My body tenses as pleasure builds and builds, my second orgasm of the night getting closer by the second. I lower my feet to the bed and rock my hips in time with Mark's punishing thrusts to chase the release that's just out of reach.

"That's it, Claire," Mark groans. "Come on, baby girl. Come with me."

And I do. I moan as I come again, loving the way his massive body covers mine, as he takes control of my pleasure so completely. He lets out a low groan as he pulses inside me.

"Fuck, you feel good," he growls.

We collapse together, our bodies slick with sweat, our chests rising and falling with heavy breaths. When he smiles at me, it feels as if everything clicks into place. I want him so much more than I care to admit.

Mark reaches over to brush his thumb against my cheek. It's such a gentle, affectionate gesture that makes my heart constrict with emotion. "There's much more where that came from."

I smile, and Mark pulls me into his arms and holds me close, his body warm and comforting against mine. I melt into him, wondering how things just keep getting better and better. It's all impossibly perfect.

We lie there for a long while before deciding to go back home. Tonight's been a good

introduction to the club for me, but I now have barely enough energy left to walk out of here, let alone explore anything else here.

We make our way back down the wide, dark hallway, and there are even more people milling about than before. It makes sense that this would be the type of place that grows busier the later it gets. A man's eyes light up with recognition when he sees Mark.

"Hey, I haven't seen you in a while!" the man says. His eyes flick to me, then back to Mark. He wears a playful smile, adding, "Got a girlfriend keeping you occupied nowadays?"

"Not a girlfriend. But this is my friend, Claire. It's her first time at the club, so don't scare her off yet," he chuckles.

"Nice to meet you, Claire," the man says.

"You too."

But the warm, happy feeling I'd had moments ago has vanished, replaced by a nagging sense of disappointment and hurt. His friend. He had gone out of his way to correct the man about me being his girlfriend and called me his friend.

The man raises an eyebrow at Mark before moving on in the direction he was headed, and Mark guides me back to the front room as if nothing has happened.

And to be fair, nothing has happened for him. It was a quick remark he made, and technically a true one, but it pierced my daze of contentment like a knife, the sting of subtle rejection catching me off guard.

The worst part is, I don't have any right to be upset. We made an agreement when

this started, and that agreement was to keep things strictly physical, no emotions involved. But that's been easier said than done, so I've been simmering in an ever-growing affection for him without voicing it.

I just thought maybe he'd feel the same. There's no way this is still purely physical for him.

Would it really be so terrible if we were a couple? Why is he so against it in the first place?

When we step outside, I can't keep my thoughts to myself anymore. "Why are you so against relationships?" I blurt.

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He turns toward me, startled, and assesses me with a furrowed brow. "What makes you ask that?"

"Because you clearly have some sort of hang-up when it comes to relationships, even before I came along, and I don't get it." I cross my arms and hold his gaze as we stand in front of his parked car in the cool night air.

"It's not that simple," he says, as if that's a suitable explanation for anything.

"Then tell me. Why is the idea of me being your girlfriend so terrible? It's not like we don't already act like a couple in every way that matters."

He sighs in defeat, knowing I won't drop the conversation so easily. "The idea of you being mine isn't terrible. But you have so much more to experience in life."

I can tell he's not saying everything he's thinking, so I press. "So?"

"So, I won't be the one to hold you back, and once you realize how much more is out there, you'll leave. Your life—your freedom—has just begun. I won't be the one to hold you back."

His expression falls, and all the anger that had been thrumming through my veins seeps out of me. The defeated look on his face just makes me feel sorry for him.

"You're wrong," I say in a softer voice. "My freedom may have just begun, but no matter how much I experience, there's one constant: I always look forward to coming home to you."

There's a flicker of hope in his eyes before his forlorn expression returns. "We'll see," is all he says.

"Yes, we will."

He may not believe me, but I'm determined to prove from here on out that he doesn't have to worry about losing me once I see what else the world has to offer. I wasn't lying when I said that being with him is what I look forward to most every day. I don't know who in his life made him believe that he isn't worth loving, isn't worth staying for, but I'll spend every single day proving him wrong until he believes me.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

### CLAIRE

I can't sleep. After our heavy conversation outside Club Caliber, Mark and I had gone home with the unspoken agreement that neither of us would bring up the topic again tonight. I had retreated to my room, and he had done the same.

Now, I'm lying in bed feeling anything but okay. Every time I attempt to move, my limbs feel like they're made of lead, as if the intense pleasure from earlier has drained every ounce of energy from me. But it's not just physical exhaustion; it's something heavier, something deeper that sinks into the pit of my stomach and crawls up into my chest.

My mind is a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions, a chaotic mess that I can't seem to untangle. But it keeps returning to the same worry—that maybe I really am just a plaything for Mark, a pity project that he took in who also just happens to be pretty enough to fuck. I'm a fun, temporary distraction in his life, while he's the center of mine.



I think back to what happened at the club earlier—first, the overwhelming, intense moments that required me to have total trust in him, followed by the constant insecurity that plagues my mind. That I'm not enough; That I'll never be enough. He has literal decades of experience compared to me, and I'm barely learning the ropes of how to be a functional adult. We're complete opposites on a practical level, so even though the connection between us is undeniable, it's no wonder he wouldn't want me long-term. He made that plenty clear when correcting the man about me not being his girlfriend.

Tears well up in my eyes as the insecurity only grows. Why am I feeling this way? Earlier, I was disappointed but determined to prove Mark wrong about whatever deep-seated issues he has with relationships. But now, everything feels hopeless and borderline depressing. I try to hold back the tears, but they fall anyway.

The lethargy taking over my body is nothing compared to the deep, dull emotional pain infiltrating every part of my heart and mind.

And the worst part is, the only person that could help right now is the one I'm crying over.

Actually? Screw it. We're not mad at each other, but even if we were, I think back to his words from a few weeks ago when he promised me he'd be there for me if I ever need it.

My fear of showing him this much vulnerability is outweighed by my need for comfort. For him.

I slip out of bed and quietly make my way down the carpeted hallway. My hand trembles as I pause before knocking on Mark's door. It's a soft knock, but it's enough to stir Mark from his sleep.

His footsteps sound, followed by the door opening, revealing Mark in only his underwear, his chest bare, his hair tousled from sleep. His eyes widen with concern as he takes in my tear-streaked face.

"Claire, what's wrong?" He pulls me into his arms immediately, and I lean my head on his chest, grateful for his strong, warm embrace.

"I-I don't know," I stammer, sniffing between the words. "I was fine for a bit, but now I just feel sad, and you said to come to you if I needed you and—"

I cut myself off, partly because I'm rambling and partly because I don't know what else to say.

Mark leads me to his bed then pulls me onto his lap, smoothing his hand over my hair and keeping an arm around my waist.

"Shit," he mutters.

"What's wrong?"

"I think you're experiencing sub drop," he explains.

"What does that mean?" I can take a guess based on the context, and it's somewhat relieving to know there's a label to put on this mess of emotions, but I still want to hear his explanation.

I lay my head against his shoulder, and his rumbling voice calms me. "It's a normal reaction after intense scenes like what we did at the club. Your endorphins get really high, then they drop later, which can cause some negative emotions. I'm sorry, baby. I should've taken better care of you tonight." His tone is laced with guilt and regret.

"It's not your fault," I say. "You took good care of me. I just felt worse and worse once we got home, and I didn't know what to do. I thought maybe something was just wrong with me." I wipe away more tears with my fingers, wishing they would stop.

"There's nothing wrong with you. Not even a little bit. I should've done more to make sure you were alright."

"I just—" I take a shaky breath, not wanting to admit my insecurity but knowing it'll continue weighing on me if I don't "—I worry that maybe I'm just a distraction for you. Someone to play with until you get bored or find someone else."

He shakes his head and squeezes me tighter. "I promise you that's not the case. You're so much more than that to me, and I'm sorry if I've ever made you feel like I'm using you."

I've come to understand that he's not the best at expressing his emotions, but I can feel the sincerity of his words and hear all the things he's not saying. And even though I wish he would say more, that he would tell me exactly what he's thinking and how he's feeling, this is enough for now.

He pulls me further back on the bed and lies down next to me, holding me tightly and kissing me softly. The sadness slowly falls away, replaced by comfort and a glimmer of hope for the future, even though I know that hoping for more is a stupid, dangerous thing.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

MARK

Claire's voice floats through the apartment as she hums a song I don't know, but the sound of her constant presence is comforting. I always hated having other people in my space, but with Claire, it feels different.

She's in the kitchen, her voice mixing with the sounds of clattering pans and running water while I sit at my desk and attempt to work. I could close the door and drown out the noise, but I don't think it's the sound of Claire doing chores that's distracting me so much today. It's my own mind.

Everything that's happened over the past few months has been a whirlwind that's left me feeling more alive than I have in years—possibly ever. And it's all because of her.

Claire has brought a light into my life that I didn't know I was missing. I find myself actively looking forward to my days rather than going through them doing whatever I can to keep myself entertained. A small part of me wonders what it would be like if I asked her to stay, to make this arrangement more permanent. She surely has enough money now to find a place of her own, but neither of us has mentioned that fact. The

thought of going back to living alone, to coming home to an empty apartment and knowing she won't be here, hurts more than I care to admit.

