



Reluctantly Yours

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Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult

Description: Travis

I'm used to running an empire, not running after a nanny who looks like a walking rainbow and disrupts my meticulously planned world.

Penny Anderson isn't just unsuitable—she's chaos in pigtails and glitter.

But my daughter adores her, and Penny's sunshine personality slowly chips away at the walls I've built.

She's hiding something behind that unrelenting cheer, and I guess we're similar like that. Still, I shouldn't care. All I should care about is my one rule—don't cross the line.

Too bad she's standing right on it, tempting me every single day.

Penny

Taking a nanny job for a powerful, brooding single dad wasn't supposed to turn my life upside down.

Travis Knight is every bit the cold, calculating CEO—until he's with his daughter, and I catch glimpses of the man behind the mask.

But this job isn't just about Sofia—it's a fresh start I desperately need. If only I could ignore the heat in Travis's eyes and the way he makes me question every rule I've ever set for myself.

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TRAVIS

If one more thing went wrong on what was becoming one of the most stressful days of my life, I was going to permanently lose my shit. Being rear-ended by some moron on their cell on my way to the office. A burst pipe in my office building had led to half a floor full of employee desks getting rained on overnight. My managers were dealing with the aftermath, but then came the unwelcome surprise of our now ex-nanny dropping my daughter off without warning.

A man in my position couldn't have interruptions like that. It was damn near impossible to concentrate on numbers and projections when my four-year-old colored at my assistant's desk while I brimmed over with anger at the incompetence of the people in my life.

Of all people for the agency to send as a replacement.

The pigtailed brunette in front of me wore an irritatingly bright smile. "Mr. Knight?" she asked when the most I'd been able to do was stare at her in disbelief. The last thing I'd expected was her announcement. My new nanny.

Finally, she started to comprehend my confusion. Her teeth sank into her bottom lip before she asked, "Is everything okay? You did request the agency send you a nanny candidate as soon as possible, right? Or have I come to the wrong place?"

Had she? She was dressed like a character from a summer camp ad, complete with a

pink backpack that matched the flowers on her sundress. There were friendship bracelets on one wrist and multicolored beaded bracelets on the other, the sort a kid would make at summer camp.

She was bright, obviously energetic, and painfully earnest. In other words, she left me grinding my teeth in distaste. This was the sort of girl who would've irritated me if I were in a good mood.

I was not in a good mood this afternoon.

"How old are you?" I asked since her physical aspects were a direct contradiction of her pigtails and backpack. "Why don't you take a look at my resume?" She swung the backpack off one shoulder and unzipped it. "Sorry. I should've had that ready when I came in."

"Yes, you should have." She didn't flinch at my sharp rebuke. For all I knew, she didn't hear me, intent on pulling a manila folder free from her bag. Flipping it open, she pulled out a sheet of paper which she handed me, wearing the same bright, chipper smile.

She had to be on drugs, and though I had never dabbled, she made me consider asking her for a hit of whatever she was on. I could've used a pick-me-up.

Penny Anderson. Of course, she had a name like Penny. Twenty-four years old. "Recently graduated with your master's in early childhood education?" I read aloud.

"Yes, just last month," she said with pride.

Well, that was a plus, though it didn't make her any easier to stomach. "I don't see any previous experience as a nanny."

“I worked at a daycare center for the past several years, as I explained on the resume.”

“That’s not the same,” I countered. “Why would the agency send me someone with no experience as a nanny?”

“If you look at the reverse side, you’ll see I started babysitting my own siblings when I was ten. I’m the oldest of five,” she explained in that same pride-filled tone. “It was a hands-on learning experience. I was changing diapers when I was eleven, handling bath time and bedtime when I was twelve. My parents verified everything with the agency when I applied.” Chuckling, she added, “Moving away to college was like an extended vacation. For the first time in years, the only homework I had to worry about was my own.”

She couldn’t be real. Was this an act? “Here’s a question. What are your acting aspirations?” I asked.

Finally, something managed to knock the smile off her face. Not for long, though. She recovered quickly, tipping her head to the side. “I don’t understand.”

“Come on, Miss Anderson,” I implored with a smirk. “This is Los Angeles. If you’re living out here, there’s a good chance you have dreams of working in Hollywood. If that’s the case, I need to know now.”

Her brows knitted together, but only for a split second before she shook her head. “No, Mr. Knight. What you see here is what you get. I grew up in Sacramento and moved to Los Angeles when I started at USC. I want to be a teacher.”

“So you won’t drop any surprise auditions on me?” I found it hard to believe someone as pretty as her, with a tight body and sapphire blue eyes, wouldn’t at least consider a career on the screen. Years of friendship with the heir to a major studio had taught me

one thing—it didn't take talent to make a star.

She giggled and shook her head. "Gosh, no. I was too nervous to stand in the background of my eighth-grade class play. I don't even have the guts to teach high schoolers. They're too judgmental."

There had to be some reason for me to dismiss the girl. Not that I necessarily needed a reason. A simple phone call to the agency would suffice. They didn't need an explanation, anyway. If they asked for one, I didn't have to comply.

Yet, for some reason, I searched for something plausible I could use. "You understand this would be a long-term, live-in arrangement, right?"

"Of course. You have a home in Brentwood. They wouldn't have sent me if they didn't give me the rundown first." Her bright, frank gaze drifted away from my face and began traveling over the room, landing on a model ship in the corner to my left and soon, she was moving in that direction. "This is beautiful. The Sofia? Is it one of your ships?"

"Yes, it is. One of many." I watched as she admired it and reminded myself not to admire her peach of an ass when she bent slightly for a closer look. She was irritating, but she wasn't bad when her mouth was shut. "What is your current living situation?"

"I was living close to campus before graduation." Straightening, she checked out the photos hanging on the wall. Other ships docked around the world, all of which belonged to me. "My lease is up at the end of the month. It's either find a job that involves living arrangements or move back to my childhood bedroom in Sacramento. This would be a win-win for me."

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I had found a reason to get rid of her. It would take an entire bottle of aspirin every day to put up with the incessant cheerfulness or an entire bottle of whiskey. My liver would lose out in the end, either way.

“Tell me about your personal habits,” I continued. There had to be some reason to dismiss her. Was I trying to convince myself? Was that the problem?

Turning my way and holding out one hand, she counted items off on her fingers. “I don’t drink, I don’t smoke, I don’t do drugs. I dabbled with veganism in college, but I missed real cheese too much, so I’m a vegetarian. But I don’t try to, you know, convince other people to live in the same way. To each their own.”

The girl talked as though she pulled quotes directly from a positive thinking self-help book. “What about your social life?”

“I don’t have one, really.”

Finally. Something I could grab a hold of. “Not at all? You have no friends?” I didn’t bother concealing my skepticism.

“Not exactly. I have friends. I shared a house with two other girls in grad school, and we keep in touch now that they’ve moved out. I had friends in classes with me, study groups, and whatnot. People I connected with when I was working in the daycare center.”

“But you have no social life? You can see how I would question that as young as you are.”

“What does my age have to do with it?”she countered, still gentle and pleasant.Unflappable.“I don’t party if that’s what you’re getting at.You can ask anyone who knows me, and I did include a handful of names and phone numbers at the bottom of my resume.”

An interesting thing happened.She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes the slightest bit.Not angry, per se, but some of her relentless shine had worn off.“Mr.Knight, what you see is what you get with me.I wouldn’t paint myself as somebody I’m not for the sake of getting a job.”

“Mr.Knight?”My assistant had a bad habit of opening the door before knocking, which today meant the sudden, rambunctious presence of my daughter.Her chocolate brown curls bounced as she ran across the room toward my desk, then stopped dead in her tracks when she spotted the colorful stranger standing a few feet away.

“Hey, there.”Penny slowly lowered herself to one knee, grinning at Sofia.“My name is Penny.”

Sofia offered a shy grin that showed off her dimples as she looked Penny up and down.I waited, watching closely.“I’m Sofia,” she announced in a tiny voice.

“Something told me that was your name.”Penny glanced over her shoulder toward the ship that was my daughter’s namesake.“It’s very nice to meet you, Sofia.Let me guess.”She tapped a fingernail to her chin.Fuck me, she even wore glitter nail polish.“I bet you’re around four years old.Is that right?”

Sofia gasped, her hazel eyes perfectly round.“Wow!That’s amazing!”She turned to me.“Daddy!Did you hear that?How did she know?”

I shrugged while Penny stood upright again, smiling down at the equally entranced Sofia.“It must be magic,” I decided.“Now, you know when the door is closed, you’re

supposed to sit with Miss Lauren, right? You can come in when the door is open.”

“I had to ask something really important, though.”

“And what is that?” I exchanged looks with my assistant, who could only shrug. What the fuck was it today with these incompetent people?

Folding her hands, Sofia begged, “Can I please, please get a new coloring book before we go home tonight?”

Lauren piped up from the doorway. “The book I had in my desk was all full.”

Before I could suggest Lauren give her some blank paper to draw on—honestly, the fact that I should have come up with such a simple idea made me wonder about her—Penny held up a hand. “It just so happens I have a coloring book in my bag. You can have it if you want.”

She wore glitter nail polish and carried coloring books around in her backpack. The whole thing kept getting more bizarre with each passing minute.

“Wow!” Sofia accepted the Disney Princess coloring book like it was a rare treasure. “Thank you! Are you sure I can have it?”

It’s yours,” she insisted, holding it out. “It’s okay,” Penny told her with a smile. “I’ve got lots of coloring books already. And I guess you could get bored hanging around here.”

“No, it’s fun...” But anyone could tell from Sofia’s reluctant tone that the opposite was true. My daughter was nothing if not polite. I covered up a laugh with a snort and sat back down.

“How about we make it an early day?” I suggested, because why not? My day was already shot to hell as it was. My presence wasn’t helping anyone, and my daughter was bored out of her mind. I doubted Lauren was able to get much work done, either. “Maybe we’ll stop for ice cream on the way home.”

“The pretty shop at the mall? With the fountain?” Sofia began to bounce on the balls of her feet. The kid was going to lift off, she was so excited. “Can Penny come with us?”

Son of a bitch. It was bad enough that I had a hard time denying her anything. She had to go and put me on the spot in front of someone whose relentlessly cheerful presence made my head hurt.

I forced a smile for Sofia’s sake. “Sure.” If anything, this would be a test. I hadn’t offered Penny the position yet. If she screwed up, she would make it that much easier for me to dismiss her and tell the owner of that goddamn agency to send somebody who didn’t look like she was about two seconds away from bursting into song and making friends with local wildlife.

However, when I noticed the way Sofia beamed up at her on the way out of my office, I had to ask myself if it would be so easy to dismiss this girl after all.

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PENNY

This was going to work.

I practically had the job in the bag.

So long as I dealt mostly with the charming, clever little girl and not her father. I must've done something to rub him the wrong way since he looked at me like I was the enemy. Like he wasn't the one who needed help. And he obviously did. This was a busy company I'd walked into earlier, and it was kind of chaotic. It wasn't the place for a four-year-old to be hanging around.

Even though he would be the one paying for my services, I was sort of in charge here. I held all the cards. I had to keep reminding myself of that, or else the weird looks he kept giving me would get under my skin and dig away at my self-confidence.

"Are you gonna be my new nanny?" Sofia was easily the most adorable kid I had met in a long time. She had gorgeous olive skin and a crown of soft, brown curls I would love to get my hands on if given the chance. I always wanted to try out those curly hair tutorials online, but my hair was the exact opposite. I could barely get a curl to hold for five minutes.

I needed to get a hold of myself before I got too attached, but I couldn't help it. Even with the weird, snotty attitude from her father, I had a good feeling. There was an

instant rapport between us. She was smart, she seemed well-behaved. When we came to the corner of Wilshire and Beverly, she reached up and took her father's hand when crossing. "Look both ways, Dad," she reminded him.

What was their story? The only thing I learned at the agency was that Travis Knight owned a big shipping company, a single parent, and had complained to Mrs. Forrest that his previous nannies were all unreliable. She had also mentioned him describing Sofia as highly intelligent, requiring a nanny who could meet her educational needs. My credentials checked that box, unlike the other available candidates at the agency.

"These are the sorts of people who are this agency's bread and butter," Mrs. Forrest had reminded me over the phone. "It's important we leave them with a good impression. Word travels fast in these social circles."

I had never exactly been part of a social circle, so I didn't quite know how that felt, but I got the idea.

It definitely seemed like he raised her well. He was involved with her life. She was polite and sweet, and she had a great vocabulary—all signs pointing to somebody taking the time to teach her well.

The ice cream shop sat in the middle of a row of businesses arranged around a central plaza. A fountain shot jets of water into the air while kids played, chasing each other around it, trying to splash each other when their moms weren't looking.

"They have real ice cream here." Sofia wrinkled her nose as we approached the colorful shop, with the two of them walking in front of me while I observed. "I don't like that stuff Marissa tried to make me eat."

Travis glanced back at me. "Ex-nanny," he explained. He then looked down at

Sofia. “They probably have the fake stuff here, too, but you can get some actual ice cream. Okay?”

There were dairy-free alternatives among the flavors lined up in the freezer case, but there was full-fat ice cream too. “I like chocolate peanut butter,” I told Sofia as we studied the colorful choices. “What’s your favorite?”

“Mint chocolate chip.” She looked up at her father, eyes shining. The kid knew she had him wrapped around her finger. “Can I get a scoop? Please?”

“Sure thing,” he told her, though he seemed a little distracted, flustered. “Whatever Penny would like too.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, ordering a scoop of chocolate peanut butter in a cup. Looking at Sofia, I explained, “Ice cream cones can be so messy, and I don’t want to get anything on my dress.”

“It’s a pretty dress,” she said with a sigh, reaching out to touch the soft fabric before pulling her hand back. “Sometimes I drip on my clothes, so I wear a napkin up here.” She patted her collarbone, then pointed at me. “You should try that!”

“I will.” I winked, and she giggled, and her father sighed softly without saying a word. What was his problem? He was obviously grumpy. How had he raised such a happy little ray of sunshine with that kind of attitude?

Once we got our ice cream, we went back outside and found an empty table. Sofia sat between us, swinging her feet happily after carefully tucking a napkin into the neck of her T-shirt. “See? It really works,” she told me, digging in with abandon.

“Let’s see if it helps me.” I tucked a napkin into the neckline of my dress, then took the first spoonful of my scoop. “Wow, this is delicious,” I declared.

“Do you go to school?” Sofia asked.

“Not anymore. I just graduated a little while ago.”

“You’re lucky.” When I lifted my eyebrows, she explained, “I don’t like school very much.”

“It’s a little problem we’ve run into this year,” Travis explained. He was fairly checked out of our little interaction, sitting back with a bottle of water after passing on the ice cream. With a body like his, I could imagine him being super health-conscious.

All right, maybe it wasn’t cool to notice his body when I was interviewing for a job with him, but I had eyes. I couldn’t miss the broad, thick shoulders under his button-down shirt. Rolled-up sleeves gave me a look at his tanned, strong forearms. And I had definitely noticed his ass while we were walking. It was worth noticing.

I had to remind myself what I was here for, snapping out of it and turning back to Sofia. She was demolishing her ice cream and loving every second of it. I hoped she would always attack the things she loved with that kind of passion. “What is it you don’t like?” I asked, keeping it casual as I took another spoonful. “I know when I was your age, I didn’t like it when people called on me to give answers, and then everybody would look at me and wait for me to talk. It would freak me out.”

“That’s okay,” she mused, stabbing at what was left of her scoop like she was an archaeologist digging for an artifact and not a chocolate chip. “I like to give the answers. I raise my hand!”

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She demonstrated for us but, unfortunately, chose the hand that was holding her spoon. "Careful there," Travis warned, gently taking the spoon from her before she sent any more flecks of pale green flying in all directions.

"Sorry. So then, the teacher calls my name, and I answer, but then everybody looks at me like this." She folded her arms, wrinkled her nose, and gave me what could only be described as a stink eye.

"Oh, I'm sorry. That's no fun." I sighed, shaking my head.

"And I tell them, if you know the answer, you should raise your hand too. But they don't." She shook her head mournfully, taking her spoon back and sinking it into her cup. "It's dumb."

Travis was watching me, waiting to see what I would say. He probably thought he was pretty slick, testing me.

"Sometimes," I offered. "People get upset when there's somebody who isn't afraid to speak up and answer questions and be heard. That's because they might be a little nervous themselves. Do you know what I mean? Then they see somebody like you who isn't nervous, and they wish they could be more like you, but they don't know how to say that, so it comes out the wrong way."

"Is that true, Daddy?" She blinked up at him, and it was pretty obvious from the way her voice changed that, as far as she was concerned, he hung the moon and stars. That was another good sign.

“I think so,” he agreed. It was another good sign that he put the water aside and turned his full intention on her. She had his eyes, hazel flecked with green and brown. “Don’t ever let anybody make you feel bad for not staying quiet just because they say so.” He held up a finger, though, and touched it to the tip of her nose. “Just like you don’t make anybody feel bad if they don’t know the answer. Right?”

“Right,” she solemnly agreed.

“Because not everybody is going to know things as fast as you do.” This was starting to sound like a conversation they’d had before. Maybe Sofia would benefit from testing to place her in advanced classes. I made a mental note to approach the idea. Now that it was summer and school probably wouldn’t be in for another couple of months, there would be time for that.

Here I was, thinking about the future like the job was mine. I wanted it to be, but it wasn’t up to me. He’d be an idiot if he didn’t hire me, but he still looked at me like I was an alien life form he couldn’t identify.

When he wasn’t looking, I dabbed at my mouth and chin with my makeshift bib in case I had dripped something on my face. I knew I wasn’t imagining things.

“Oh! There’s Ava! From school.” Sofia waved an arm overhead, and I followed her line of sight to find a little girl riding a scooter around the fountain. When she waved happily, I guessed not all of the kids in Sofia’s class thought she was pesky. “Can I go say hi?”

Travis sized up the situation and nodded. She would only be a handful of feet away from us. “Go ahead. But stay where we can see each other.”

“Do you wanna come?” Sofia asked me as she hopped up from her chair and wiped her mouth.

“I think Penny and I will talk for a little while,” Travis decided. “Go ahead. But be careful,” he called out after her since she was already running away.

“She’s too adorable,” I told him right away. “And so smart.”

“Too smart for her own good sometimes,” he agreed with a chagrined chuckle. “Four going on forty.”

“I definitely got that impression. I’m sure she keeps you on your toes.”

“That’s why I need help,” he concluded. With a sigh, he leaned back in his chair, angling his body so he could watch Sofia play near the fountain. “I’ll be in the middle of ironing out an expansion deal over the next six months,” he explained. “I’m looking to set up operations in New York. The next couple of months will be the most hectic, with school out for summer. How much did they tell you about the requirements before sending you over to see me?”

“Not very much,” I explained. “Only the most important parts. Number of children, general situation.”

“Compensation?” he asked, smirking when he looked my way. He needed not to be so hot if this was going to work. I forgot how to breathe and didn’t remember again until he broke eye contact and shifted his attention back over to Sofia and Ava.

“Yes, that, too,” I told him. Did it get a lot hotter out here all of a sudden? I needed to get a grip. How was I supposed to concentrate on keeping a child in one piece if I couldn’t stop drooling over her father?

He ran a hand through his dark brown hair, just long enough for some of the natural curls to come out. That must have been where Sofia got hers from. “I don’t have many rules, but the rules I set, I expect to be followed. That was always an issue for the girls

who came before you.”

I couldn't help myself. My pulse raced, and my insides quaked in anticipation. “Are you telling me I have the position, Mr. Knight?”

His eye roll went a long way toward dampening my excitement. Most people would at least have the decency to look away so as not to be offensive. Not him. “Sofia obviously likes you, and your background and education can only help. She needs a little guidance. I'm afraid she isn't stimulated enough. I want her to meet her potential.”

Finally, he wasn't talking to me like some grumpy, Big Bad Wolf type of guy—Mr. Business grumbling at all of his underlings. I could even forgive the eye roll. He was a concerned dad, and he wanted what was best for his little girl. “Understood,” I agreed with a firm nod. “We can always discuss her milestones and touch base on tactics for keeping her engaged and growing.”

“Are you always this earnest?” he asked the question like it was a bad thing. Was I supposed to be offended?

“I am,” I told him, folding my arms on the table and shrugging. “And I genuinely think you've got a great kid, and it would be a lot of fun hanging out with her for the next six months.”

“You don't get to decide it's too much to deal with and skip out the way other people have.”

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“I can’t imagine how they could,” I mused. His eyes narrowed a little, and I guessed what he was thinking. He was pretty easy to see through. “I mean it. I’m earnest, but I don’t go overboard with compliments.”

“Ow!”

Our heads snapped around in unison at the high-pitched cry. Sofia was on her hands and knees like she’d just fallen. Her face was starting to crumple, and her shoulders heaved. An epic meltdown was brewing.

I was out of my chair before Travis could react. I didn’t run to her, though. “Uh-oh,” I said with a sigh as I approached. “What happened here?”

“I fell!” Sofia rolled to the side to plop down on her butt and show off her lightly skinned knees and palms.

I slid out of my backpack, examining the damage. “How does it feel?” I asked as I pulled out my travel first-aid kit.

“It hurts.” She sniffled and her little chin quivered.

“I’m sure it does. I used to fall down all the time when I was a kid.” As I spoke, I dug out a packet of antiseptic wipes. “Sometimes I still do. I’m a little clumsy. But when I was a kid, we used to go camping a lot, and I was always falling and scraping myself or cutting myself. I used to have scabs all over my knees.”

“You don’t anymore.” She sniffled again, then pointed to what I was opening. “What’s

that?”

“Just something to make sure you’re nice and clean and safe.” Instead of warning her it would hurt, I touched the wipe to her knee. She sucked in a quick breath but didn’t freak out, most likely because she wasn’t conditioned to freak out before I ever touched her.

I cleaned her up, put a little antiseptic ointment on her knees, then helped her to her feet. She was already feeling better, though she did warn Travis not to hold her scraped hand too tight when they walked. “I have injuries,” she informed him, extremely serious.

Travis and I exchanged a look as he confirmed, “You’ve got the job. I made plans to work from home tomorrow. Can you be moved in by tomorrow evening?”

“Absolutely.” Would it be crazy? Yes. Would I end up throwing everything I owned into bags at random? Sure. Did I know a good thing when I saw it? Absolutely.

I was not about to give up this chance.

Even if I had to ask myself how long it would be before Travis Knight got used to the idea of me being around.

Even when the sizzle of current running up my arm when we shook hands made me wonder if I could ignore his effect on me for six whole months.

3

TRAVIS

For the second time in two days, I was using a service recommended to me by

Spencer. First, the agency where I'd found Penny. I'd have to find a way to thank him for the mixed blessing Penny turned out to be so far.

Now, this Bruce guy. Spencer mostly used him for background checks, but I had the feeling he did a lot of other work. Maybe things I didn't need to know any details about. He seemed like a pretty intimidating sort, and I wasn't easily intimidated.

I stepped into my home office when he called in the middle of Penny arranging her bedroom a little more than thirty hours after I offered her the job. She was already talking about using one of the spare rooms as a so-called art studio. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what that was about.

"What do you have for me?" I asked with one ear trained on the noise upstairs. I knew the agency would have run a background check on her the way they would with all of their potential nannies, but that wasn't enough for me. I wanted to know everything there was to know about this girl.

"Honestly, not much," he said in that strange, almost angry way he had. Like he was barking the words. "Parents, Donna and Michael. Five kids. They've lived in Sacramento for twenty-five years. Solidly middle-class all the way."

"No history of anything I need to know about?"

"They are the poster children for boring, average, everyday working people. Though there is one thing I found, but I don't think it would make a difference here." He released a deep breath. "Eight years ago, there was a death in the family. One of the kids."

And this wasn't something I needed to know about? For all I knew, that chipper personality was masking a psychopath. "What happened?"

“A ten-year-old boy drowned on a camping trip with the family.”

Shit. “Any other details?”

“There were a couple articles floating around at the time. One of those tragic stories that scares the shit out of parents.” I ground my molars. I was a parent who, sure as shit, felt a chill run down my spine. He continued, “The best I could piece together, the whole family was there and the river was high.”

She was there. Did she see it happen? Even if she didn't, that was heavy shit for a sixteen-year-old to carry.

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“Other than that and some serious student loan debt your girl took on, I've got nothing to tell you. She's clean.” He snickered, adding, “Almost boring, she's so clean.”

“Thanks a lot for looking into it for me.” I confirmed the address for him to send his final invoice, then ended the call. What was I hoping to learn? That she was, in fact, a serial killer? That there was an entire locked-down file from her teenage years before she became a legal adult? A family history of addiction and incarceration? The news should have left me feeling relieved, confident in the young woman currently moving into my home.

What was it about her that set me off? I pondered the question as I walked from the office, passing the kitchen and dining room on the other side of the tiled hall. I continued through the living room, reaching the stairs across from the wide double doors leading out to the front courtyard. Maybe it was the fact that she was so damn shiny and clean. Nobody was that innocent. Nobody was that damn perfect.

Sofia obviously didn't agree with me. “Daddy!” she squealed when she heard me approaching in the upstairs hall. She barreled out of what was now Penny's room, eyes shining, cheeks flushed with excitement. “Penny has an easel! She said she would teach me how to paint!”

“Did she?” I took her hand and led her back to the room where Penny hung clothes in the closet. Her three suitcases and two boxes were swallowed up by the large space.

She laughed gleefully over her shoulder. “All this room! I've never had a bedroom this big. Not even when I was renting with my roommates. And there's so much sunshine,”

she added, admiring the big windows overlooking the back patio and pool.

“I can’t wait for you to see my room!” Sofia bounced on the balls of her feet, clapping her hands. They weren’t so injured anymore a day later. “There’s a castle and everything!”

“I bet there is. I can’t wait to see it. Do you have a princess costume?” Penny asked as I lingered in the doorway, observing.

I couldn’t believe how easily the two of them were getting along. Not that my daughter was difficult in any way. I wasn’t interested in raising a brat. She was too smart, to put it plainly. She saw through bullshit. When the other girls had fallen over her and used baby talk, she couldn’t have rolled her eyes any harder.

“What kind of foods do you like to eat?” Sofia wrinkled her nose. “Marissa always wanted me to eat kale.”

“I bet Marissa just wanted you to be healthy. Between you and me...” Penny dropped her voice to a whisper. “I don’t like kale, either. But I do think there should be something green on the plate at lunch and dinner times. That’s a pretty good compromise, don’t you think?”

“What’s a com... pra... mise?” Sofia asked, sounding the word out carefully as she played with the lace trim on Penny’s comforter. She had already made the bed with, no big surprise, pink sheets, the comforter featuring a rose print—shabby chic or something close to it. Her style swung back and forth between a deranged cartoon character and an old lady.

There I was, eight years her senior, and she dressed like my grandmother.

Currently, she wore a cardigan over what I guessed was a tank top and a long,

flowing skirt that reached her ankles. When she bent to pull some books from a box, I was drawn to the sight of her creamy tits playing peekaboo with the top's hem. I couldn't help it. I was only human.