My phone rings, jarring me from my thoughts. I glance at the screen and see Shane's name. I haven't heard from him since the vacation, though that's my fault just as much as his.

"Hey, man," I answer at the same time the shower turns on down the hall.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Can't complain," I say. "Working, hanging out, the usual. How's wedding planning?"

"Still a little chaotic, but it's coming together. Feels like every time we cross something off the list, two more things pop up."

I chuckle, not envying him one bit. "That sounds about right."

There's a pause before Shane asks, "And how's Claire doing?"

"She's good. She has finals next week, so lots of studying."

"Well, tell her we say good luck. You guys officially dating yet?" he chuckles.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "You know I don't do relationships."

"Ugh, you're still on about that? Seriously, dude."

"It's a good thing I don't remember asking for your opinion," I say, trying not to let my annoyance get the better of me. Why does he have to dig into the topic every time

we talk? "We're having fun and getting along. Is that not enough of an answer for you?"

Shane sounds just as annoyed as I feel when he replies, "Honestly? Both of you are obsessed with each other, and she's too afraid to tell you while you're too much of a pussy to put yourself out there. Seriously, man, you're making yourself miserable."

"Thanks for that enlightening insight, but I'm perfectly happy, actually."

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"But isshehappy?"

The words strike a nerve as they bring to mind memories of this past weekend, of Claire showing up at my bedroom door crying and shaking.

"Fuck you. I don't know what you think you're doing by trying to interfere in all of this, but you don't know the half of what's going on."

"You're right, I don't, because you won't let me in. You won't let anyone in, and until you do, you're never going to be fully happy."

And with that, he hangs up, and I'm left staring at my phone with anger raging through my veins. I resist the urge to throw my phone at the wall and instead toss it on the desk. Who the fuck does he think he is, lecturing me like that? He's acting like he's my goddamn therapist who can just randomly call me up, tell me what I'm doing wrong with my life, then not call me again for another month or two.

But even as the anger surges through me, there's a small, quiet voice in the back of my mind that whispers, Maybe he's right. Maybe I am making myself miserable. Maybe I am pushing people away because I'm too afraid to let them in.

No. I keep people at arm's length because it's easier that way. Plus, I do let people in; I'm just selective. Up until recently, I talked to Shane about everything, but now he has less and less time for me as the days go by.

I lean back in my chair with my eyes closed. The sound of the shower stops, and I imagine Claire stepping out, wrapping herself in a towel, her skin flushed and warm.

Is it worth it to risk everything I've built for myself for her? Yes, my mind immediately answers, but I push back against it. Even if she agrees to be mine, how long would it last until she gets bored and wants more of what the rest of the world has to offer?

Is it worth the risk to love someone even if the chance of them leaving is almost inevitable? Would the heartbreak of being hurt in the same way I've been hurt before be just another lesson to learn, or would it break me entirely this time?

I don't know if I'm brave enough to find out.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### CLAIRE

I'm unable to suppress my smile as I grab Mark's hand and drag him to the living room where the laptop is opened on the coffee table.

"Look!" I point at the screen once we're close enough, and he bends down, squinting to read it.

It takes Mark a moment to register what he's looking at, but once he sees my name highlighted, he straightens up and looks at me with raised eyebrows. "You aced both of your classes?"

"Yep!" I beam.

His smile grows, and he pulls me into his arms. "Claire, that's amazing! Your first ever college semester and you managed that. I'm so proud of you." He squeezes me tight, and I lay my head against his chest. I'm smiling, but my eyes fill with tears at his words. He's proud of me. It seems like such a small thing, hardly something to cry



over, but those four words mean more to me than I could possibly explain to him.

After being forced to diminish myself for so long and being chastised for my curiosity growing up, here I am being praised for my desire to learn. Not only that, but I don't think I've ever heard those words directed toward me by anyone. Simply knowing that someone who cares about me is proud of my accomplishments is enough to overwhelm me with joy.

I attempt to discreetly wipe my eyes, but Mark catches the action, pulling back slightly to look down at me. "Are you okay?" His expression is etched with concern.

I laugh through the tears. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little emotional that I was actually able to do this. I couldn't have done it without you."

"You could have," he says gently, reaching up to brush a tear from my cheek and resting his hand there to cup my face.

I shake my head. "No, I couldn't have. It would've taken me years to save up the money for classes after finding a place to live, and you've been paying me way more than necessary on top of that so that I haven't needed to work otherwise. Seriously, I can't thank you enough."

"I may have helped you get started, but you did all the hard work. It was your willpower and intelligence that allowed you to succeed."

Smiling up at him, I say, "Thank you" and attempt to hold back the fresh wave of tears coming to my eyes. He's partly right—I did work hard to excel in my classes—but I never would have had the means to take them in the first place had he not decided to offer me a place to stay and a way to earn money. Not only that, but his ongoing support has motivated me to do my very best.

I want his approval, his pride, his affection. I want to make him proud. And as he stares down at me with a soft smile, I wonder if he can see in my expression just how much he means to me. It's so much more than I've been willing to admit, too afraid to scare him off, but with the way he's looking at me, I can't help but think he feels the same way I do.

Mark leans forward to pull me against him again, and he softly kisses the top of my head before pulling away.

"How would you feel about going to dinner to celebrate?" he asks.

"That sounds wonderful. I'm supposed to have a therapy appointment at three, but—" I'm about to tell him I can cancel it, but he interrupts.

"I'll drive you there, and we can grab dinner afterward."

"Deal."

A few hours later, I'm sitting in the room with Dr. Lawrence telling her about all the developments I've had with Mark. I even tell her about going to the club, knowing now that she'll listen with an open mind and provide advice where it's needed.

"So, do you feel like things are getting more serious between you and Mark?" she asks after I update her on all that's happened.

"I do, but we both agreed that we'd do this as a no-strings-attached situation."

"And how do you feel about that now? I know last time we talked, you were conflicted."

I think for a moment before answering. "I don't know. I'm happy with how things are going right now, but it doesn't feel like what we agreed to at first. I know you said last time we talked that I shouldn't put my feelings on the back burner, but it's like we're in limbo right now where we won't admit feelings even though they're there. We basically act like a couple already. We spend almost all of our free time together, we live together, we show affection, and he's even taking me out to dinner tonight because he said he's proud of me for acing my classes this semester."

Dr. Lawrence nods. "That's wonderful that he's acknowledging your accomplishments in a way that you appreciate. So, if things were to continue down the same path in your relationship, saying it's no strings attached but acting in these ways, how would you feel?"

"Well... I guess I would like to actually be his girlfriend," I admit. It's not something I've said aloud yet, but it's something I've thought about increasingly over the last couple of months. "But I think he still has some weird relationship hang-ups, and I don't want to scare him away by telling him that when we agreed that wouldn't happen."

"Yes, you agreed to these terms with him at first, but sometimes life is more complicated than what a predetermined set of rules will allow. If you play by his rules and minimize your own feelings in the process, that's not fair to you."

"So, I should tell him that I want more from the relationship?"

"Ultimately, it's your choice. Just be prepared for him to hold up his boundaries as well, because he does have the right to end the arrangement if you're not on the same page anymore."

I swallow hard but nod, already dreading the conversation with him but hoping that just maybe it will go well. I don't want to consider the alternative. But I know Dr. Lawrence is right; I'm not being fair to myself by trying to suppress my emotions for his sake.

I need to tell him how I feel, and it will either be the catalyst to a life-changing relationship or a massive mistake. And I won't know which one until I take the leap.

"I'll tell him," I say, more to myself than to Dr. Lawrence.

She nods. "Okay. I hope it goes well for you, Claire. And I hope you have a lovely dinner tonight. See you next week?"

"Yeah." I stand and thank her before heading out, and Mark is waiting in the parking lot with the windows rolled down, listening to some obnoxiously loud rock music.

When he sees me, a smile forms on his lips and he reaches to turn down the radio. "Hey, how'd it go?"

"Good," I say, plastering on a fake smile. I'm not planning on telling him tonight—at least, I don't think I am—but my heart is racing like I've just ran a mile. But if I don't tell him tonight, how long am I going to put it off and allow myself to stress about it? Dr. Lawrence and I have had a similar conversation about this situation multiple times now. I can't just keep going in circles like this.

Mark takes my hand in his as he pulls out of the parking lot. "Awesome. Let's get some food, then. I'm starving."

My stomach twists, but not with hunger, and on the drive to the restaurant, I try to convince myself that the conversation will go well whenever it happens. That he'll admit my feelings are reciprocated and we'll live happily ever after.

I just hope I'm right, because the alternative is too painful to consider.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

### CLAIRE

The front door clicks shut behind us, the sound echoing in the quiet apartment. Dinner was delicious and filled with laughter and the occasional heated glance, but after my session with Dr. Lawrence earlier, the stress of needing to tell Mark how I feel has been a constant undercurrent in my mind. I try to ignore it as I kick off my shoes and follow Mark into the living room.