Her head snapped up. Did she catch me? Way to go. What a great way to start things off. The girl hadn't finished unpacking, and I was staring at her tits.

"Compromise is, like..." When Penny turned toward the bookshelves, I released a deep breath. She probably hadn't noticed. I was being paranoid. "It's like splitting up chores. When we were kids, we always had chores to do around the house. Me and my brothers and sisters."

Sofia's eyes lit up. "You have brothers and sisters?"

"Sure do." Was she thinking about him? The brother she lost? "So, we had these chores. Our mom would assign them every week. There were certain things that I hated, and there were other things my brothers and sisters hated doing. Like washing the dishes or pulling weeds in the backyard. But we would all get in trouble if everything wasn't done. So, we would sometimes switch with each other. That way, the chores still got done, but we didn't have to do the things we really hated. We compromised."

"Oh. I get it." Sofia nodded sagely. They could be a couple of adults having a serious talk. "I don't really want to eat green food at all, and you want me to eat it all the time, so I'll eat it sometimes."

Giving her a thumbs up, Penny beamed. "Exactly. You are very smart."

I cleared my throat from the doorway. "Right. Enough vocabulary lessons for tonight. You know what time it is."

Like clockwork, Sofia's face fell. "But we're still unpacking!"

"Penny can finish that after bedtime," I announced, overlooking the way Sofia sighed.

With a crooked finger, I showed Penny to the bathroom and gave her the general rundown. "I'm sure you can figure it out. Sofia will help you find anything you're looking for, right?" I asked, prompting my daughter to nod.

Penny clasped her hands in front of her with another one of those irritating smiles. "All set, Mr. Knight. You don't have to worry about a thing."

That was easy for her to say. It wasn't that I worried about her as much as I had to wonder about her angle. Who was she? Why was she so unrelentingly positive and happy? She couldn't be for real, which told me she was hiding something. It was an idea I couldn't get out of my head as I retreated to my bedroom at the end of the hall. The bathroom door was open, meaning I could hear the laughter and singing going on in there. Normally, I would've closed my door for a little peace and quiet, but it felt right to listen in. The girl was new, after all. And this was my kid she was bathing while belting out Disney songs.

My phone rang, and I answered, staring down the hall. What was I waiting for? A shriek? It was Lex calling. "Hey, I'm in the area with Summer, and I have those Blu-rays for Sofia," he explained. "I thought I could drop them off for her if you have a second."

He'd offered to pull a handful of out-of-print titles from back when Landry International had a kids' movie division. It wasn't profitable enough by the time the eighties rolled around, so the division was shuttered. Over time, those films were no longer reproduced, but he'd pulled strings. "Sure," I replied, grateful for a distraction. "I'm home now."

“He wants to get a look at the nanny you hired!” That was Summer, calling out from the passenger seat and giggling when Lex grumbled.

“I wondered about the timing,” I admitted, and she continued to laugh. She was good for him. She called him on his bullshit and stood her ground. Lex had her to thank for his current success and come to think of it, I owed her a debt of gratitude, as well. The money I’d put up to fund their film along with our friends had brought back a nice return.

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“Do you want the movies or not?” Lex asked. I told him I did, and he promised to be around in a few minutes. In the meantime, I went downstairs to pull a bottle of scotch from the liquor cabinet and helped myself to a healthy pour.

Penny was still upstairs with Sofia when my friends arrived. Summer offered a warm hug that brought the faint aroma of incense to my nose. “So where is she?” she whispered, grinning.

“And I’m the one who wants to get a look at her?” Lex muttered, shaking his head and handing over a bag full of movies.

“Thanks for this.” I waved them further inside, setting the bag down in the large, tidy kitchen, then offered them a drink. Lex accepted a glass of scotch. Meanwhile, Summer sipped a glass of chardonnay.

Penny’s sandals slapped the stairs loud enough to be heard on the other side of the house.

“Here she comes,” Summer whispered with a grin.

“What is with you?” Lex asked, giving me a bewildered shrug.

Tossing auburn locks over her shoulder, she wrinkled her nose. “Don’t act like Travis didn’t talk your ear off about the girl when he called you yesterday.”

Lex winced at my sharp look. “We tell each other everything,” he mumbled by way of explanation.

There was no time to give him shit before Penny's cheerful voice rang out. "She wants to say goodnight, and then I'd like to talk about?"

The sight of visitors brought her up short. "Oh, excuse me," she offered, blushing. She then did a double take, touching a hand to her chest. "You're her... and you're him," she added, gaping at Lex. "Oh my gosh. Wow. I can't believe it!"

Penny looked a little overwhelmed as she shook Summer's hand. It was understandable. She had only become recognizable after the movie she and Lex had worked on together became a huge hit. They had recently won Best Picture at the Oscars in a big surprise upset, what with it being Summer's first Hollywood film and Lex's first Executive Producer credit. Their next project was in the works.

"It's so great to meet you," Penny concluded with a shaky laugh. "I'm sorry. I don't usually freak out like that, but it came as a surprise."

"How do you like it here?" Summer asked her. "Sofia is a doll, isn't she?"

"I adore her," Penny gushed. I stared down into my glass, scowling at the amber liquid rather than at the girl whose aggressive warmth made me want to gag. She'd known my daughter one day. One. Why was everything so over the top?

Lex elbowed me, arching an eyebrow. Was I being that obvious? I didn't feel like having him chastise me so I straightened my posture and slapped on a smile I didn't feel.

"Weren't you talking about showing me that new port you were looking at expanding?" Lex prompted, and my gratitude was palpable. An excuse to get out of the room was what I needed.

"Yeah, it's in my office. Will you ladies be all right alone for a second?" I asked,

already halfway out of the room. They continued talking about Sofia, something that earned Penny a measure of grudging respect. She didn't pepper Summer with a thousand questions about Hollywood the way somebody like Marissa would have.

"What is it with you?" As we walked to the office, Lex looked over his shoulder, asking, "What's the problem? She seems..."

"Exhausting?" I muttered, reaching the room and dropping onto the leather sofa close to the door. "Like she's trying too hard?"

"She's trying to impress you," he informed me. "She wants to make a good impression on the people you know. What's strange about that?"

"It's not strange. It's just fucking aggravating." I gulped down the rest of my glass' contents, admitting, "She's like sandpaper on my nerves."

"Then get rid of her. It wouldn't be the first time you had to dump a bad match."

What he said made perfect sense. All I had to do was tell the girl it wasn't working out. All right, so she had already moved in, but it wouldn't be that difficult to move her back out. It seemed she hardly had anything to her name.

"It would break Sofia's heart," I told him and myself. I needed to hear it too. "She loves the girl already."

"Isn't that what matters?" he asked with a shrug. "I mean, so long as Sofia is safe with her?"

"Easy for you to say. You don't have to live with Mary-fucking-Poppins skipping around the house."

“Listen,” he concluded with a knowing laugh. “We both grew up the same way. We lived with a revolving door of nannies and staff. It might be nice for her to have a little continuity. But that’s just my opinion,” he concluded, holding up his hands in surrender. “She’s not my kid. Whenever you think you need to do.”

The thing was, he had a point. We had grown up with distant, disengaged fathers and mothers who did their best to fill in the blanks wherever they could. “I want to strangle her,” I admitted. “I don’t know what it is, but something about this girl bugs the hell out of me.”

“You better figure out how to handle it,” he concluded as he finished his drink. “Because kids sense shit like that. If you don’t like her, you need to get rid of her before Sofia gets more attached. And that’s all I’m gonna say,” he concluded, holding up his hands again and backing out toward the hall.

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He had already said more than enough, and it was nothing I didn't already know. I was going to have to suck it up and deal with my personal distaste for Penny since, in the end, Sofia mattered most. She needed stability, which meant I couldn't go through nannies like Kleenex, no matter how they grated on my nerves.

No matter how infuriatingly tempting they might be.

4

PENNY

My first week of nannying for Travis Knight was a real learning experience. I had never been through boot camp but couldn't imagine it being more challenging or exhausting.

Not that I was complaining. Who would complain about living in a mansion? I had a huge room all to myself, my own private bathroom I didn't have to clean, though I kept it tidy for the housekeeper, and an enormous kitchen where I could bake to my heart's content. Travis had even seemed to accept the idea of me setting up an art room for Sofia, somewhere she could explore and create. What was the point of having three empty bedrooms if one of them couldn't be used that way?

If only it didn't seem so much like pulling teeth to get more than a grunt out of the man paying me to live in such comfort. The very handsome, very stoic man who made my stomach flutter every time he entered the room. He was always civil, but that was pretty much as far as he went. Not that I needed him to, like, pat me on the head or tell me I was doing a good job. I wasn't a child, though the difference in our ages

probably made me seem like one in his eyes.

It was just that until now, I never knew what it meant to live in a household where there was anything less than openness, generosity. Not the kind measured in dollars and cents, but the kind that came from inside. Being open. Being willing to laugh. We had always laughed so much back home when all of us were together. There were times Mom and Dad were sure we would get kicked out of a restaurant for having too much fun, cracking each other up. We just liked being together.

It is not my job to create a happy household. That had to become my mantra over the course of the week. I wasn't Mary Poppins. I couldn't fly around with an umbrella, and there was nothing in my carpet bag. I was just me, and my job was to take care of a sweet little girl whose dad loved her but was much too busy to devote his full attention.

I was a quick learner, though, so he couldn't fault me for that. After moving in on Tuesday night, it took me the following day to get up to speed on schedules, expectations. Sofia was normally out of bed around seven thirty and liked to play with her dolls in her castle. She woke them up, dressed them, and gave them pretend breakfast.

While she did that, I would fix actual breakfast, then call for her to come downstairs. After eating and tidying the kitchen on days when the housekeeper didn't come in, it was time to wash up, get dressed, and decide what to do with our day.

Cecilia, the housekeeper, was in on Friday morning, whistling to herself as she cleaned the kitchen. Having another adult to speak to was nice and helpful since she'd sometimes drop little pearls of information that helped me understand what I'd gotten myself into.

"You're my favorite of the girls he's brought in," she confessed as I fixed

breakfast. “There was no talking to them. Always with their heads in their phones.”

“Sofia didn’t like them much, did she?” I asked, thinking about all the little complaints she’d voiced in comparison to how well we got along.

Cecilia waved a hand, chuckling. “You can’t fool that child. She knows quality when she sees it.” The way she smiled when our eyes met told me I had made the grade, and her approval left me glowing with pride by the time Sofia sat down to eat.

Afterward, we decided to go to Brentwood Park. It was a beautiful day, and Sofia had woken up with even more energy than I would’ve expected. It would do her good to run it off for a little while. Heaven forbid she be too bouncy and loud by the time her father came home from work, not that there was ever any way of knowing when that would be.

He couldn’t help it, I reminded myself as we walked to the park, holding hands the whole way. He was doing his best, the way everybody always did. I knew there had to be a reason for his grumpy attitude, and it didn’t have anything to do with me, even if it felt like it did. I couldn’t decide whether it hurt more because he was so gorgeous or because I wanted so badly to please him, to bask in the warmth of one of his rare smiles.

“This is fun,” Sofia decided as we walked, our hands swinging back and forth. “Marissa never took me to the park. Or Darcy.”

“I guess not everybody likes going to the park,” I offered. No wonder Travis had gotten rid of those girls, whoever they were. It didn’t sound like they were super committed, but I didn’t know their stories. Maybe they had their reasons. “We have fun together, right?”

“So much fun!” she shouted, like she wanted the whole world to hear. “Maybe

tomorrow, we can go to Disneyland!”

I coughed softly to cover up my laughter. “I don’t know. That sounds like fun, but we’d have to get your dad’s permission for something like that.”

“Oh.” It was like a cloud passing over the sun, the way her energy dipped. “Maybe next time.”

“What’s wrong, munchkin?” I asked when we stopped at the corner just before reaching the park. “What’s on your mind?”

“Sometimes grown-ups don’t want you to do fun stuff,” she mumbled. “I say, Daddy, I’m a big girl. I can do stuff. But he doesn’t listen.”

“That can be tough.” My heart ached when she stuck out her bottom lip. It quivered pathetically. “Can I tell you a secret, though?”

If there was one thing kids loved, it was hearing a secret. Her head bobbed up and down like she had magically forgotten to be upset.

Crouching next to her, looking both ways to make sure nobody could hear us, I whispered, “Most of the time, grown-ups don’t want to say no. I know your daddy wants you to have a good time. He wants you to have fun.”

“Really?” She looked skeptical.

“Really. But he wants you to be safe too. Disneyland is a big place,” I pointed out. “Super busy and full of people. I’m sure he would rather be there with you to make sure you’re safe. Besides...” I added with a grin, “... he would want to come, too, right? It wouldn’t be fair if we went and had fun without him.”

The funniest thing happened. Her delicate eyebrows knitted together as her head snapped back. “Not my daddy,” she informed me. “He doesn’t do fun things.”

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I was getting that impression myself. "I'm sure he wants to," I insisted as gently as I could before we crossed the street. "But sometimes, being a grown-up can be really tough. Even if you want to have fun, you can't always do exactly what you want."

"Not true! Grown-ups do anything!"

Sweet kid. I didn't want to burst her bubble, so I didn't. "Sometimes it's not that easy. Here we are!" Because we needed to change the subject. It wasn't my place to come up with theories on why Travis was so distant sometimes, though it didn't take a genius to see it.

He was a very busy, important person. He ran a huge shipping company. I'd done a little research on my phone during my downtime before going to sleep at night. A quick Google search sent me to a Wikipedia page with photos of enormous ships carrying stacks of containers, and according to the article, they shipped all over the world. He had built his business from the ground up, though his father, Harrison Knight, had a pretty big company of his own.