"How about a drink to celebrate your success?" Mark asks, already heading towards the kitchen. "I have a nice bottle of red I've been saving for a special occasion."

"That sounds perfect." My voice is steady despite the nerves fluttering in my stomach. I need to talk to him, to tell him how I feel, but the words are stuck in my throat. I'm held back by the fear of rejection, knowing that the pain of losing him would hurt so much worse than hiding the intensity of my feelings.

He returns a moment later with a glass of wine in either hand, the dark red liquid sloshing against the sides of the glasses. I gratefully accept mine and take a sip, then another. Settling onto the couch, Mark wraps an arm around me, and I close my eyes for a few seconds.

You know what?I think.Today is about celebrating. I can wait until tomorrow to have this talk.Tonight, I'm going to take every ounce of enjoyment I can from my time with Mark.

"Is there anything particular you'd like to do tonight?" he asks me.

"Just enjoy your company. Though maybe we could go to Club Caliber again next weekend as a late celebration..."

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"That can be arranged." His voice is low and husky. He clearly likes that idea just as much as I do.

Then, a question occurs to me that I had forgotten to ask him the last time we were at the club. "I was wondering," I start, "when we were at the club, I saw some of the submissives kneeling for their Doms. Is that something you like?" While he's explained a lot of details to me, I'm still not entirely sure what the difference is between some of these dynamics.

"I don't require it like some Doms do," he answers, tracing circles on the bare skin of my arm. "But I certainly don't mind it. It can be a very intimate gesture of submission."

His words send a thrill through me that goes straight to my core. I don't know why the idea of kneeling for him seems so enticing, but ever since I saw it happen at the club, it keeps popping into my mind.

"Is that something you're interested in?" He asks after it's clear I don't have anything else to say.

"Maybe... I like the idea, at least."

Mark's lips quirk up at the edges. "Then kneel for me, Claire." My stomach swoops at his commanding tone.

I take a deep breath before I set my wine glass down on the coffee table then slide off the couch and lower myself to my knees in front of him. I'm not sure why my heart is

beating so fast, but when I look up at him and see the approval in his eyes, everything else melts away.

Looking at it from the outside, I had wondered if kneeling for someone would feel demeaning or embarrassing, but now I see it from an entirely different perspective. In this moment, it's a display of trust, of my willingness to give myself to him in so many ways.

Mark leans over and reaches toward my face, brushing his fingers over my cheek, then my lips. My breath catches in my throat as that one simple touch brings my entire body to life.

"You look beautiful like this."

I smile and drop my gaze. "Thank you."

"Eyes on me," he says, lifting my chin up with his finger. He takes my wine glass from the table, his eyes never leaving mine as he lifts it to my lips in a silent encouragement to drink. I tilt my head back slightly, and the wine spills past my lips. I swallow the rich liquid before Mark tips the glass against my lips again, allowing me to take another sip. His eyes are on mine the entire time, and I don't dare look away. We're suspended in time, existing in another world for this brief moment. It's a soft moment, intimate and incredibly erotic.

A droplet of wine lingers on my lower lip, threatening to fall. Mark leans forward and swipes his tongue across my slightly parted lips, capturing the droplet before it can escape.

After pulling back only an inch or two, he leans in to kiss me again with the taste of the wine lingering between us. He deepens the kiss, gripping my waist and becoming more possessive and demanding by the second, and I melt into him as my body



responds to his touch.

His hands move from my waist over my body, tracing my back and shoulder blades before curving around to the front and caressing the curve of my breasts. Right now, I hate the fabric separating my skin from his touch, and he seems to think the same thing as he reaches down and lifts the hem of my shirt. I raise my arms above my head so he can pull it off, and he unhooks my bra afterward, leaving me bare and exposed before him. I'm still in a pair of jean shorts, though I doubt that will last long.

Mark's eyes are hooded with desire as he takes in my kneeling form. "You're so beautiful, Claire," he praises. "I want to worship every inch of you."

He stands up, offering me his hand, and I take it, allowing him to pull me to my feet and lead me into his bedroom. As soon as we're inside, Mark turns to me and pushes me up against the wall, kissing me again like he needs me more than air. I kiss him back just as hard, desperate for more of him. I don't think I'll ever get enough of this man.

When he finally breaks the kiss, he trails his lips down my neck while unbuttoning my shorts then sliding them down my legs along with my underwear. His fingers brush against my skin as he pulls the last pieces of my clothing off, and I brace myself on his shoulders to step out of the fabric.

To my surprise, he doesn't stand back up or take me to the bed. He stays on his knees before me, looks up at me with a devilish smile, then says, "I need to taste that sweet pussy. Hold on tight, baby." In an instant, he's hooking an arm under my leg and lifting it over his shoulder, causing me to grab his shoulder with one hand and the door frame with the other to steady myself.

I gasp when his mouth makes contact. He doesn't start slowly this time; he dives right

in, licking and sucking me like a starving man. My body reacts, my legs wanting to close of their own accord, but I'm spread wide open for him and am unable to move with my leg draped over his shoulder.

Instead, I grind my hips against him.

He pulls his mouth away for only a second to say, "That's it, baby. Show me what feels good. Take what you need from me."

My fingers thread through his hair as the tension inside me builds when he goes back to eating my pussy like his life depends on it, and I drop my head back against the wall and close my eyes.

His words spur me on, pushing me closer to the edge. He slides a finger inside me while his tongue still flicks at my clit. The pressure inside me grows heavier, the need for release consuming me.

I come moments later, crying out as he draws out every bit of pleasure. My leg shakes as I struggle to stay upright, and I grip Mark's shoulders tightly as I come against his lips.

By the time I'm breathless and shaking, he stands, holding me so I remain upright after the orgasm that just rocked through me.

But I know he isn't done with me yet. He leads me to the bed, and I lie back as he removes his clothing and grabs a condom from the bedside table. It only takes a few seconds for him to roll it on and climb on top of me, positioning himself at my entrance.

He slides into me slowly, inch by inch, filling me completely. It feels as incredible as ever, but there's an added layer to our intimacy tonight. It feels more sensual, more

significant, like we're on the precipice of something massive. There is no hesitation between us, and the way he's looking at me makes it feel like my heart is cracking open.

I'm his, and he's mine.

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He begins to move, thrusting in a slow, steady rhythm, and his body presses against mine as he kisses me again. He allows more of his weight to press down on me than usual, but I love the way it makes me feel so connected to him.

I lose track of time as I get lost in him. His touch, his scent, the rhythm of his breathing, the way his skin feels against my own. Everything else has lost meaning in this moment besides him.Us.

I don't know if it's minutes or hours later that the familiar heat floods through my veins, and my muscles tense as I get closer to the edge.

Mark, now familiar with every one of my subtle reactions, says, "Come for me. Let me see you fall apart."

His words spur me on, and my mind is empty aside from the influx of pleasure and emotion flooding through me. Seconds later, I come. The pleasure is overwhelming, the sensations so intense it's almost unbearable. But Mark is there, gripping my body and whispering words of praise as I come undone.

As soon as I'm coming down from the high, he picks up speed, slamming into me in short, quick thrusts before he groans and pulses inside me. He drops his forehead to mine, breathing hard, and plants another chaste kiss on my lips before rolling over and taking off the condom.

His heart pounds against my ear as he wraps me in his arms.

My mind is empty, the entire world gone except for the two of us. In the heavy

sensuality of the moment, an incredible sense of calm washes over me as we catch our breath. My eyes fall closed, my body suddenly exhausted. I'm floating in an almost meditative state, not quite falling asleep but close.

Mark's warm body envelops mine, and when he gently kisses my forehead, the words leave my lips in a whisper before I can consider the weight of them.

"I love you."

Mark stiffens, and only then do I realize what I said. Shit. I had planned on telling him, but not like this. Not tonight.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that," I backtrack. Panic creeps in with every second of silence that passes. Did I just ruin everything?

I turn to Mark, and he gives me a smile that I think is supposed to be reassuring, but it doesn't reach his eyes, nor does it hide the disappointment in them.

"Don't worry about it," he says coolly, which breaks my heart just a little bit more. I didn't expect him to return the words, but I hoped he'd at least be receptive to them, or that he would reciprocate some sort of feeling.

But no. He gave me the most emotionless, dismissive answer he possibly could have. Like it was a silly mistake rather than a heartfelt confession. I shouldn't have apologized, but I panicked.

I turn over so Mark doesn't see my expression, and so I don't have to see his.

He doesn't love me. The thought fills my mind, drowning out everything else. If he did, what reason would he have for not saying it back? It's not like I haven't shown him how much I care about him; tonight was just the first time I've actually vocalized

it.

He's still holding me, but his touch has changed, if only slightly. Our bodies aren't melded together like they were a few moments ago, and Mark is unnaturally tense. My face is hot as I try desperately to hold back the tears brimming in my eyes. They fall anyway, and I cry silently facing away from him.

We don't speak, don't kiss, don't do anything except lie there. Twenty minutes pass of me trying to hold in my tears, but it feels like hours, until I finally sit up and stand.

"I'm going to bed," I say, not making eye contact and trying to force my voice to sound normal. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," is all Mark says in return.

My heart splinters as I close his bedroom door behind me. Dr. Lawrence's words echo in my head: he does have the right to end the arrangement if you're not on the same page anymore.

In my moment of pure vulnerability and honesty, I've fucked everything up between us by breaking the one rule he set, and the thought of losing him makes the ache in my chest grow until it consumes every part of my body and mind.

He doesn't love me, but I thought maybe he cared for me enough that he'd say something other than an apathetic dismissal.

Joke's on me, I guess. I've fooled myself and messed up the first relationship I've had where I actually felt valued for who I am. I don't even want to hold out hope that he'll explain things tomorrow or confess that he does have feelings, because it'll only hurt more when he doesn't.

If I've learned one thing in life, it's that hoping people will change is the best way to get your heart broken over and over again.

I'll just have to do what I've always done: carry the pain, as heavy as it may be, but keep moving forward. Now, it's the only thing I can do.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

MARK

She loves me.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 7:42 am*

I shake my head, trying to push the words out of my mind for what feels like the millionth time today. Not only the words, but the image of her face when she had realized what she said, then the devastation that crept into her expression when I froze.

I almost said it back because it felt so right in that moment, but I didn't. I couldn't. Allowing myself to voice those feelings would only make it hurt more when she finally leaves.

If she hadn't said those three words, who knows how long this could have continued on for? I'm not planning on kicking her out or even asking her to leave, but I saw the exact moment I broke her heart in two last night.

And I fucking hate myself for it.

This morning, she was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee in hand and reading a book, and the glimmer of hope in her eyes faded to nothing when she looked up at me and caught my hesitant expression.

I poured my own coffee, and when I sat down beside her, she said nothing and continued to read her book as if I wasn't there.

Those three words have shifted all the energy between us, twisted it into an uncomfortable silence. Now, Claire has left the room and I'm sitting here alone, trying to distract myself by scrolling through my phone and sipping my coffee, but nothing works. I can't even text Shane with this issue, not only because we aren't talking right now after our argument, but because I know exactly what he'd say. He



would tell me to be true to myself—and to her—and to give it a chance.

But giving anything a chance, especially love, is such a massive risk that's not always worth it. Up until she came along, I was perfectly fine living the bachelor lifestyle. Why did she have to come in and change everything?

My heart aches as my mind spins in circles. I told her not to get feelings involved. Sure, maybe I got feelings involved too, but it's different. If you keep everything inside, it's easy to pretend like it doesn't exist. But saying it aloud gives the sentiment weight. It makes it real.

For a moment, I consider the option of taking the risk. What if I admitted what I feel for her? What if things actually went right for once?

But even if I did do that, I'd be doing her a disservice. She's so young, and her life is just starting. There are so many possibilities out there for her to discover, especially after having been shielded from the outside world for so long. Meanwhile, I'm almost forty, and while I know that's not "old," I've settled into my comfortable lifestyle. I'm happy with where I'm at in life, while Claire is still in her early twenties and has never had the opportunity to explore and discover herself.

If I kept her, I'd only be holding her back. She has her whole life in front of her, but I doubt she even registers how much there is to see and experience. This is all she knows of the world outside her old home.

The sound of Claire's bedroom door shutting drags me from my thoughts, and I decide to take a shower, hoping the hot water will help me clear my mind.

It doesn't.

If anything, the shower only works to amplify my worries because I have nothing to

distract me.

Fuck. I need to get out of the house and find a distraction, because being here with Claire is only going to drive me insane.

But where the hell can I even go? Normally, I'd either go to the club or grab a drink with Shane, but neither of those sounds like an appealing option right now.

I need to clear my head, so I pull on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, making my way out the door. The air is warm, and I decide to walk a few blocks to a little Italian restaurant I'd once taken Claire to for lunch. I settle into a corner booth, and the buzz of conversation around me blends into the background.

As I wait for my food, I scroll through my phone absentmindedly, hoping to see a message from Claire, but the screen remains blank. A part of me tells me that it's better this way; we both need some space to sort through our feelings. But the other part of me resents the silence, knowing I'm the one who caused it. This is my fault.

My lunch arrives at the table, but I hardly touch it. I chew on a piece of garlic bread, the flavors lost on me as my mind wanders back to Claire and the moment that shattered everything. The way her eyes gleamed with hope has been replaced by that painful expression of disappointment, and it's eating away at me.

After paying the bill, I step outside and stand there for a moment. Where do I go? I start wandering through the city streets until I hit the river. Because it's such a warm, pleasant day, there are people scattered along the riverwalk and boats filled with tourists passing by frequently.

I find a bench overlooking the river and watch the boats pass by. An elderly couple strolls hand in hand, and they laugh together at something the man just said. They move in harmony, their love for each other written all over their faces. Part of me

feels a pang of envy—what would it be like to be so intertwined with someone else, to have built a life together, a love that withstands the tests of time?

Am I really going to deny myself this? I think. The chance at love is right there with Claire. Am I going to let it slip away because I'm scared she'll leave? Because I think I'm holding her back?

I rub my temples, but the thoughts don't slow. Even though she's been sheltered her whole life, she's a smart, capable woman who can make her own decisions. Who the hell am I to refuse a relationship with her on the presumption that I know what's better for her than she does?

Shane's words from last week echo in my mind, and I can almost hear him taunting me, reminding me that I'm not only hurting Claire but myself as well.

The fucker was right, and he's never going to let me live it down.

I sit for a while longer, tapping my fingers against the bench as I mull over the risk involved. This feeling for Claire is new and fucking terrifying, but it's also the best thing I've ever felt. I should embrace it instead of running away, no matter how scared I might be. For her, the risk is worth it.

With a sudden rush of determination, I stand up and speed walk home. I need to go spill my heart out and hope, against everything, that she'll still want me after I've hurt her so badly.

I head back down the riverwalk, urgency propelling me forward. Each step is a reminder of the time apart I've already endured, and regret twists in my gut at the thought. I can't leave her thinking that her feelings don't matter, that she's not worth my vulnerability.

Because, if I'm being honest with myself, she's worth everything. Every vulnerability, every risk, every second of my time for as long as she'll have me.

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I burst through the apartment door after what feels like the longest elevator ride of my life.

"Claire?"

No answer. She's probably in her room, still too upset about my bullshit reaction to her confessing her love for me. I don't blame her one bit.

"Claire?" I call again as I make my way down the hallway. Her door is open; that's odd. She always closes it, whether she's in there or not.

But when I peek into her room, she's not there. I practically run around the house, and my heart sinks with each empty room.

I go back into her room, noticing her cell phone sitting on the bed. With that here, I have no way to contact her.

She's gone.

## CHAPTER FORTY

### CLAIRE

My journal is balanced on my leg as I scrawl words on the lines faster than I can think. I'm pouring my emotions out however I can, because if I let myself sit and think for too long, I'll break. I tried reading this morning, but when Mark had sat next to me at the table without saying a word, I couldn't handle it.

He left the house not too long ago, but instead of his absence feeling freeing, it presses down on me, making the emptiness in my chest grow.

I write down everything that's happened over the last few days, my feelings about my sessions with Dr. Lawrence, my plans to tell Mark how I feel only to accidentally blurt them in a moment of passion before being snubbed. How stupid of me to have let the words slip out before I could catch them.

I think the worst part is, I still held onto the hope that he might have loved me too. But he didn't; he doesn't. He may have some feelings for me beyond our physical arrangement, but they're clearly not enough.

I've spent my entire life minimizing my feelings for others' comfort, so why couldn't I have done that for a little longer?

I can't help but wonder where he's at right now, what he's doing and thinking. Is he trying to figure out a plan to get me out of his apartment now that I've crossed the line? I have more than enough money now, thanks to him.

The thought of being on my own used to feel freeing, but now it just sounds lonely. I've become so accustomed to living with Mark that not having him around would feel like a piece of myself is missing.

My pen hovers over the page as I try to put the whirlwind of thoughts and emotions into words.

The knock at the door jolts me out of my spiraling thoughts. That's weird. For a fleeting moment, I wonder if it's Mark, if maybe he forgot his key or something. But the knock sounds too loud and measured.

Leaving my journal on the bed, I make my way to the door and open it to find two

cops on the other side. My heart sinks in my chest. Did something happen to Mark?

"Um, hello."

"Hello, we're looking for Claire," one of them says.

"That's me. Is everything okay?"

"We're actually going to need you to come down to the station for questioning."

My stomach plummets. "Questioning? About what? Is everything okay?"

"Just come with us, ma'am," the other officer says. His tone isn't harsh, and his expression is slightly apologetic, but he's firm in his request.

I want to argue and demand answers, but fear roots me to the spot. My mind races, trying to piece together what this could be about. If Mark was hurt, they'd have no reason to question me, and they'd likely tell me right now. They said they wanted to question me, which means they probably think I'm involved in something problematic.

Deep down, a nagging suspicion twists in my gut. I had hoped my family wouldn't come looking for me, but after the emails, I wouldn't doubt that this is their doing.