It made me wonder why Travis hadn't stayed in his family shipping company, but there could be all kinds of reasons for that sort of thing. Maybe he wanted to step out on his own, be his own man. I had to respect that.

There was one thing he had never mentioned. Neither had Sofia, and I wouldn't bring it up. It was nowhere near my place, for one thing, and there had to be a reason nobody had hinted at it. Where was her mother? Why wasn't she around? Even divorced couples could split custody, but there was never so much as a hint of a custody arrangement.

I wasn't proud of scouring the internet for information on his private life, but then it wasn't like I found anything. No mention in Wikipedia of him having a child, much less of him ever being in a relationship. I could see him being super protective of Sofia's safety, but why no mention of a partner? Had she died? If so, I could even understand a little bit of Travis' grumpy, abrupt attitude. Sofia was only four. If her mother had passed away, that meant it couldn't have been all that long since she'd been gone.

Maybe he hadn't gotten over it yet. Maybe he didn't like watching another woman become close to his daughter. Loss was a funny thing. Just when a person thought they had it under control, something could happen out of nowhere that turned everything upside down and put them right back on square one, where the pain was freshest. I knew from experience.

Sofia had a child's knack for making friends wherever she went. I watched her but was seeing someone else in her place. Someone who had the same ready, dimpled smile she had, was as brave as she was, always ready to introduce himself to new people, and always the first one to suggest an adventure.

I caught myself before I could wander too far down memory lane. I had to be present. Kids could run off and get into trouble in the blink of an eye.

I should know.

* * *

"And then Penny bought tacos at a truck!" The way Sofia described it, she could've been talking about a three-star Michelin dining experience. Her happy, bubbly voice echoed through the kitchen as she told her dad all about our adventures today. "And we had a picnic in the park. And a bird came out of nowhere."

She wouldn't settle for explaining what happened. She had to reenact it, swooping in with her arms outstretched. "It snatched my chicken, Daddy. Can you believe it?"

Travis offered a weary but patient smile as he removed his cufflinks and slid them into his pockets. "It sounds like you had a big day."

"And maybe tomorrow, we'll go to the museum!" She was beside herself, completely overjoyed, and I couldn't help but smile as I ruffled her springy curls in passing.

Travis patted the top of her head, loosening his silk tie. The green hue made his eyes pop, and I wondered if he knew it did. "I have an idea. Why don't you go upstairs and wash up before dinner? I thought maybe tonight, we could order pizza."

Without missing a beat, Sofia looked up at me, eyes round. "This is the best day of my whole life." I was barely able to stifle my laughter until she was out of the room.

"She is too much," I whispered when we were alone, giggling and shaking my head.

Travis, meanwhile, folded his muscular arms and cocked his head to the side. The eyes I admired not half a minute ago narrowed threateningly. "I'm thinking you might not have understood a few things when we went over the basic ground rules."

I felt like he caught me with my pants down. I was totally stunned into place and maybe distracted by his arms a little. "Come again?" I asked in a soft voice.

"Yes, Sofia needs to be out in the world. She can't be cooped up in the house all the time. But buying lunch at some random taco truck? Promising activities without clearing it with me first? You're here to take care of her when I can't," he reminded me. "But that doesn't mean you have free rein to gallivant all over Beverly Hills with her."

It wasn't often that I felt the twinge of outrage bubbling in my core. I knew my actions came from a good place. I knew Sofia was safe with me. "Hey, look at it this way," I joked. "She wanted me to take her to Disneyland. I figured the museum was a decent compromise."

"There you go with that word again. Are you listening to what I'm saying?" he demanded. How could somebody so handsome look so ugly when he scowled the way he did? "I know I can't vet every activity you decide to do, but I would like to have a say in at least some of it. As for what my daughter eats, I would like a say in that, as well."

I couldn't believe what I was looking at. A man whose company had been valued in the hundreds of millions of dollars was throwing a temper tantrum because he couldn't micromanage every little thing we did during the day.

Reframe it.

It was a habit, almost like a reflex at this point in my life. What was really happening? This wasn't about the park or the museum or a taco truck. It was about control. He didn't appreciate feeling like he didn't have any. I was starting to wonder if the other girls didn't take Sofia on excursions because he didn't want them to.

"There must be a way we can both get what we want," I spoke slowly, clearly, careful not to ruffle his feathers more than they already were. If this were a barnyard, he would be the rooster strutting around, making sure everybody could hear his dissatisfaction. A rooster with killer biceps and muscles carved from rock. "What can I do next time to ensure you aren't upset? Because that's the last thing I want."

His eyelids fluttered, and his mouth opened, then snapped shut like he was expecting a fight and couldn't understand why he didn't get one. "I'm not sure. I haven't thought about it yet."

“We can talk about it now,” I suggested. Because, at the end of the day, what he wanted more than anything was to be heard. That was the same with anyone, no matter how old they were, what they did for a living, or how many people depended on them for a paycheck. “Ideally, would you want me to call to check in with you every time there is a possible change in plans?”

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He rolled his eyes, and I already knew the answer before I asked the question, but I wanted him to see how pointless that would be. “That almost defeats the purpose of having a nanny, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“I see what you mean.” I slid a pair of baking sheets into a cabinet and gently closed the door. “But there must be something I can do to make you more comfortable.”

“What was with the baking sheets, anyway?” he asked.

“Oh, we baked cookies earlier.” I gestured toward a jar on the counter and lifted the lid to reveal the chocolate chip goodness inside. “There was an arts and crafts fair in the park, and I fell in love with it. So did Sofia. She begged me to buy it. It wasn’t that much, so I figured it couldn’t hurt anything.”

He tipped his head to the side, studying the brightly painted jar with its snowflakes and smiling snowmen. “It’s June, and you bought a Christmas cookie jar? It looks ridiculous with everything else.”

Ridiculous was taking it a little too far, but again, I absorbed his negativity with a smile. “It made Sofia happy, and it’s cute. It’s not a Christmas jar, either,” I pointed out. “There’s no Santa Claus on it.”

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered. “Can you please clear with me before you make interior decorating decisions?”

The last time I checked, it was just a cookie jar. I hardly thought it qualified as an interior decorating decision. “Of course. I’ll clear that with you from now on too.”

“Dammit! That’s not... just don’t buy anything at all. All right? She sees something she likes? Guess what? She’ll see something else she likes five minutes later. And as for playing baker in my kitchen,” he continued. “She gets enough sugar as it is.”

“I understand the finer points of childhood nutrition,” I murmured. “And if it makes you feel any better, I used bananas in the cookies to cut back on the sugar. There’s hardly any in it at all. You should try one,” I offered, pulling a cookie from the top of the pile and holding it out.

He looked at it like it was poison. “You’re not getting the point.”

I understood the point clearly. That was what he didn’t understand. Taking a bite of the cookie, I chewed slowly while he watched. “I don’t think this is getting us anywhere,” I mused. “It might be better if we take a break, then come back when you have a better idea of what it is you need from me. I’m only here to do my best for Sofia. I’m sure you know what that is, being her father.”

He waved his hands, scoffing. “Fine. I wanna grab a quick shower before dinner, anyway. I’ll order the pizza. Go see what’s taking Sofia so long.”

I held my tongue rather than reminding him I could’ve been doing that if it hadn’t been for him throwing a tantrum over lunchtime tacos and cookie jars. After his childish performance, hanging out with a four-year-old would be a refreshing change. Some people were determined to be negative no matter how many blessings their lives were full of.

“Sofia, sweetie?” I called out on my way down the upstairs hall. “You ready for dinner?”

I caught her kneeling in front of the play castle that took up one corner of her spacious bedroom. Her dolls were lined up against the front wall, waiting for their hair

to be brushed while she attacked the frizzy curls of the doll in her lap. “Hey, there. How come you’re not washed up?” I asked.

“I got busy. I don’t need to wash. I already did when we got home,” she reminded me.

“Your dad wants you to, and I think it would be a good idea.”

“I. Don’t. Need. To.” She was at a simmer and ready to boil. It had been a long, busy day, and she was feeling cranky, much like her father.

“What can I do to convince you to do this?” I asked, approaching slowly.

“Nothing. Dolly’s hair... I have to do Dolly’s hair.” She wasn’t interested in listening, that much was clear. Lifting her head, she added, “You can’t make me.”

“Where is this coming from?” I asked.

Lifting a shoulder, she went back to her work. “I’m busy.”

Was she playing grown-ups now? Was that the game? Acting like her very busy father? Or was she simply worn out and overstimulated? I got the feeling it was the latter, especially considering the way her voice quivered a little.

“Why don’t we do this?” Sinking to my knees, I gently removed the doll from her hands and put it aside. I then took her hands and waited for her to meet my gaze. “Why don’t you take a little time, think about it, and then let me know what it is you need from me. It can be hard coming up with a way to say what we’re feeling inside. Right?”

“Yeah.” She sniffled.

“I’m here to listen whenever you feel comfortable talking, but I can only listen if you use your big-girl words.” I tucked a curl behind her ear, patting her cheek. “You’ve had a pretty busy day. You’ll probably feel better once we have dinner. Maybe we’ll watch a movie before bedtime tonight. One of the ones Mr. Lex brought over?”

Her eyes lit up, and she nodded. “Yeah! Can we watch it in my room?”

“Sure.” Because something told me Travis might not be the type who wanted to cuddle together while watching a movie. It didn’t seem like his thing. Otherwise, I might’ve suggested he join us. Sofia would’ve loved it, though, and it would’ve been nice to see him take the stick out of his tight butt and loosen up a little.

His idea of loosening up was probably ordering pizza. Sure, it made her happy, but it was only a pat on the head. Or, like a Band-Aid, it wouldn’t really solve anything.

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What was I thinking? None of this was any of my business. Sofia was overall a happy, healthy kid. I hadn't seen anything that would make me think otherwise.

"Let's wash up real quick," I suggested. "So we can be ready for dinner."

She scrambled, jumping up and heading straight for her bathroom. I sat back on my heels with a weary sigh. I loved the kid. She was terrific, but she was just about as exhausting as her father.

It was like the man heard me thinking about him. I turned, gasping in surprise, when he cleared his throat rather loudly in the doorway. He hadn't showered yet unless he changed right back into his work clothes afterward. "Sorry to startle you," he said. "But I didn't want to interrupt that beautiful moment."

Sarcastic prick. "It's all right," I told him. His brows drew together when I smiled, then stood. "She got a little distracted, but we're back on track."

"That was a nice trick you pulled."

"I'm sorry?" I asked. The man spoke in riddles.

"Listen." All at once, he narrowed his eyes, and the effect sent a chill down my spine. "I don't appreciate being talked to like I'm a toddler."

"I don't understand?—"

"Why don't you take some time and let me know how you're feeling?" He rolled his

eyes and scoffed. His imitation of me was laughable, but this wasn't the time. "Is that your way of placating both of us?"

Whoops. So I used a little bit of child psychology on him. It wasn't like I wanted to make a fool out of him or anything. "Mr. Knight, please?—"

He was determined not to let me get an entire sentence out. "I talk to you like you're an adult. You talk to me like I'm an adult. Got it? Or do I need to take time to express myself more clearly?"

This wasn't a matter of him being grumpy or feeling like he didn't have control. He was bound and determined to be mean.

I wasn't a child.

I knew how the world worked. But that didn't keep my heart from aching just a little when he turned away without another word and walked down the hall.

5

TRAVIS

After concluding the conference call with my Board of Directors, I said, "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I'm looking forward to meeting face-to-face next month."

Next month? More like a couple of weeks. Next month made it sound like there was time to prepare for this. Not that I needed the time. This was something I'd been working on for months, almost a year. The expansion was necessary if I wanted the company to grow, which was my ultimate goal. Knight Shipping Services would be the biggest shipping company in the world.

Bigger than anything Dad was ever able to build.

I closed my eyes, leaning back in my chair, willing myself to be careful. I didn't want to think about it that way. Though not so deep down inside, that was exactly what I wanted more than anything—to bury him and his piddling company. To be bigger than anything my old man ever dreamed of.

One of the things about running my own personal empire was the hours it chewed up. By the time the call ended, it was well past nine o'clock. That was the only time my assistant could make work. I looked around my home office, taking in the mementos of my journey so far. Photos of my first ships, the trips I had taken to new ports where my shipments would be delivered. I had seen the world and learned a hell of a lot about it in those early days, but nowhere near as much as I had learned about the process of doing business in it. Those were lessons I'd started earlier, during my days in China. Working some shitty grunt job at a desk across from Spencer's, the two rich boys earning their stripes.

And it had backfired spectacularly in my father's face.

I reflected on that as I left the room, moving slowly through the quiet house. Sofia must have gone to bed while I was on that call. I would have to check on her once I went upstairs to bed. At the moment, I was too keyed up to think about it. Instead, I went to the kitchen, pulling a bottle of chardonnay from the wine refrigerator. The bulk of my collection sat in a climate-controlled room at the far end of the house, but I liked to keep a few bottles handy for everyday use.

I was halfway through uncorking when a sound at the back door made me spin on my heel with the corkscrew held up like a weapon. What the hell did I expect to do with it? The door opened, and in came Penny, who stopped short with her eyes wide when she spotted me holding the corkscrew aloft.

“I was just throwing a bag in the trash can outside,” she explained, almost guilty.

At the moment, the only thing she was guilty of was uncoiling a curious sense of hunger in my gut. It was the most unexpected thing. Sure, I had checked her out before now, admiring her firm body in the rare moments when her old lady clothes revealed a little of what was underneath.

But right now? There was no question. She wore a pair of thin, soft shorts and a matching tank top with spaghetti straps that barely covered her waist. A pair of perky tits were on display now, tipped with pert nipples. The hair she usually pulled back or wore in pigtails was now loose, swinging around her face when she turned around to make sure she had locked the door behind her.

All right, so her clothes were printed with tiny hearts, but I could overlook that in light of what mattered more—long, slim legs and a tiny waist that flared into full hips.

I was no better than a lecherous old man drooling over the sweet young thing who crossed his path. She was only eight years younger, but it felt like a lifetime in experience. Somehow, reminding myself of that did nothing to cool my sudden interest. “Cecilia could’ve gotten that in the morning,” I reminded her, referring to the housekeeper who came in four days a week.

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“I know, but I figured why leave it lying around when I can take it out myself? Now, it’s one less thing for her to do.” She stood with one hand gripping the other elbow, looking awkward, unsure of herself. “Did everything go well with your call?”

“Fine. Full steam ahead. I hope you’re ready to visit Manhattan in a couple of weeks.” It only made sense to take Sofia with me. I hated the idea of being away without her for five days, and with Spencer’s cousin, Colton Black, reaching out to invite us to a family dinner while we were in town, it would be a nice excuse to carve out time outside of boardrooms and offices.

“I’m still a little overwhelmed,” she admitted, standing on the other side of the room.

No shit. Rather than say it out loud, I pulled a second wine glass from the cabinet. “Have a drink with me. You’ve officially worked for me one month, and you’re still here.”

She eyed the bottle and the glass I provided. “Are you sure it’s appropriate?”

“A glass of wine, not a cask. I promise I won’t tell anyone you had a drink after Sofia was in bed.” It wasn’t like I poured the entire glass, either, before sliding it across the counter. “Go ahead. Drink with me to the expansion of Knight Shipping. By the time this expansion is complete, we’ll have ships sailing the entire globe. No one will touch us.”

Especially not my father. I left that to myself, raising my glass when she picked up hers. They clinked together softly before she took a sip of the crisp wine. “That’s nice,” she announced, going back for more.

“It should be. It cost five hundred dollars.”

“For a bottle?” Her mouth fell open but quickly snapped shut when she caught herself. “Sorry. This is an entirely different world for me, but I guess you already know that.”

“I got the idea,” I settled for replying.

“I mean, we can’t all have ships sailing the entire globe,” she continued with a twinkle in her eye. That was one thing I could appreciate about her. She had a sense of humor aided by her intelligence.

Would I have been able to stand here and have a glass of wine with any of the other girls who came parading through these doors, determined to take care of my daughter? It was unthinkable. To tell the truth, I had normally avoided them as much as possible.

So why was I standing here now, watching her sip from her glass, studying every move she made?

“Can I ask you something? And if I do, will you be honest?” There was a challenge in her question.

Instead of turning me off, it intrigued me. “That depends,” I replied, making her snicker. She had to be curious. The fact that she hadn’t yet voiced any questions spoke to her discretion and maturity—something sadly lacking in the other girls I’d hired who were roughly her age. Chronically online, sleuthing, thinking they could crack the code when one of my assistant’s daily tasks involved keeping my Wikipedia page free of personal information and checking all Google alerts for mentions of my name. I had a child’s privacy to consider, not to mention my own.

“I’m not asking for your ATM pin,” she said, rolling her eyes. This was a rare glimpse of the woman behind the ever-present sunny attitude. I was interested in finding out more, glad our paths had crossed the way they did tonight.

“Go ahead,” I allowed, pouring myself more wine. Something told me I would need it.

“Why do you have to be the biggest and best? I know it sounds dumb to you,” she clarified with a sigh when I chuckled. “But I mean, look around. You already have so much. Five-hundred-dollar bottles of wine, a housekeeper, a guy who takes care of the grounds and the pool. A live-in nanny. A private jet, which we’re going to take to Manhattan in a couple of weeks. What happens when you’re the biggest, and there’s no one left to beat?”

It was the last question that gave me pause. An uncomfortable uncertainty wrapped itself around me like a cloak. Or a shroud.

“I said too much,” she decided, setting down the glass and backing away from the counter with her hands raised. “Sorry. Forget I asked.”

“Stop right where you are.” The sharpness of my tone froze her in place and even surprised me, but I went on, “I’ll tell you what you want to know if you don’t run away like a scared rabbit.”

She arched an eyebrow but didn’t say a word as she returned, this time taking a seat at the counter, wearing an inquisitive expression.

Fuck, she couldn’t look at me that way. It wasn’t fair. That frank, honest gaze, the blue eyes that reminded me of the Pacific at sunrise. It made me want to tell her everything, to let her see me, and that was unacceptable. No matter how good it felt at that moment.

“You want honesty? I’ll give you honesty.” Setting the glass down, I looked her straight in the eye. She didn’t blink, either to prove a point or because she was truly enraptured. “When I was twenty-one, fresh out of college, my father decided it was time for me to get serious about my future. I needed to learn the ropes of the business. An internship, if you will. He sent me to work in China,” I continued with a wry smirk. “Out of sight, out of mind. That was where I met my best friend, Spencer Collins. It was his father’s company I was working for. That should have been the first red flag.”

To her credit, she listened intently, almost frowning as she absorbed my words. “Why not your dad’s company?” she asked.

“Exactly. Why not his company?” I agreed, chuckling. “I found out soon enough. Turns out, Hayworth Knight Partners did a lot of work with Spencer’s father. They had been friends for years, since prep school. They had a long shared history of deals in the beginning. They had considered merging, practically creating a monopoly on the industry. They had the resources, they had the balls.”

Staring down into the glass, I experienced the same twinge of confusion I’d felt the day I found the memos. “Back in their time...” I murmured, “... everything was done on paper. Duplicate, triplicate. A lot of the more important papers and contracts were digitized, but the rest was left in boxes, stashed in storage. One of the shit jobs my supervisor gave me was to go through those boxes and make sure nothing had been overlooked that we would need to scan or enter into the database.”

“You found something, didn’t you?” When I lifted an eyebrow, she shrugged. “I do a lot of reading. Mysteries, that kind of thing. This is textbook.”

Something about her response—complete with that shrug—made me chuckle. “You’ve learned a lot from those books. Yeah, that’s exactly what happened. I discovered a lot of things. Nothing I can get into detail over,” I was quick to add. “I’m

sure the statute of limitations has run out on a lot of it. But the things in those memos... what they alluded to. Cutting corners, employees who raised concerns over safety. Regulations they flat-out ignored. I mean, they were risking people's lives, and for what? More profit? I mean, I enjoy making money as much as anyone, but I prefer mine not to have blood on it."

"So you decided to break off on your own."

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“That’s it.He sent me to China to learn what I needed to know to take over for him, but he only set the stage for his biggest competitor to emerge.Once I’ve expanded our East Coast operations, I will have officially surpassed him.”

“That’s what it’s all about for you?I mean, I would probably feel the same way,” she allowed in a soft voice.Feeling me out, making sure she didn’t go too far.“I would want to bury him just to say I did it.”

Incredible.For the first time, we were speaking the same language.She got it.“That’s exactly it.”But not all of it.Some things I could never talk about.Some betrayals couldn’t be voiced.

“Then good for you,” she decided with a firm nod.“I hope you leave him in the dust.”

“Thank you.”There was something disarming about her right now.It had to be the wine going to her head.Maybe it had gone to mine.Maybe that was the problem, even if it didn’t feel very much like a problem from where I was standing.Not when the overhead lamp lit her the way it did when it made her rich brown hair gleam, shimmering with every move she made.When she flipped it over her shoulder, the fragrance of roses slammed into me and made my dick swell.

“So now you know why I’m determined to get this deal through.Is there anything else you want to know?”I asked, fighting to ignore what she was doing to my dick simply by existing.

“It was wrong of me to ask the way I did.Really, it’s just curiosity,” she explained as her cheek flushed.“I didn’t have any business wanting details.”

“You’re curious. You hear me walking around here on the phone all the time. I don’t blame you for wanting to know what’s going on.” It was like picking my way through a minefield, fighting to find the right words. Maybe it was how pretty she looked with her hair down, blushing when our eyes met from across the counter.

Come to think of it. It had been much too long since the last time I stuck my dick in something warm and wet. No wonder she looked good enough to eat in those ridiculous pajamas, which should’ve made her look innocent but somehow were sexier than any negligée or see-through nightgown.

“Can I ask you something now?” I ventured. She gulped but nodded. “How the hell are you so goddamn chipper all the time?”

She snorted, the sound bursting out of her before she clamped a hand to her mouth. “It’s a good thing I didn’t just take a sip from my glass.” She laughed, then managed to get ahold of herself.

“Sorry about that. I want to know. I should have you teach classes. Show my employees how to keep a stiff upper lip when things go sideways, which they do all the time.” She arched an eyebrow, and I explained, “Unexpected storms, mechanical problems on this or that ship, partners complaining something is running behind schedule. You name it, it can go wrong.”

She fought a grin and failed. “Are you saying you need a nanny for your staff too?”

“Something like that.” Instead of being irked by her playful response, I found myself grinning with her. The wine was a good idea. I needed to unwind, and it obviously wasn’t happening on its own.

It was her turn to stare into her glass, frowning, avoiding my gaze. “Something happened to me when I was younger. Something pretty big.”

My heart sank when I realized what she was about to tell me. I wasn't supposed to know. She had no idea I had already dug into her past, so I would have no reason to know as far as she was concerned.

Strange, but my immediate impulse was to stop her, to tell her it was all right, I didn't need to hear it. Not if it meant making her dredge up something painful. At the same time, part of me yearned to know more about her. Who she was, what made her tick. Could I bottle some of the relentless positivity she carried with her like it was one more item in her backpack?

"My family was really close. Like to the point where I had friends who would roll their eyes when I would tell them I couldn't hang out because I would be hanging out with my family. They couldn't understand why because their families weren't like mine. You'll think it's corny," she predicted, laughing gently.

"Who says? What was that like? My family was certainly nothing like what you're describing."

I could almost feel her relief. "Well, don't get me wrong. It wasn't always fun. There were fights, like in any family. We would go on camping trips together all the time. My parents loved the outdoors, and most of us did too. I'm more of an indoor girl," she confessed, looking almost guilty.

"I've never liked camping," I agreed. "Camping is like swapping a silk bed for a rough patch of ground. Why trade luxury for discomfort?"

"Was that a joke, Mr. Knight?" I scowled just as a smile lifted into the apples of her cheeks. When I didn't bother responding, she continued, "But anyway, we were always spending time together. And I was the oldest, so I was sort of like a second mom in some ways. I liked it," she explained. "It wasn't like they forced me. I felt a sense of responsibility toward the kids."

Her tongue darted over her lips, and I waited as she took a breath. “On one of those trips, my little brother... he wanted to fish. He kept begging Dad. The river was rushing, and Dad was a little hesitant, but Josh was so sure he’d be all right.” She lowered her gaze again and her voice with it. “But he wasn’t all right. We woke up one morning, and he wasn’t in the camper. None of us heard him leave. It’s like he wanted to surprise us.”

A tender, painful smile tipped the corners of her mouth. “I can imagine it. He was ten years old, totally convinced he was a grown-up. And maybe if the river hadn’t been so high and so swift, he would’ve been all right. But it was high,” she concluded with a catch in her voice. “And it was swift. And it swept him away. He must’ve lost his footing and...” Pressing her lips in a tight line, she lowered her head, then shook it.

“That’s enough,” I said. “You don’t have to tell me any more. I didn’t mean to ask a question that would...” Fuck, I was no good at apologizing. I absolutely sucked at it, in fact. I hadn’t had very much practice.

She shook her head hard, running a hand under her eyes. “No, it’s okay. If anything, it hurts more when I try to push it all down inside. It took me a long time to figure that out.”

“That must’ve been terrible for your family, as close as you are.”

“It was. It was brutal. But you know, something came out of it. You asked why I’m... how did you describe me?” she asked with a playful gleam in her eyes. How could she look playful after telling me that story? “Right. How I’m so goddamn chipper all the time...”

I winced. “That sounds shitty now.”

“It already sounded a little shitty.” She held her thumb and forefinger, maybe half an

inch apart, giggling.

“Point taken.”

“There’s your answer, anyway. My family woke up that morning thinking it was any other day. We were going to go on a hike, then build a campfire and roast hotdogs. Instead, we had to call in park rangers to help search for Josh’s body. And Josh only went out thinking he was going to catch some fish to bring back and surprise us all. Anything can happen at any time,” she concluded. “It can all end like that.” She snapped her fingers, the sound reverberating throughout the room. “What is the point of wasting a single day being miserable? Yeah, bad things happen, people are jerks, whatever. But is that worth sacrificing even a minute of my life over? Obsessing over who said what or who did this or that? Once you get in the habit of looking for the bright side, the bright sides are easier to find.” Sitting back, she shrugged. “At least, that’s been my experience. Your mileage may vary.”

There was nothing I could do at first but thank God I had never thrown her cheerfulness in her face out of anger. Why not kick a puppy while I was at it? “Thank you for trusting me with that,” I offered for lack of anything else to say once she fell silent.

“You asked for the truth.” She lifted her creamy shoulders far enough that the thin straps of her tank top shifted, sliding down ever so slightly. My fingers twitched with the impulse to reach out and touch her skin.

It was almost too much to ignore.

She fixed them, and I was glad she couldn’t see the hunger she had awoken in me. I would have to find a diversion in New York. The guys out there were all paired off,

committed to their women, but they would remember the places they used to visit to find some quick, willing pussy. I was in desperate need.

Otherwise, I could end up fucking us both over by making the wrong move.