I slip on my shoes and follow the policemen, and it's not until I'm being shut in the backseat of the car do I realize that I left my phone in my room.

The police station smells like stale coffee and cleaning supplies. My pulse pounds in my ears as I'm led through a maze of desks and uniformed officers. Everything blurs together until I'm being told to sit down in a plastic chair in a hallway.

"Wait here," one officer instructs.



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I wrap my arms around my torso as I sit and wait, trying to steady my breathing. The walls feel like they're closing in. Just as panic threatens to consume me, I hear a familiar voice.

"Oh, my baby, I'm so glad you're okay."

I whip around, and my stomach churns. There she is—my mother, her face a mask of tearful relief. She rushes toward me, arms outstretched as if she actually expects me to fall into them. I stand and cross my arms over my chest. Her expression falls.

"What are you doing here?" I demand, my voice sharp despite the lump in my throat.

She dabs at her eyes with a tissue, having the gall to look hurt at my defensive tone. "I was so worried about you, sweetie. You disappeared, and I didn't know if you were safe."

I want to laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation, but I'm still too stunned. This isn't concern; it's control dressed up in maternal guilt.

Before I can respond, the officer returns and gestures for me to follow him into the room. My mother's theatrics fade as the door closes behind us.

"Claire," the officer begins, settling into the chair across from me. "We received a call from your mother, requesting a wellness check. She said you'd disappeared in the middle of the night and that she was concerned for your safety."

I clench my fists under the table. Of course she did.

"But that's not all," he continues. "She also mentioned that you took a vehicle without permission. The registration shows it's in your parents' names."

My heart sinks. Technically, the car is theirs, even though I'm the one who's driven it for years. I open my mouth to argue, but I know I have no defense. The law is on their side.

"I took the car," I admit in defeat, wanting to get this over with as quickly as possible. "It was the only way I could get away from them without being stopped."

"Were they holding you there against your will?"

"Not technically, but the community we lived in was isolated, so there was no way to get away without a vehicle. And I had no means to leave otherwise."

He nods, jotting something down. "We'll need to sort this out. Sit tight."

When he leaves, I bury my face in my hands. This is worse than I imagined. Not only has my mother meddled in my life yet again, but now I'm facing potential charges for simply trying to escape her grasp.

The door creaks open, and I'm led back into the main area. My mother stands there, looking every bit the concerned parent.

"Don't worry," she assures me with feigned relief. "I told them I won't press charges. But I need the car back, and I'd like you to come with me."

This time, I do laugh. It's a bitter, angry sound that catches her off guard. "Seriously? You think I'm going to come home with you after all this? Are you going to change your mind and press charges if I say no?"

"No, but I wouldn't want you to miss your sister's wedding." She's still wearing that expression of concern, but there's the tiniest glint of challenge in her eyes, as if she knows she just played the winning move in this battle.

"What do you mean? Grace is getting married? She's barely seventeen!"

Mom purses her lips. "Well, yes, but when you ran away, you left Mr. Davidson without a bride-to-be. Grace is of age, so she's able to take your place."

This has to be a fucking joke. Rage floods my veins, and my heart hammers in my chest. How dare they use my baby sister as a pawn in their twisted games?

"You have to be fucking kidding me right now."

Mom flinches at my language. "I just want what's best for you and your sister. Mr. Davidson is an important member of the church and will give either of you a very comfortable life."

"So, what? You want me to come home and watch my sister get married to a man over twice her age so that you can brag about another one of your children having an important last name?"

She looks at me with pity, as if I understand nothing. Like I'm a child lashing out. "Like I said, I just want what's best for my children. But if you come back, you can take her place instead."

And there it is. The leverage. She knows I'd do anything to protect my sister from hardship, and marrying Mr. Davidson would be even harder on her than it would be on me. Even despite the freedom I've tasted, I'll go back, if only to protect her.

When I don't respond, my mom takes that as consideration. She tilts her head, her

eyes wide with feigned innocence. "It's your choice, Claire."

My hands shake. I want to scream, to tell her to open her eyes and realize she's only hurting us, but the thought of my sister—sweet, innocent, and so deserving of more from her life—stops me.

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"I'll go," I say through gritted teeth. "But only for her."

A triumphant smile flickers across my mother's face before she masks it with faux sympathy again. "You're doing the right thing, dear."

I don't respond. Anger and defeat churn inside me, but one thing is clear: this isn't over. Not by a long shot. Because even as we leave the station and settle in for the long drive home, the car having been towed to the police station from my—well, Mark's—apartment, I'm formulating a plan.

### CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

#### MARK

When I realize Claire is gone, my heart sinks. I knew this would happen. But it only takes a few minutes for me to stop feeling sorry for myself when I realize how off this feels. Sure, I may have broken her heart last night, but she wouldn't have left without saying something.

Even though it feels like an invasion of privacy, I go into her room and take note of what items are still here. And as far as I can tell, it's... everything.

Her cell phone is here, her clothes are all still hung or folded in the dresser, and her journal sits open on the bed with a pen placed on top.

I go back to check the hook by the front door, and sure enough, her keys are gone. But still, there are alarm bells ringing in my head even though I can't quite figure out

why. She probably just went to the store or something.

I force myself to sit down and wait for her, knowing she'll probably walk through the door any minute. She just needed some space, I tell myself. After all, I took a few hours to go to lunch and take a walk by myself this afternoon. Maybe she's doing something similar.

But one hour passes, then two, and I can't take it anymore. My instincts are screaming at me to do something, though I'm not sure what I can do.

I hate myself for what I'm about to do, but I go back into Claire's room, sit on the edge of her bed, and pick up the open notebook she's been writing in over the last few months. I don't want to invade her privacy even further, but my gut is telling me there's something very wrong here, and I can't quite figure out what it could be.

So, I look for clues.

I start with today's entry—which ends in the middle of the sentence. Another red flag—and work my way backward. My heart aches as I read about how much I hurt her last night, and it only hurts more when I see the previous entries where she spills her heart on the page about how she's been falling in love with me.

My heart constricts with each confession, each detail about her life that I hadn't been aware of. I keep flipping the pages, skimming the words, until I come across something that stops me in my tracks. She's written about an email from an unknown sender begging and threatening her to come back home. And apparently there was another email before that.

I don't know how, because I have nothing else to go off of, but somehow I know that this was her family's doing. They got her to leave somehow, but there's no way she'd have gone willingly. I know that much.

But how the hell did they do it? And how can I find her if all her communication devices have been left here?

I pickup the phone and call Shane. He answers on the second ring.

"Hey."

"Hey, I'll apologize later for being a dickhead to you, but I think Claire's in trouble."

His tone instantly shifts from apathetic to concerned. "What? Why? What happened?"

I briefly recount the events that led to this moment. "So basically, I have no way of contacting her, and I have no clue where she is."

"Did you look through her phone?" he asks.

"Yeah. No suspicious calls, texts, or even emails aside from the two I just mentioned."

"And there's no friends she might have left with?"

"I don't think so. I really do think she's in trouble."

Shane is silent for a moment as he thinks. "What about her car? Is it still in the parking garage?"

"Her keys are gone, so I'm assuming not."

"Hmmm. Let me make some calls, okay? I'll see if I can find anything out."

"Sounds good. Thank you." I heave a sigh as I pace the apartment. I'm going to feel

like an idiot if she walks through the door in a few minutes with nothing wrong, but I'll feel even worse if that's not the case.



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My phone rings thirty minutes later, and Shane's name pops up on the screen. I answer immediately.

"Hey, any luck?" I ask. The panic welling up inside me comes through in my voice.

"Yes, actually." Shane is all business, but I can hear the same sort of concern in his tone. "Dani and I are on our way over, but we need to make a stop first. Claire is safe as far as I know, but she's back with her family."

Shit. I knew her family was behind this, and as happy as I am to hear that she's safe, the idea that she's back in that oppressive environment makes me nauseous with worry. Will they punish her for leaving? While it hasn't sounded like there's a lot of physical abuse there (thankfully), I'm sure she's being guilt-tripped to all hell right now. Who knows what else she might be going through.

One thing I still can't understand, though, is why she'd go with them in the first place. It's not like they could have forced her, right?

I have so many questions, and I'm dying for answers. I should have been here, should have talked things through with Claire instead of letting my fear and insecurity get the best of me. I'll never forgive myself if something bad happens to her.

It takes Shane and Dani an hour to get to my place, and I spend the entire time pacing and feeling helpless. The only thing keeping me from collapsing into a miserable mess is my determination to get Claire back.

When I open the door, Dani and Shane's faces are solemn but showing that same

determination I feel.

"Thank you guys for coming," I say in a rush.

Dani wraps her arms around me. "We'll get her back and bring her home, I promise."

Her using the word "home," meaning here, my home, makes my heart ache. She's right. This is Claire's home now too. "Thank you."

"We just made a stop at the police station," Shane explains. "Turns out, if you bribe the right person with enough money, they'll tell you what you want to know."

My eyebrows rise. "Holy shit. What did you find out? And why are the police involved?" God, if she got hurt...