Remember Sofia. The image of my daughter's face swam in my mind and firmed up my resolve. She was more important than any urge. She loved Penny, that much I knew. And for once, reflecting on that didn't make me grind my molars.

All things considered, I couldn't have chosen anyone better for her than the girl standing in front of me. Under all that sunshine resided a core of pure steel. I couldn't imagine the mental strength it took to see the world for what it was and still make the conscious choice to see the bright side of things. "How about we set a new ground rule before flying across the country?" I suggested.

There was a hint of wariness in her gaze, but she nodded, waiting.

"I won't give you shit about your positive attitude anymore if you promise to stop using your child-rearing tricks on me. That means no talking to me like I'm Sofia's age."

There was something playful in her eyes, in the way her lips twitched before she turned to rinse her glass in the sink. She kept me waiting, too, not saying a word until she was halfway out of the kitchen. "That depends," she countered in a light voice. "Will you stop acting like someone Sofia's age?"

I couldn't be mad, not when her joke was paired with the sight of her delicious ass swaying under those thin shorts. My breath caught, and every scrap of my awareness focused on her curves as she walked away.

Getting laid in New York wouldn't just be a fun diversion. At this rate, it looked more

like an absolute necessity. Otherwise, I might end up making an even bigger mistake than I did when I got married five years ago.

6

PENNY

“And there will be so many things for us to see. We’ll go up to the top of the Empire State Building. You can see the whole city from up there. Maybe your dad will say it’s okay to see a show on Broadway.” There were a few shows she might be interested in that would hold her attention based on her favorite animated movies. “I heard there’s a huge toy store there too. And we could go to Central Park and ride the carousel.”

I was almost breathless by the time I finished telling the little girl whose eyes lit up at me about all of the options for our trip. We would leave on Travis’ private jet around dawn, meaning I had a little last-minute packing to finish once I got Sofia tucked in.

Of course, what kid would fall asleep easily the night before such a big, exciting trip? Her eyes shone with wonder. “Do you think Daddy will come with us when we go to all those places?”

I wanted to say yes. She was so hopeful, and she loved him so much. Yet she couldn’t understand how busy he would be. “Well, we have to ask him. He can’t be in meetings all the time. But...” I trailed off, feeling a little guilty.

“But he’s busy with work.” The little note of defeat in her voice was murder. I was almost overcome with the desire to tell her anything she wanted to hear, so long as she would be happy. It was starting to look like Travis wasn’t the only one wrapped around her little finger. I would’ve given the kid anything she asked for.

But I couldn’t speak for him, no matter how much I wanted to reassure her. “I have an

idea,” I whispered, crooking my finger so she would lift her head from the pillow while I lowered my lips to her ear. “How about I talk to him tonight? I’ll find out what his schedule looks like. See if he has a little time free for fun. What do you think?”

“That’s a good idea!” She looked much happier and more hopeful when she settled back in with her beautiful curls spread out across the pillow. I leaned down to kiss her cheek, then gave her a hug. “Now, I need you to try to relax and fall asleep.”

“I’m too excited.” She groaned. “How am I supposed to sleep when I’m so excited about tomorrow?”

“I have a thought.” I turned off her bedside lamp, leaving only her night light glowing softly. “Why don’t you close your eyes and think to yourself about all the wonderful, fun things we’re going to do while we’re there? Picture it in your head. Going shopping, riding on the carousel. Really imagine it like it’s a movie. Do you think you can do that for me?”

“I guess so. I’ll try.” She closed her eyes and blew out a breath that made me bite my lip to keep from laughing. “But what should I imagine?”

“Imagine you’re in a big, beautiful park,” I suggested in a soft voice, stroking her hair. “And it’s such a pretty day. And there are kids everywhere with their moms and dads. You can smell popcorn and hotdogs and all kinds of delicious foods. And you’re riding on a carousel, holding onto the bar in front of you and going up and down, up and down...” She smiled a little, sighing. “There’s music playing,” I continued, whispering a little more softly. “And you feel the breeze in your hair and on your skin.”

“Are you there?” she whispered.

“Are you kidding? I’m right next to you. My horse is blue with a white mane. What

about yours?”

“Pink,” she decided right away. “With a purple mane.”

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“That sounds beautiful. We’re riding together and laughing, and it’s just the most fun, perfect day ever. And out there, watching us is your dad. He’s waving at us and holding the bag we brought back from the toy store with all your new things in it. And all you have to do when we leave is to go back to the hotel and play with all your toys before you go to sleep in a big, comfortable bed. Then we can do it all again tomorrow.”

By the time I finished, she was halfway to dreamland, breathing slow and steady as she drifted deeper into what I had created for her. I leaned down to kiss her forehead, then whispered, “Goodnight, princess.”

Her bags were packed and waiting at the foot of the bed. I was quiet as I went through her closet, putting together an outfit for the flight and leaving it at the foot of her bed. Then, after tiptoeing out of the room, I closed the door gently and released a deep breath.

Bedtime accomplished.

Now, to get the rest of my things pulled together. What had me a little nervous was Travis’ announcement at dinner tonight.

“My friend, Spencer, has family out there, like I told you,” he’d explained. “They want to take us out for a nice dinner tomorrow night. There’s a whole group of them and their wives and kids. A couple of them are roughly Sofia’s age.”

“Are you sure you want me to come along for that?” I’d asked with my heart in my throat. It was a little overwhelming, not to mention unexpected. I figured I would be

hanging back with Sofia most of the time while he did his business and connected with his friends.

“Sure.” He’d shrugged it off like it didn’t mean anything. “You’ll probably be the only nanny there, but I’m the only single parent. You know what I mean? I know Sofia will behave, but I can’t watch her every second.”

He didn’t seem to get it, so I didn’t bother making an issue out of it. I would be the only one there as an employee besides the people serving the food and clearing the plates. But would I ever get the chance to eat at a fancy New York restaurant otherwise? Probably not. If he thought it would be all right, it would.

That didn’t mean I had anything to wear. I wanted to look nice. One of the few dressy dresses in my closet might work. I hated wearing black, but everybody always said a woman had to have a little black dress. It was simple, nothing flashy. Understated. It would have to be enough. I had a nice pair of earrings Mom and Dad bought me for graduation, and I might be able to duck out with Sofia to grab myself a decent pair of shoes. So long as nobody expected me to walk in heels, it would be fine. It wasn’t like I had never worn them, but I didn’t get many opportunities as a nanny.

Was this my life? I had to laugh at myself a little. Here I was, Penny Anderson, flying on a private jet to Manhattan in the morning. My parents could hardly believe it when I told them over the phone. Once they got used to the idea, they made me promise to send a zillion pictures. “Everybody looks like a tourist when they’re in New York City,” Mom had informed me when I protested. “Do you think anybody really cares?”

She probably had a point. It wasn’t like I’d have this opportunity again, so I might as well make the most of it.

There was movement coming from further down the hall, reminding me of what I promised Sofia I would ask her father. I went to my door, listening for any sound

telling me he was on the phone or similarly busy. When all I heard was the opening and closing of drawers, I figured he must be packing. My bare feet were soundless on the hall floor as I approached, knocking gently against the door frame, staying a respectful distance from the threshold.

It was still sort of weird, feeling my way through what was expected, what was appropriate. It wasn't difficult to rub him the wrong way. The last thing we needed was any weirdness hanging in the air before taking a five-day trip across the country.

"Come in," he muttered, sounding distracted. I had never been in his room, and as I crept in, my heart was in my throat. What was I so nervous about? He was still my employer, for one thing, but we did live together, and I would need to get used to sharing the house at some point. This was the end of my sixth week, and there were still more than four months to go.

"Sorry to disturb you," I murmured, entering the stark but masculine space. "Do you have a second?"

Rounding the door frame, I almost swallowed my tongue when I found him standing in front of an open suitcase, wearing nothing but a pair of loose shorts like the kind guys wore when they worked out or played basketball or whatever. They hung halfway to his knees, but it wasn't their length that made my mouth go dry and my pulse triple in speed.

It was his lack of a shirt. Either he had just finished a workout, or this was how he slept, though it didn't matter either way. What mattered was the way my brain went blank all at once. I could hardly remember my own name, much less why I came in in the first place.

I must have been silent for too long because he turned my way, arching an eyebrow. "What is it?" he prompted, folding a pair of jeans. So maybe he was planning

on spending a little downtime while we were away. The sight of them and the idea of that shook me out of my brain fog.

“I was only wondering because Sofia brought it up. Is there any chance you might have a little time to do some sightseeing with us? She asked about it, and I didn’t know exactly what to say. I thought I should clear it with you before I get her hopes up.”

That was when he did maybe the worst possible thing he could’ve done. I could hardly believe my eyes, but it was happening in front of me, and for some reason, it was like he moved in slow motion. He turned to face me. The stupidest, simplest thing in the world, and maybe it wouldn’t have set off a flurry of butterfly wings in my stomach if he wasn’t so ridiculously, insanely chiseled. Like, somebody took an actual chisel to a block of marble and carved the man’s torso, chest, shoulders, and arms.

I didn’t know what to do as heat flooded my cheeks. I didn’t know where to look. I pried my gaze from his abs and looked into his eyes, though that was never a good idea, either. I always went kind of stupid whenever I looked into them.

I looked away again, but this time I landed on the bulge in his shorts. Was he even wearing underwear? Why couldn’t I breathe all of a sudden?

He is your boss. Grow up. Sure, I could tell myself that all I wanted, but my racing heart and my out-of-control hormones were another story.

Did he have any idea? Oh, God, I would die if he did. How could I face him if he had the slightest clue what he was doing to me? I couldn’t remember the last time I felt this flustered and breathless, and God help me, horny for somebody else. I honestly didn’t think this sort of thing actually happened. That someone could be so incredibly hot, they could make me forget all sorts of things, like how much this job meant to me and how I really, really didn’t want to mess it up.

“I can’t make any promises,” he decided. “I would like to, of course.”

“Of course,” I agreed.

My heart dropped when he took a step closer, then another. Would it make me look bad if I backed away? Would it be so bad if I threw myself at him? He was fresh out of the shower, all soapy and clean. Oh, dear God. The smell of it was enough to make my toes curl. There was something primal about what he was doing to me. Something I didn’t know how to control because I had never been in this place before.

“I’m going to need you to run interference when it comes to things like that,” he told me. “When I can’t be around, I need you to speak up for me, let her know it’s not because I don’t want to be there. I’m doing what I feel I need to do for her future.”

Maybe it was too late in the day for us to have this conversation. Maybe I was too tired after chasing an almost manically energetic four-year-old around the house all day while trying to get her packed. “I thought you were doing it to beat your father,” I pointed out.

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That was a mistake. A big one. His eyebrows almost shot up off his head he lifted them so quickly. “Excuse me? Say that again,” he invited with a growl.

“No, I don’t think I will.” Still, he stared at me like I was some foreign species he had never seen, so I lifted my chin in spite of my icy, quaking insides. “All I’m saying is, at least be honest with yourself about why you’re doing this. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be the best.”

“Wait a second.” I wished he wouldn’t fold his arms. It only made his chest look better, not to mention making his biceps bulge. Any more of this, and I would end up running to my room and diving under a cold shower. “We don’t know each other nearly well enough for you to take what I told you in confidence and throw it in my face. I don’t let my friends get away with that, and we are not exactly friends.”

Right now, I could hardly understand why he had friends to begin with. “I know we aren’t friends. My friends don’t normally pay me to stay around.”

His eyes widened, and for a second, he looked impressed, like he was expecting me to bow and scrape and didn’t figure on me talking back. “Listen to you. How hard do you work to keep that smartass attitude in check?”

“At the moment,” I murmured with a sweet smile. “I’m working overtime.”

Come to think of it, maybe it was for the best that he folded his arms because it went well with the tone in his voice. They worked together to turn my horniness into something not as hormonal but just as dangerous. Think of Sofia. This was supposed to be about her, not about how much I wished I could climb him like a tree. “And it’s

what would make her happy,” I concluded. “I was only asking if you would have the time. I didn’t want to make any promises for you that you couldn’t live up to.”

“Am I supposed to thank you for doing what any rational adult would do in a situation like this?” he countered, snickering. “Thank you so much for not making promises on my behalf. That grad degree is really coming in handy.”

Do not engage. Do not. He only wants to get a reaction out of you. I took a deep breath in through my nose, then blew it out through pursed lips. I was looking at a child wearing a man suit. Nothing more. “It is,” I told him with a sunny smile. “It’s coming in handy right now, in fact.”

“Oh, do not.” He held up a hand dangerously close to my face, close enough that I wanted to swat it away. “You are not starting with that again when you know I hate it.”

Standing straight and tall, I retorted, “I’m only doing whatever it takes to keep things from blowing up. For Sofia’s sake.”

“No, I think you’re a little bit of a bullshit artist.”

A tiny gasp stirred in my throat. “That’s very rude.”

“I very much don’t care. There’s nothing morally superior in knowing how to talk down to someone, Penny.”

“There’s nothing morally superior in bullying someone into silence,” I countered. “I’m sorry if you don’t like being reminded that your daughter needs you in her life more than someone who shows his face every once in a while. I think it bothers you most, as you know I’m right.”

“You’re taking this too far.” He stepped up to me again, and this time it didn’t occur to me to back away. My blood was racing, and I heard my heart pound in my ears. It was exhilarating, like riding the biggest, scariest roller coaster ever.

It was also all wrong. Compared to him, I was some dumb kid who didn’t know anything about the world. He was wealthy, connected. He had a private jet, for God’s sake. He didn’t even take me seriously as a human being.

And yet...

“I only care about Sofia,” I whispered. That much was true. “I see the way her eyes glow when she talks about you. You’re her hero. The greatest person in her world. And all she wants is for you to spend a little bit of time with her in a big city full of a million things to do. One day...” I added, since he hadn’t cut me off, “... you’re going to wish you had time with her, but by then, she might think she’s too cool to be with her dad. She would be so happy with only a few hours.”

“You have known her for six whole weeks,” he reminded me, grunting, his eyes searching my face. “I know what she needs. I am her father. And you’re only the...”

I never did find out what he wanted to call me, since instead of hurling an insult, he sank his hands into my hair and pulled me in close. There was a split second where I knew this was a before-and-after kind of situation. There was everything that happened prior to right now, this very moment, and everything to come after it. This would be the turning point. The place where everything changed.

I could stop it. I could. I needed to, especially when he looked at me the way he did, so intensely, almost like he hated me and wanted me all at once. My body was on fire. I could barely breathe. I wanted to run, but I wanted more to stay and see what happened next. I needed to.

It was amazing how much could go through a person's head in a split second. All of that and so much more flashed across my awareness in the time it took him to lower his head and press the most searing, tantalizing kiss against my lips. It happened all at once, like an explosion, something with the power to blow my world apart.

The deep growl that stirred in his throat made my nerves dance, but it was a touch of his tongue against mine that made me arch my back instinctively, pressing myself against him. There was so much of him, and he was hardly wearing any clothes. I couldn't help the way my hands slid up his back, testing his muscles and the warmth of his smooth skin as I clung to his shoulders or else risked dropping to the floor when my knees went weak.

One of his arms snaked around my waist and pulled me in close enough that I could feel the very big, very obvious hardness jutting from his shorts. When was the last time this happened? It had been way too long, which was probably why I was wet by the time his hand slid down to caress my ass. Was that me whimpering into his mouth as he stroked my tongue with his? Me sinking my nails into his shoulders before he pushed me against the door and held me in place with his brick wall of a chest?

"Fuck, Penny," he growled out, going in for another kiss, another, kissing me until I was dizzy and giddy and ready to sacrifice just about everything I thought I knew about myself in favor of pure, hot desire.

He kissed a path of fire down my throat, whispering my name like the filthiest prayer. Touch me. Take me. I didn't have the nerve to say it out loud, but that was what went through my mind repeatedly like a desperate plea. I'd spent the past six weeks living with this man, loving his daughter, and telling myself not to stare too long whenever we were in the same room.

And there was a reason for that.

So much for getting caught up in the moment.

“Wait.Wait... wait.”It was torture, prying his hand away from my boob, but I had to do it.For Sofia.“We shouldn’t do this.I should go.”

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He went still before leaning past me, touching his forehead to the door while I was still pinned in place. His chest and shoulders heaved, and that steel rod in his shorts still prodded me. I was just as breathless, aching and wetter than I'd been in way too long. That didn't change anything.

What was right was right.

And this wasn't it.

Even if it felt that way.

"Of course." He pushed away, backing up, giving me plenty of room to escape. "Please, don't hold that against me. I shouldn't have done it."

"You don't have to apologize... I mean, it was..." Incredible. Something I would fantasize about probably for the rest of my life. "It was just something that happened. We can move past it. I'm going to go now." Because really, what else was there to say that wouldn't make things worse? He didn't say a word before I fled down the hall and into my room, where I closed the door and leaned against it, letting out a shaky breath.

Now, what was I supposed to do? We were about to fly to Manhattan together. I had another four-and-a-half months at this job. It would be impossible enough to say goodbye to Sofia when it was over without this stupid, awkward, incredibly hot complication.

TRAVIS

“Ladies! Let’s go! The car is waiting downstairs.” I patted my pockets, checking for my phone and glancing at my watch. “Hurry up!”

They had been together all day, with nothing better to do than be ready for dinner tonight. As for me, I’d been on the go since we landed the jet this morning, taking one of the two waiting cars straight to a meet-up with my new contacts at the port authority. Since then, I’d been in back-to-back meetings, finally arriving at The Plaza with barely enough time to shower and get dressed for dinner with Colton and the others.

She wasn’t stalling, was she? Last night was inevitable, like something I was compelled to do, but the timing couldn’t have been worse. I needed this kind of distraction like I needed a hole in the head, not to mention the tailspin life would dissolve into if I lost another nanny with no warning.

So far, she had given me nothing to worry about. Not a single hint of what happened last night was visible in the way she acted throughout the flight. In fact, she and Sofia both ended up sleeping through a lot of it. Sofia, I could understand. She had gotten out of bed earlier than usual and might not have slept very well because of all the excitement.

Penny, I had to wonder about. Was she up as long as I was, wondering what it meant, beating herself up for letting it happen? Not that she had any reason to. I was the stupid shit who couldn’t control himself. She was my employee, for fuck’s sake. What was she supposed to do, push me away? Slap me across the face?

“Coming, coming!” Penny’s bright, sunny voice sounded the same as ever. For once, I was glad to hear it.

She rounded the corner into the front hall of our suite, running her hands over her hair like she was making sure every rich, brown strand was in place. “Sorry. Shopping took longer than I expected, but we both wanted something nice to wear tonight. We wanted you to be proud of us.”

I would have told her there was no reason to go out of her way, but that would mean possessing the ability to speak. It wasn’t easy for my brain to come up with words when most of the blood in my head was traveling down to my dick. Was I supposed to let her out of the suite looking the way she did?

Something in my face must have alarmed her because she stopped dead. “What? Is this all right? Do I look okay?”

“You look...” Stunning. Gorgeous. Like walking sin in a knee-length red dress that tied around the neck and, from the looks of it, had to be worn without a bra.

“Red really isn’t my color, normally,” she fretted, looking down at herself while I told myself not to stare and definitely not to touch. “But I really liked the dress, and the only choices were red or black. I hate wearing black.”

“It works for you.” What a stupid fucking thing to say, but when the alternative was to describe how clearly I could see myself throwing her on the floor and tearing that dress off with my teeth, it seemed like the safer choice. “Is she ready?” I asked instead, looking over her shoulder for my daughter.

“Oh yes, hang on a second. I almost forgot.” Penny flashed a grin, clearing her throat, standing straight and tall. “Allow me to introduce the one, the only, Sofia Emelia Knight.”

From around the corner appeared a vision in pink. It was a little much for a simple dinner—more like a princess costume with a puffed skirt and shoulders. Her hair was

up in a cluster of curls on top of her head, which bobbed with every careful step she took in a shiny pair of Mary Janes.

“She fell in love with it.I couldn’t help myself,” Penny whispered as Sofia came to a stop in front of me and performed a wobbly curtsy.

It took effort to straighten out my expression.“You are lovely,” I told her, taking her hand and performing a deep bow.

“Thank you, sir.”Then she broke out giggling.“Penny taught me to curtsy!We practiced and everything!”

“You did a very good job.It’s obvious you girls were busy today.”

“I hope it’s all right that I took her shopping,” Penny offered as she checked herself out in the mirror near the door.A gold bag complimented her sandals and the hoop earrings she wore.Her brown locks had been carefully blown out and shaped into waves that brushed her back.This was the polar opposite of the girl I first met in my office.This was a woman I could see tying to my bed, keeping her for myself.Something uncoiled deep in my gut, like a beast coming to life.

“That’s why I gave you the card this morning, so you could use it,” I reminded her, taking Sofia by the hand and ignoring my sudden hunger.“And now I have the pleasure of going to dinner with two beautiful ladies.I’m a lucky guy.”

Sofia giggled, skipping beside me when Penny walked quietly on the other side.I found myself looking at her as we waited for the elevator.I couldn’t stop.All it took was changing coasts for her to appear different in my eyes and look absolutely stunning.

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She was fucking stunning last night in nothing but a nightshirt and yoga pants. Yet that vision of her had nothing on her now.

The ride to SoHo went quickly, with Sofia asking a million questions and barely waiting for an answer before she asked the next one. It was what I needed to put things into perspective. No way could I give in to the desire to reach across the seat and test the softness of Penny's knee once she crossed her legs. Her porcelain skin gleamed, begging to be touched.

After that, there was the whirlwind of entering the restaurant and being escorted to the private room that Colton had reserved for the evening. Walking in and finding everyone arranged at a long table, already deep in conversation as children played, turned my thoughts away from the woman beside me.

"Ah, there they are." Colton Black was the warm host, greeting us as we entered the room. His wife, Rose, stood holding their six-month-old daughter, Charlotte. Penny immediately melted at the sight of the kid. And who could blame her? Charlotte was adorable, smiling like crazy at the attention before the women introduced themselves.

Colton's sister, Sienna, looked like she was due with her first baby any day. There had to be something in the water around here. "It's so nice to see you," she said as she shook my hand, pressing the other to her lower back. "I don't know if you remember, but we met when Spencer brought you out with him... oh, around five years ago?"

"I do remember," I assured her, and I remembered thinking she was kind of cute.

"You'll have to refresh me," Penny suggested with a light laugh once the two of them

introduced themselves. Goddammit, she glowed. I longed to touch her, to stand closer to her. I was a moth, and she was the flame, tempting me when I knew I'd get burned.

"Spencer is cousins with Colton's and Sienna's mom, Lourde," I explained.

"And my dad," Lucian Diamond added, shaking my hand while his fiancée, Ivy, introduced herself to Penny and Sofia. My poor kid was beyond overwhelmed, almost glued to Penny's leg.

"It's great to meet you all." Penny introduced herself to Aria and Valentina, the Miller twins, and their husbands. I needed to stop thinking of them as the Miller twins now that they were married. Valentina carried her daughter on her hip, finally setting her down when she clamored to be released. Isabel was around two years old, whereas Colton's Eloise was three.

"You'll have to be a good example for the younger kids," Penny advised. "Show them how to behave like a big girl." Sofia lifted her chin, clearly taking her role very seriously.

The women shared a quiet laugh that told me they'd already brought Penny into the fold. It was that simple for her to make friends.

Who was this woman? I lost track of the number of times I reminded myself not to stare at her with my mouth hanging open once we sat down to eat from the lavish feast laid out in front of us. A kid around her age stepped up next to her chair and flashed a grin that left me wanting to knock his teeth out. "Can I get you some wine or another beverage?" he asked while his eyes roamed over her body.

"Oh, I'll have whatever wine everyone else is drinking." Penny gestured to the bottles lining the table.

“Are you sure?”he asked.

“You heard her,” I grunted out, holding his gaze when he looked away from her. Move along, fuck face. His spine straightened, and he wasted no time leaving the table. My fists were in my lap, itching to make contact with his face, and all because he spoke to her like he was worthy of breathing the same air as this luminous creature.

She was gorgeous, yes, but it was her natural charm and humor that left me gaping as we settled in and she got more comfortable. “You grew up in London?”she asked Miles, Aria’s husband. “That’s fascinating. I’ve always dreamed of going there.”

“Now that Travis is setting up partnerships out in the UK, you should have him take you along,” he suggested in his clipped British accent.

“One thing at a time,” I begged. “We still have months to go.”

“No talking about business tonight,” Penny reminded me, almost chiding the way she would Sofia. Before I could quirk an eyebrow, she turned to Rose. “What’s it like, running your own store?”

Rose laughed gently, helping herself to a slice of garlic bread. “It used to be challenging. Now, it’s an adventure, especially with this little one.” She smiled down at the baby bouncing on her lap, asking, “Are you familiar with the line?”

“Who isn’t? Farrah Goldsmith? That’s like dream level.” Penny slapped a palm to her forehead, laughing at herself. “Listen to me. But I guess you hear stuff like that all the time.”

“It’s still very nice of you to say.” They shared a smile, and I had the strange feeling of being on the outside, looking in. She related to these people not as my employee,

but almost like she was one of them. She didn't let their differences get in the way. And there I was, thinking she would be all fingers and thumbs, so to speak. That she would get flustered and check out, turning her attention to Sofia instead. She seemed to make it her mission to surprise me.

I was surprised by many things, like the driving need to get her alone, where only I could drink in the sight of her body and bask in the warmth of her smile. Suddenly, I couldn't wait for the night to end, almost counting the minutes.

"Is this your first time on the East Coast?" Valentina asked.

"It is." The way Penny giggled was charming. Normally, I would roll my eyes and consider getting another drink when I heard it. "I'm such a tourist. I took Sofia shopping today, and just stepping into the store was like a major experience."

"Beverly Hills is pretty ritzy," Ivy pointed out.

"Please," Penny countered, laughing gently. "Before now, I wouldn't dream of stepping foot into a store like the ones out there, either. I'd be too afraid they would tell me to leave." And I'd burn the store down if they did. Better yet, I'd buy it and fire the fuckers.

"What do you have planned for tomorrow?" Aria asked, prompting Penny to launch into a list of possibilities while I sat back with my scotch, lost in thought.

This was tricky territory. I had to hit the brakes before things spun out of control. I had already seriously considered assaulting a server.

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Colton elbowed me. “She’s cute and great with Sofia. You lucked out.”

Funny. Before now, if he’d made that point, I would’ve recited the laundry list of reasons why the girl was all wrong. Too perky. Too much. Sitting beside her now, gazing at her delicate profile, noticing the way her sapphire blue eyes lit up with excitement when Aria and Valentina offered to take her and Sofia to lunch, I couldn’t bring myself to complain. I could hardly remember why I had in the first place.

The scotch was probably helping, as every sip unwound me a little more until I was feeling loose, relaxed. For the first time as long as I could remember, I was at peace.

That feeling lasted long into the night, with all of us sitting around the table well past the point where the plates were cleared, and after-dinner drinks were enjoyed. Valentina leaned against her husband, Evan, while their daughter, Isabel, slept in his lap. Colton did the same with his Eloise. Sofia struggled to keep her eyes open, but it was no use. She wound up falling asleep, curled up on her chair, with her head in Penny’s lap.