"Everything's okay," Shane says, "but let's sit down and talk about it, because we can't do anything tonight. We need to be smart about this." He sits on the couch and Dani follows suit, so I hesitantly sit on the armchair despite the negative energy buzzing through my body.

"Why can't we do anything tonight?"

"Because the sun is already setting, and Claire's family lives at least a few hours' drive away. It'll be smarter to leave first thing in the morning."

I nod, even though everything inside me is screaming to go get her now. But Shane's right; we need to be smart about it. "Okay, give me the details."

Shane recounts their conversation with the police—though he fails to mention just how much he had to pay them off for that information. Apparently, Claire's mother, Beth, reported the car Claire has been driving as stolen. Beth had been searching

Claire's name online, so when she found a school newspaper article with Claire's name in it, she was able to figure out Claire's email address since all the student emails follow the same format. After her emails went unanswered, she upped the ante and not only contacted the CPD about the missing car, but also for a wellness check under the guise of being a concerned mother.

The police must have turned up here sometime while I was gone and taken Claire in for questioning about the car. According to the officer Shane talked to, Beth had agreed to drop charges if Claire returned with her.

Though, if I know Claire like I think I do, she's probably already planning a new way to escape that doesn't involve taking her family's car or anything else that could be used as leverage. Lucky for her, she won't have to figure out an escape plan, because I'm coming to get her, and I won't let anything stand in my way.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

### CLAIRE

I can't force myself to put on the same fake smile I used to as I follow my parents through the doors of the church and shuffle into the pew beside them. All eyes are on me, even though they avert their judgmental gazes when I happen to catch them staring. There are no secrets here, so everyone knows I left. However, I'm sure my mother and father have already spun the story of how I've come back. As much as they've been admonishing me for leaving, they wouldn't dare tarnish the family name even more than it already has been due to my actions.

I've already caught the tail end of a conversation my mother was having with one of the church elders' wives, saying how it's a blessing I've strayed from God's path only to find my way back with more conviction than ever.

Yeah, right.

I tug at the collar of my old dress, the high neckline constricting my throat. If anything, it feels like an apt metaphor for today.

The massive stained glass windows behind the altar cast an ethereal glow over the room, the streaks of light broken up only by dark wood beams framing the peaked ceiling. Even with my sorrow of being here again, I still find this place breathtakingly beautiful.

I still don't know if I believe in God or not, but if he does exist, I'm certain it's not in the way everyone here imagines. I had my doubts before, but giving myself a chance to step away and examine my beliefs from a new angle was the best thing I've ever done for myself.

Now, sinking into the pew and looking around at the other church-goers, all I can think about is how stifled I feel here. If God supposedly made me in his image, wouldn't he want me to be my authentic self? Because here, in my home and in my community, I'm being forced into a mold that I don't fit into.

Before, it felt bleak, but it was all I knew. Now, this place is my own living hell.

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The pastor steps onto the altar and a hush falls over the congregation. I don't miss the way his gaze catches on me as he surveys the filled pews.

My stomach churns with discomfort.

My sister notices too, and she reaches over to subtly squeeze my hand, reminding me she's here for me. That's what I really need to focus on right now—her. She's been used as a bargaining chip for my return, my mom knowing that I wouldn't sacrifice my little sister's entire future for my own.

Thankfully, Grace saw right through their ruse, and we stayed up all night talking into the early hours of the morning. She updated me on what's been happening since I left, and I answered every question she had about the "outside" world. She was wide-eyed as I told her about how I came to stay with Mark, how scared I was at first until I realized how kind and generous he really was. I told her about Dani and Shane, about our vacation to Hawaii, about starting college and therapy. I did, however, leave out the parts about sex and Club Caliber.

And then, I took a risk. I had asked her if she wanted to leave with me next time—because there will be a next time. There's no way I'm staying here longer than I have to. If she had been opposed to it, she might have told my parents and ruined my plans—not that I really have a plan yet, but I will.

But she wasn't opposed. In fact, she was fully on board and seems to want out of here as badly as I do. Apparently, she's been having the same sort of thoughts I'd had around her age: wondering why asking questions was so looked down upon, feeling like she has to suppress parts of herself to make everyone else happy, questioning if

there can be more to life than quietly serving men who think so highly of themselves.

Maybe it's selfish of me, but it warms my heart that I'm not alone. My older siblings all followed my parents' plans for them, so knowing that I'm not some aberration is a relief. Plus, that means I won't lose my family entirely; I'll still have Grace.

We'll have to be sneaky about leaving, though. We'll need to sneak her documents out of Dad's office the same way I had taken mine, and we'll need to find a way to leave that doesn't involve taking the family car. The nearest town is more than twenty miles away, so walking is doable but difficult. Apparently that creepy, old fucker Mr. Davidson still thinks he's still going to marry me, so I need to get out of here before wedding plans are hastily (re)arranged.

I've saved up enough money now—thanks to Mark—that I should have no problem getting an apartment for Grace and I. I'll just have to make it back to the city somehow.

Pastor Elijah speaks, his voice echoing over the congregation of rapt onlookers.

"All of us have felt God's call in one way or another," he begins, "but the Lord's path is not always the easiest one to take. It challenges us, pushes us outside of our comfort zones. Maybe you think you could make it on your own, that you know better than the path the Lord has laid before you. But what happens when we run from God?"

Damn it. I suspected it might happen, but sure enough, this sermon is definitely going to be a thinly veiled lesson directed toward me.

Pastor Elijah takes a dramatic pause. "There was a man who thought he could run. A man who thought he could escape the will of the Lord. His name was Jonah."

That confusing sensation of guilt and anger wells up inside me. Anger because nobody should feel obligated to live a life of blind obedience, and guilt because it's the one emotion that's most familiar to me here within these church walls. I wonder, if God is real, would he condemn these people who twist his word into something that fits their own narrative?

I was never running from God; I was running from the community that used His name for their own power and manipulation.

It's then that the thought cements inside me; I don't need to classify my religion or my beliefs. If I live my life being kind, loving, generous, and unapologetically myself, that's good enough for me. If their God is as loving as they say he is, then the way I live my life and treat others will be more important than whether or not I identify as a member of the church. The members of this congregation loudly proclaim their dedication to God, but so many of them live selfishly, hatefully, even cruelly. If judgment day comes, I'd be willing to bet I'd have a better chance of getting through those pearly gates than most of these performative hypocrites.

It takes everything inside me to not stand up and walk out of the church right now. I only stay for Grace's sake, because if my parents find out I plan to leave again, they're sure to do everything in their power to force me to stay.

Pastor Elijah's sermon is rhythmic in the way all pastors' seem to be. His sentences rise and fall, his volume varying as he emphasizes certain words and pauses at the end of particularly important sentences. He's a good speaker, I'll give him that much. Though, from what I read online after my particularly eye-opening conversation with Dr. Lawrence, cult leaders are usually charismatic and persuasive, so that tracks.

He continues to tell the story of Jonah and how he ran from God's command only to suffer the consequences, and he looks at me more frequently than usual, but I don't care.

Today's service feels like the longest one of my life even though it lasts the same amount of time it always does. And I'll have to do it all over again on Wednesday evening, because of course one day of church isn't enough here. But the worst part isn't even the service; it's the mingling afterward, where everyone comes to say hello under the guise of welcoming me back, even though their prying questions about where I've been and why I was gone so long make it clear that they just want more gossip to spread.

I smile and nod and politely avoid their questions, but that nagging sense of dread only grows the longer we stay here.

"I'm going outside to get some air," I say to my mother, and I walk away before she can attempt to argue with me.

I decide to go out the side door, knowing that large groups of people will still be gathered out front. Leaning against the warm brick wall, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. It's going to work out, I tell myself. I'll get back somehow, even if I have to walk to the nearest town.

My thoughts drift to Mark. What is he doing right now? How is he feeling? He probably thinks I left without saying goodbye, that I couldn't handle the way he reacted to my accidental confession. Still, I can't bring myself to regret telling him I love him. Because I do love him, so much it hurts. Maybe it was silly of me to imagine a life with him when he specifically told me we wouldn't be together long-term, but I couldn't help it.

When I was with him, I felt safe, loved, and seen for the first time in my life. I was able to be myself without holding back. He might not love me in the way that I love him, but he gave me the space to grow and learn, and for that, I'll always be grateful.

The door beside me swishes, and I open my eyes to see Grace lean against the wall



next to me. "Hey."

"Hey," I respond.

"Are you okay?"

I sigh. "Yeah. It's just hard being back here after everything that's happened."

"I bet. But we'll be out of here soon, right?"

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"Yes. We just need to figure out a plan. It'll probably take at least a week of me playing along to lull them into a false sense of security. We need to get your legal documents from Dad's office, and then we need to figure out when to pack and leave without anyone noticing."

Grace nods. "I'm all in. Just let me know what I need to do and when."

After a few minutes of companionable silence, we make our way to the front of the church, and my parents walk out with my eldest sister, her husband, and their three kids a few minutes later. We exchange friendly hellos, but that's about the extent of the conversation before we all split off. Grace and I get into the backseat of my parents' car, and we head back home.

I'm mentally preparing myself for another mini-sermon from Dad once we get inside, but when we pull up to the house, a familiar car is parked in the driveway.

My heart races as my father mutters under his breath wondering why there's someone in our driveway. I say nothing, but as soon as we come to a stop, I jump out of the car and race toward the house.

My mother calls after me, but I don't slow down. Because there, standing at the front door, are the three people I want to see most in the world.

Mark, Dani, and Shane are here.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

CLAIRE

I sprint across the yard and leap into Mark's open arms. He lifts me easily and squeezes me so tight I can hardly breathe. Burying my face in his chest, I inhale his scent and realize just how much I've missed it. How much I've missed him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, pulling away just enough to look at him. My eyes are brimming with tears. They're really here.

"I'm getting back the woman I love. And I'm really hoping she forgives me for being such an ass." His gentle smile melts away all the negativity that's been raging inside me, but I still have to make sure he really means this.

I lock eyes with him. "I've spent my entire life being promised a love I've never felt. I don't need that from you too. Are you sure about this?"

"More sure than I've ever been about anything. I love you, Claire, and I'll spend every day showing you just how much."

I smile. "Then yes, I forgive you. How did you guys find me?" I look between the three of them, noting just how out of place they look here—especially when everyone else is in their Sunday best—and Shane answers.

"Turns out you can get anyone to talk with the right amount of bribery, cops included."

"Oh my goodness," I laugh. They came for me. They cared enough to bribe the freaking police for my address and drove hours to get me. I can't believe it.

Dani grins at me and pulls me into a hug. "I'm so happy to see you," she whispers. "But that's the ugliest damn dress I've ever seen."

I laugh through my tears, just now realizing that I probably look ridiculous to them in my modest high-neck, floor-length dress.

Everyone's gazes lift to focus on what's behind me, and I stiffen. This is going to be rough. I turn to face my family, noting my father's angry expression, my mother's panicked one, and my sister trailing a few feet behind them looking more hopeful than I've ever seen her.

"What exactly is going on here?" My father seethes when he's within speaking distance.

Mark pulls me beside him in a protective stance and opens his mouth to speak, but I lay my hand on his arm to stop him. "I got this," I tell him.

My heart feels like it's going to pound out of my chest as I step forward to stand up to my father for the first time in my life. Fear grips me, burning through my body as my fight or flight response kicks in. Unfortunately, I usually happen to have one of the other, lesser-known responses to the adrenaline rush—fawn. Make things better by appeasing him and turning into the docile, obedient daughter he wants. Smooth things over by making everyone happy at my own expense.

But not this time.

"I'm leaving, Dad. I'm sorry, but I'll never be happy here, and I hope you have it in your heart to forgive me eventually."

His jaw drops and his face turns a concerning shade of red. "You dare abandon your family and the path that God has set you on? Just what exactly have these people been teaching you?" He spits the word people as if it's an insult, enunciating the word like a swear.

I'm shaking as I answer, "They've been teaching me everything I should have learned before. How to express myself and set boundaries, how to grow as a person in an environment free from harsh judgement, how to love and be loved unconditionally."

"Now let's just pause for a moment—" my mom says in her placating voice, but my father interrupts.

"We've given you everything. I've provided food, shelter, clothing, and guidance from God's word for you and your siblings your entire life. How ungrateful and spoiled—"

Now it's my turn to interrupt. "No. Stop right there. Your job as a parent is to provide the necessities, and those things are the bare minimum; That's what you committed to when you chose to have children. You have no right to try to make me feel guilty for that. I'm not spoiled for needing food, shelter, and clothing."

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I take a deep breath and continue while my father is still stunned into silence. "And I'm not ungrateful, either. I appreciate that you and Mom gave us a comfortable life, but I also don't think it was fair that your children all had to live in fear of your anger or the constant threat of going to Hell if we did something wrong. I'm sure you did your best with what you were given, especially living in this environment, but I'm also allowed to have my own feelings about how I've been treated."

My father looks like he's about to explode in a fit of rage, but I can tell he's warring between telling me off and keeping up appearances in front of the strangers at his doorstep. He settles on asking through gritted teeth, "What about your sister? You're going to leave and let her marry Mr. Davidson after all?"

All eyes turn to Grace. There they go again, using her as a pawn in their game of guilt-tripping instead of treating her like an actual human. I make eye contact with her, letting her make her own decision in the matter, but I give her a subtle nod to let her know I'm here for her.

Her voice is soft but determined when she finally speaks. "I'm leaving too."

"You most certainly are not," my father hisses.

I subtly lift my hand and hold it out to her, and she walks past my father to stand beside me. I couldn't be more proud of her than I am right now.

"Grace, please," my mom pleads. "Don't leave us too."

Grace gives her an apologetic smile. "Sorry, Mom."

"So you're not only leaving behind your parents, but you're corrupting your sister in the process?" I've never seen so much raw hatred in my father's eyes. "You'll burn in Hell for this."

I shrug. "Then I guess that's a chance I'm willing to take. If I'm going to hell for living a life of love, happiness, and freedom, then I don't want the alternative. Especially when it involves constant guilt and fear. I'm done with the bullshit, Dad."

My mom gasps at the curse word leaving my mouth, and I almost laugh at the idea of her finding out everything else I've said and done over the past few months.

Dad is still silent.

Mark, who has let me say my piece without interruption, finally steps forward. "So, here's what's going to happen. Claire and Grace are going to go in the house with Dani, gather the things they need, and put them in the car. Shane and I are going to stand here and keep you two company—" he points at my parents "—while they get their belongings."

Dad scoffs. "You're going to keep me out of my own house?"

Mark crosses his arms over his massive chest and smirks, towering six inches or so over my father. "Only for as long as it takes the ladies to be ready. No harm done, right?"

God, I could kiss him right now. Seeing him so easily put my father in his place and keep his cool while doing it makes me love him that much more. A man who can handle tense situations without using anger or violence, even when he easily could resort to those things, is way more attractive than I would have thought.

Grace and I head into the house with Dani trailing behind us. I grab a few things from

my room that I hadn't taken with me the first time I left, but most of my time is spent helping Grace grab her things and shove them into bags. Dani helps where she can, and while the two of them begin carrying stuff out to the car, I go into Dad's office and take Grace's legal documents.

On my way out of the house, I look back and take it in, knowing I'll probably never be back here again. I didn't have a chance to say goodbye last time, but for as much stress this life has caused me, a lot of good memories happened in this house. Playing hide and seek with my siblings, spending calm evenings knitting beside my mother, even listening to my father's voice as he read to us when he wasn't angry.

Every moment, both good and bad, led me to this moment, and I can't bring myself to regret any of it. I'm leaving my old home and settling into my new one, knowing that the possibilities of my future are limitless. It's bittersweet, leaving my old life behind while seeing what lies ahead.

I say a silent goodbye to the home I've spent my life in and head outside to where Shane and Mark are standing.

"I think we're ready to go."

Mark nods, stepping away enough to give me space to say goodbye, and Shane walks toward the car.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye." Looking at each of my parents, I study their expressions. Tears run down Mom's face, and Dad's arms are crossed as he scowls. Mom opens her arms, and I hug her.

"I love you, Claire."

"I love you too, Mom. If you ever decide to forgive me, you have my email. But



please, don't try to guilt trip me again. This is what's best for me. And for Grace."

She nods against my shoulder and whispers, "I hope you're right," then lets me go. I stand there for another moment, waiting to see if my dad says anything, but he doesn't. He stares off into the distance still looking every bit as angry and bitter as he did before.

"Bye, Dad."

He grunts in acknowledgment, but he doesn't even make eye contact. I guess that's that, then.

Dani, Grace, and I squeeze into the back of the car with me in the middle while Mark takes the driver's seat.

"Everyone all buckled in?" he asks, turning around and flashing me a grin. God, I love him.

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"Yes, Mr. Bossy pants," I tease.

He mutters under his breath, "Not yet I'm not," and Dani and Shane groan simultaneously while I laugh.

We drive off, and I watch as my too-familiar town disappears behind us. I didn't realize how much stress I had been carrying until right now, when all those worries disappear. I'll no longer have the constant fear of being found, and I don't have to worry about my sister's well-being because she's right here next to me.

As time passes, the collective energy in the car seems to relax, and the heavy silence turns into lighthearted conversation. Grace asks questions about life outside the community, and we all answer about what life is like in the city. It feels weird that I was in her position only six months ago.

But I'm so excited for her to experience a life where she's free to be herself. She'll likely have to adjust in the same way I did, but the discomfort of adjusting is nothing compared to the freedom it allows.

The sun is low in the sky by the time we make it back to Mark's. Grace has been staring in awe at the skyscrapers as we drive through the city, her expression reflecting how I felt six months ago when I experienced Chicago for the first time. It's a magical feeling to have so much freedom and potential right in front of you.

Once Mark is parked, we all exit the car and I realize that I hadn't even asked Mark if it was okay for Grace to stay here as well. I circle the car and pull him aside while the others pull Grace's bags from the trunk.

"Is it okay if she stays here?" I whisper. "I'll work on finding an apartment for her—or us" I add, not sure quite where we stand with the whole relationship thing. "I just don't want to impose, and I know you didn't expect to have a seventeen-year-old girl coming home with me too."

"Claire." Mark looks at me as if I just said the most ridiculous thing in the world. "She's your sister. Of course she's welcome here. If you're okay with it, she can take your room and you can share mine. But if you need some space from me right now, I also understand that."

I shake my head. "I don't. As long as you promise to be honest with me about your feelings and your fears so we can work through them together."

Mark takes a step closer to me and brushes my hair back behind my shoulder. "I promise I will. I know I hurt you, and I don't want to minimize that by pretending it never happened. When I thought you had left because of me, I couldn't fucking breathe. I love you, Claire. You've brought a light to my life that I didn't even realize was missing. I love you, and I'm going to take advantage of every opportunity I get to tell you that from now on."

My heart cracks, opening up to him entirely. The vulnerability on his face shows me that he means every word he says. "I love you too." It's all I can think to say; I'm at a loss for words. The last tiny bit of stress I'd been holding onto dissipates.

"Are you two lovebirds coming in, or should we go on so you guys can make out in the parking garage?" Dani asks from the other side of the car.

Mark grins. "We're coming. There are much more comfortable places to make out inside."

Dani rolls her eyes but smiles as they head toward the door, and I don't miss the

shocked expression on my sister's face. Oops. It's definitely going to be an adjustment for her being here, but I have a feeling she'll adjust quickly, especially with me there for her to lean on.

The five of us make our way inside, and I'm pretty sure Grace might be in shock as I show her around the apartment.

"This whole room is mine?" she asks as I show her the bedroom I've been living in.

I smile and squeeze my arm around her shoulders. I remember how surreal this all feels. "Yes, as soon as I clear my stuff out, it's all yours."

After gingerly setting her bags on the floor along the wall, she sits down on the edge of the bed and looks up at me. "Thank you for bringing me with you. I wouldn't have been able to handle staying back there without you."

"Thank you for coming with me. Don't tell the others, but you're my favorite sibling anyway." I wink at her, and we both laugh.

Mark and I make quick work of moving my belongings into his—our—bedroom, and I give Grace some space to unpack her things after checking in on her a few times.

And just like that, we're back to normal. Better than normal, actually. Shane and Dani stick around for another hour, and once the door clicks shut behind them, Mark looks over at me.

"I have a confession."

I follow him to the couch and sink down onto his lap. "What's that?"

"I read your journal. Well, some of it. When I came home looking for you, I saw it

open on your bed, and when I realized you weren't coming back, I read it hoping to find some clues about where you went."

Discomfort rolls through me at the thought of Mark reading my innermost thoughts and feelings, but I can't blame him. "It's okay. I'm so glad you found me."

"Me too. And since I learned so much about you, I think it's time I return the favor."

He traces invisible patterns on my thigh as he explains his past to me—how his mother abandoned him when he was a baby, how his father was an alcoholic who resented being left with Mark and therefore treated him like a burden, and how Shane and his parents were the only ones who treated him like a person worthy of love. He's spent a lifetime guarding his heart because he thought he was unworthy of love, that regardless of how much someone is supposed to love you, they'll leave.

When he finishes his story, he doesn't meet my eyes. This admission was difficult for him, and it's clear that this is the first time he's spoken about it.

I squeeze his hand and say, "Thank you for telling me that. And I want you to know, I'll always be here, and I'll spend a lifetime proving it."

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"Likewise." He smiles down at me. "There's a whole world out there for you to experience, and I want to show you everything it has to offer. I want to give you everything you've ever dreamed of."

I lay my head on his chest and let out a contented sigh. I don't bother explaining to him that everything I've ever dreamed of is right here, in his arms.

Because of him, I've been able to start the life I've always wanted, and in the process, I've fallen in love with a man who loves me for who I am beneath all the fear and guilt, who gives me the space to be myself unapologetically.

Despite all of my flaws, he loves me just as much as I love him. In our vulnerability, we've discovered the chance to begin life anew together—a life of freedom, joy, peace, and pleasure. And with him at my side, I know that it will be the greatest adventure of all.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

### CLAIRE

The sea breeze carries laughter and music across the sand as I watch Dani and Shane sway together under a canopy of twinkling lights. Their wedding is everything I expected—joyful, vibrant, and filled with so much love it radiates in every inch of space. The sky is painted with deep blues and purples as the sun sets, and the sound of waves crashing against the shore in the distance is a calming soundtrack to the night.

Shane's parents dote over Mark. His mom leans in, but her voice is loud enough for me to hear. "Is this the girl?" she whispers with a knowing smile, her eyes darting to me.

Mark's lips curve into a sheepish grin. "Yes, this is Claire. Claire, this is Shane's mom, Kathryn."

Her gaze softens, and she introduces herself and tells me how glad she is to finally see Mark with a deserving woman. He smiles at the interaction, and she reaches up to pat his arm before returning to her husband's side. Mark's hand splay across the small of my back as he leans down to speak to me over the slow music. "Would you like to dance?"

"Sure. But only because you look so damn good in a suit," I tease. He flashes me a grin and guides me toward the makeshift dance floor.

"Wait until I take the jacket off. You might swoon."

We find a spot near the edge of the crowd, and he pulls me close. I lose myself in the music and his touch, and his body moves effortlessly with mine. When the chorus of the song swells, he dips me low, and I giggle while gripping his shoulders.

I can't help but think how different this is from the weddings back home—those ceremonies were so stiff and formal, heavy with tradition and often fear, especially from the woman's side. Here, the joy is all-encompassing, permeating every interaction. People laugh and dance without a care in the world.

"It's so clear how much they love each other," I say.

Mark's gaze follows mine to Dani and Shane, who are caught in their own private moment despite the crowd. "Yeah," he agrees. "They're perfect for each other."

We dance until my feet ache as the songs shift from slow and romantic to fun and upbeat until I finally collapse into a chair at the edge of the dance floor. "Okay, I surrender. My heels are winning this battle."

Mark chuckles. "Would you care for a walk on the beach? No shoes required."

"Yes, please." I slip off my shoes and sigh with relief. "Barefoot is definitely the way to go."

The sand is cool beneath my feet as we leave the reception behind. Moonlight glints off the water, and the night air is warm but comfortable. We walk in silence. I'm lost in my own thoughts, and I'm sure he is too.

"It's crazy to think that the last time we were here, things were just beginning between us," I muse. "It feels like so long ago."

"It really does."

I glance at him, trying to read his expression. He's been unusually quiet as the night has gone on, but it's been a long day—an exhausting one, in the best way possible.

I stop, crossing my arms against the cool breeze, and stare out over the black waters. There's something about the ocean that's calming in a way I can't explain, like it reminds me how small I am in the grand scheme of things. That there's an entire world out there to explore.

I turn around, wondering why Mark doesn't have his arm around my waist or my hand in his. He's always been physically affectionate, even more so since we made our relationship official. To my surprise, he's a couple feet away, down on one knee with a ring in his hand.



My breath catches in my throat.

"Claire," he starts in a shaky voice, "I never thought I'd be the kind of guy doing this. Hell, I never thought I'd be lucky enough to find someone like you, let alone deserve you."

My eyes brim with tears as I smile down at him. Is this really happening?

"You make my life brighter than I ever thought it could be," he continues. "You make me want to be the best man I can possibly be, because you're the most incredible woman I've ever met. And I want to spend the rest of my life proving that I'm worthy of you."

Tears spill down my cheeks with the overwhelming joy bursting in my heart.

"Claire, will you marry me?"

For a moment I can't speak. All I can do is nod frantically before finding my voice.

"Yes," I manage, laughing through the tears. "Yes."

Mark rises, slipping the ring onto my finger with surprisingly steady hands. He pulls me into his arms, holding me tightly and kissing the top of my head.

"I love you," I whisper against his shoulder.

"I love you too."

We stand there for what feels like forever, wrapped in each other and the magic of the moment. Eventually, I pull back, a playful smile coming to my lips.

"Aren't you not supposed to propose on someone else's wedding day?" I tease. "I don't want Shane and Dani to think we're trying to steal their moment."

Mark chuckles, and some of the tension leaves his shoulders. "I'll be honest, Dani is the one who helped me plan this. They're both in on it."

"Of course they are," I laugh.

We slowly walk back toward the hotel, avoiding the reception area so as not to draw attention away from Dani and Shane's night. The reception is still in full swing, music and laughter drifting on the night air. Mark slips his jacket off, rolling up the sleeves of his white button-down shirt. He looks devastatingly handsome, and my

stomach swoops at the surge of lust that shoots through me.

As if reading my thoughts, Mark pulls me in close and says in a low voice, "You know we're not getting much sleep tonight, right?"

I grin up at him, suddenly very excited to get back to our room. "Oh, I'm counting on it."

The idea of forever, in any capacity, used to be terrifying and overwhelming. Now, knowing I have a lifetime with Mark and with a small group of people who truly love me, every day feels like a new adventure. Forever doesn't scare me anymore; It feels like a promise of endless opportunities, laughter, and love.

The End