I watched silently as Penny absentmindedly stroked Sofia’s curls when chatting with the other women. The most natural gesture but one that filled me with an inexplicable sense of satisfaction—watching her love my child.

That satisfaction carried on past the point of our saying goodbye when it was clear the staff wanted to go home. “We’ll meet out at the country club tomorrow morning,” Colton reminded me, referring to an establishment in the Hamptons that Evan owned. “I know Dad and Uncle Connor and the others would love to hear about your new expansion.”

“I’ll be there,” I replied, pulling out Penny’s chair. The temptation to touch her was too much to resist. My fingers brushed against her bare shoulder, and she shivered, turning her head and locking eyes with me. They glowed with the same light I saw in them last night. I wasn’t imagining things.

In the car, with Sofia asleep in my lap, I asked, “Did you have a good time?”

Penny’s sweet sigh answered my question. “I feel so good. Like I’m all filled up inside. I never met those people before tonight, but I feel like I’ve known them forever.”

I understood the feeling. It was good to connect with them and catch up on their lives. I was looking forward to breakfast and an early tee time. More than anything, I looked forward to getting back to the hotel. I might have satisfied my appetite during dinner, but there were other appetites to be addressed.

Once Sofia was in pajamas and tucked into bed, I crept out of her room, leaving the door open a crack to let the hallway light in. If she woke up in the night, she’d be able to at least see where she was.

After that, it was a matter of hunting down the woman whose kiss still lingered at the forefront of my memory. I found her in her room, the door open, only she wasn’t getting dressed or preparing for bed. She stood at the window, gazing down at the city.

It was enough for a heartbeat or two to watch her framed against the skyline. Then, it was a matter of my feet carrying me across the room, where she turned at the sound of my approach.

To hell with right and wrong. Nothing had ever felt more right than this, anyway.

To hell with whether or not I could trust her after this.

To hell with the consequences.

Taking her face in my hands, I claimed her delicious mouth for myself again.

8

PENNY

A five-alarm fire exploded at the touch of his lips to mine. That was all it took for everything I told myself not to feel or even think about to rush to the surface. I took his lapels in my hands and pulled him closer, signaling to him that I wanted more than this. Much more.

This was all wrong. So why did it feel so right?

Last night was bad enough. The heat from his kiss made me want to forget everything I knew was important—Sofia, my job, and self-respect. I would have thrown it all away, and all he did was kiss me.

Now, there was so much more involved. I knew right away he wouldn't be satisfied with a kiss tonight, not when he growled like a deranged animal when his hands roamed my body, grasping, groping. My heart raced, pumping adrenaline through my system while I fought between duty and what he was doing to me.

He could keep doing it and never stop. It had to be the wine going to my head, making me moan into his mouth when he lifted my leg and hooked it over his hip before his fingers danced their way up my thigh. My skin sizzled. God, how long had it been? How long since I felt this complete rush of pleasure, the kind of pleasure that wiped out every other thought? There was nothing in the world I wanted more than

this, right here, this man pinning me against the window and kissing me until I couldn't think.

I could only feel, and what I felt was something I didn't want to end. Not ever.

"I want you." His deep, throaty growl in my ear made my pussy throb. I moaned again, making a move I hoped I wouldn't regret.

I slid the jacket off his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor as I ran my hands up over his arms, appreciating his shoulders, their firmness, and the way they bulged under his shirt.

Every kiss and touch made me want more. He was unlocking something in me, something I hadn't even realized was there the moment I first set eyes on him. There was chemistry, and there was this—sheer, simple lust.

For once, I let myself give in to be swept away. I gasped and arched against him when he stroked my pussy through my panties. More, I need more. I opened my mouth, prepared to beg for it, but he silenced me with another kiss, deeper this time, thrusting his tongue into my mouth while stroking me. I was already wet, but now I felt that wetness soaking into the fabric.

He felt it, too, groaning and thrusting his covered erection against me. "So wet," he growled out, his touch firm, causing lightning bolts of pure sensation to sizzle through me. I could only rock my hips, moving against him, straining for relief.

What happened after this?

I didn't care so long as it didn't stop.

I would die if it stopped.

“If I stick my cock in this wet pussy...” he whispered, lapping at my throat, making me squirm and moan, “... do you think you would come on it for me? Would you squeeze me tight and milk me dry?”

A dirty talker. Oh my... “God, yes.” I whimpered, my body alive, on fire, burning like it never had before. And I thought I knew what it meant to be with a man. Every guy I'd been with might as well have been a virgin compared to this. None of them had the power to make me weak with only a glance. Add a skilled hand, a tongue that could work magic, and this might as well have been my first time.

He wound an arm around my waist and lifted me just high enough for my feet to leave the floor. I didn't need to ask where we were going as I ran my fingers through his hair and scraped my nails over the back of his neck. He shivered against me, groaning close to my ear and lowering me to the bed.

I could've stopped this.

I could've stopped him.

I could've stopped myself, but nothing was further from my mind as I kicked off my sandals, then lifted my hips so he could peel away my soaked panties. I watched,

stunned and incredibly turned on, as he sniffed them, his eyes closing as a deep growl sounded in his throat. “You smell incredible,” he breathed out, dropping them to the floor.

Kneeling, he spread my legs wide. All I could do was hold my breath, lost in the craziness of the moment, then he descended on me and covered my mound with his hot, greedy mouth.

The first touch of his tongue made me gasp loud enough to cover my mouth with my hand. All we needed was for Sofia to wake up and come walking in to find her dad with his face between my legs. “Oh God, Travis,” I whispered, writhing on the bed, lost in sensation. Not just the touch of his tongue against what was already so hot and aching but the soft bed and the silk sheets my hands slid over. I took the back of his head and pulled him closer, tighter against my pussy.

His growl sent vibrations running through my core, then the tip of his tongue swept over my throbbing clit. Everything around me exploded. Sheer relief and agonizing pleasure mixed until I had to release my hold on him to bite down on my knuckles to muffle my cries. My hips bucked, but he held them down, forcing me to take every lap of his tongue before I sobbed helplessly, overwhelmed by the waves of pleasure still washing over me.

It was all so much, almost too much.

And yet, not enough.

He finally slowed, and I could relax, sinking into the mattress, floating in bliss. He took me by my hands and pulled me up so I was sitting on the edge of the bed. My first look into his eyes took my breath away. They were dark, demanding, and held my gaze as he opened his fly, pulling himself free from his boxer briefs.

I knew he had to be big from what I had already felt of him, but the sight of his thick, veiny dick swaying in front of my face was enough to make me slightly nervous about handling him. “Take me in your mouth,” he demanded, one hand on the back of my head.

I didn’t need to be coaxed. Not when there was nothing I wanted more than to make him feel the pleasure he had given me. I wrapped my fingers around his thick shaft, a little hesitant at first but more confident when he sighed. “That’s right,” he whispered, moving his hips, probing my mouth until I parted my lips and took him inside.

“Tap my leg if it’s too much, sweetheart, but if you don’t, I’m gonna fuck your mouth.”

Yes, please.

Holding my head in both hands, he pushed himself deeper, hitting the back of my throat. I reached out to grab his hips for support, but it was no use. He wouldn’t slow down. He knew what he wanted and was going to take it, not that I was putting up a fight.

I relaxed my throat and let him in deeper, and his pleasure-filled groans were my reward. “God, you’re so good,” he gritted out, fucking my face as I did my best to keep up. “Just like that. Jesus Christ, Penny...”

I looked up to find his eyes closed, his head falling back. It made me increase the pressure, hollowing out my cheeks, taking him deeper. Taking everything he could give me and more. I was proud I could make him feel good.

Then, suddenly, he pulled me away, stroking himself and stepping back. My heart sank before he muttered, “Take off your dress. I want to see you.”

I shivered, almost shocked at the sight of him jerking off to me. I stood, never taking my eyes off his while I slowly reached behind me to untie the bow at the back of my neck. His breath quickened as I pulled the strings open and let the top of the dress fall away from my body. I wasn't wearing a bra—I couldn't with the low-cut back. That meant my nipples tightened in the cool air under his lustful gaze.

“Holy fuck, you are perfect,” he breathed out, his fist moving faster.

I flushed with pleasure, going warm all over as he stared at me through half-lidded eyes.

“Get this off me,” he ordered, glancing down at his shirt. I worked the buttons quickly, letting my fingers graze his chest as I exposed his bronzed skin. He let go of himself long enough to slide the sleeves down his arms. Then, his pants joined our discarded clothing. “Lie back,” he ordered, and I obeyed without thinking.

What was there to think about? This was what I wanted more than anything. No, I needed it.

I could barely wait for him to unroll the condom. My heart was racing again, and fresh wetness flowed from me as I laid back on the bed with my feet on the floor. He stepped between my thighs, spreading them with his own, dragging his head through my slit. The pressure sent ripples of sensation straight to my core, which was now hot, needy, and eager.

Not bothering to wait until I was ready, he sank himself deep, so deep my breath caught. Not that I wasn't. I had never been more ready for anything.

Or so I thought.

He pushed deeper, his thick shaft stretching me to my limits. I went stiff, sucking in a sharp, surprised breath. His breathing was strained when he asked, “You okay?” I nodded, too overwhelmed to speak, and he started to move. Slow. Deliberate, making me feel every inch of him. He was so big, and the friction unlocked a deeper, aching sort of pleasure that began to build.

“As tight as I thought,” he groaned out, taking my ankles in his hands and raising them to rest on his shoulders. “So fucking tight. Going to make me come...”

His filthy words, paired with each stroke, created something big enough to scare me. I’d never felt this way. I didn’t know it was possible. Gritting my teeth, I whispered, “Fuck me. Hard. Make me come again.”

Who was I? A better question was how could I ever go back to who I was before now that I knew the thrill of feeling him move inside me, grunting with every stroke, with each time our bodies slapped together in a rhythm that finally broke when he lost control.

Spreading my legs again, he lowered himself to his palms, one on either side of my head. He drove into me, forcing another strained breath with every wild, punishing stroke. “Tighter... fuck, you’re getting tighter,” he rasped, and now his body glistened with sweat and his skin flushed. The tendons stood out along his neck as he tensed, holding back.

He didn’t need to.

I didn't want him to.

"Come with me," I begged, lifting my hips to meet his strokes. God, he was beautiful, and right now he was all mine. "Please."

He grunted as he slammed against me, making me squeal. I had to press my lips against his shoulder to muffle what I couldn't hold back when the world shattered.

He buried his face in my neck, groaning as he came, my muscles squeezing around him. My legs clenched, locking around his hips, holding him in place until the wave passed, and I was breathless, shaking in the aftermath.

Shit.

No pretending that didn't happen.

No pretending I didn't want to, either, not that I ever would. I wanted every second of it.

What was worse, I already wanted him again. My pulse still hadn't slowed, and I hadn't caught my breath, but I already knew that much. To hell with right and wrong. Life was too short.

Or so I needed to believe by the time he lifted his head to gaze down at me. His hazel eyes searched my face, looking for what? Understanding? Acceptance?

"Don't you dare tell me that can't happen again," he whispered. "Because it's going to. You know that, right? It's just sex. Purely physical. Right?"

There was nothing I wouldn't have agreed to with this man still between my legs, deep in my pussy, but the thought of complicating things meant there was only one

answer that made any sense. “Yes, it’s just sex,” I agreed.

The best sex I’ve ever had.

“Because telling ourselves it shouldn’t and can’t happen again...” He grunted and shook his head. “It would be a waste of time.”

I couldn’t find the words. I could only nod, accepting the inevitable. There was no going back, and that was fine with me, so long as it meant having him like this.

Even when I knew it couldn’t last forever.

9

TRAVIS

At the end of a long table high above Manhattan, I looked down its length into the faces of people who made Penny Anderson seem downright dull. I didn’t think I’d ever had my ass kissed so many times, by so many people, in such a short span. I’d be lucky if I didn’t leave this board meeting with a rash.

“What I see here looks good,” I decided. This wasn’t my first time looking over the contracts for the purchase and expansion of a major port along the Hudson River. It would allow me to effectively double the size of my fleet and the number of shipping routes available.

Yesterday, I’d met with consultants who outlined the various routes and had already cleared any red tape. It was amazing what money would do when put to use. It opened doors and created opportunities. Like the opportunity to leave my father and his sorry excuse for a company so far in the dust, I wouldn’t be able to see him in my rearview mirror.

The thought of him set my teeth on edge, forcing me to pretend I studied a contract I already knew from front to back. It was either that or allow my board members a glimpse of the disgust I knew was written across my face. The image of my father's cold, domineering stare usually did that to me.

And there were other images I fought hard for a long time to keep out of my head. The things I wanted to forget, needed to forget, if I had any hope of moving forward with my life. He had done his damndest to destroy it. When had he made up his mind to do it? Before or after I told him I would rather swallow glass than spend a single hour working for him?

“Mr. Knight?”

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“Oh.Excuse me.”Gesturing to the page in front of me, I offered a dry laugh.“There’s no stopping me once I start poring over legal jargon.”

A soft laugh rose over the room.Another thing money could do.None of them were sincere, but I wasn’t particularly interested in sincerity at the moment.Not with so many ugly, shocking images running through my head.Of all times for that to come up.I went out of my way to avoid thinking about him, about the past.At times like this, though, with so much on the line, it made sense for him to rear his ugly head, even if it was only in my subconscious.

“I want to talk executive staffing of our New York offices,” I announced, pulling my shit together, reminding myself who I was.My own man, someone who had built a company and was on his way to creating an empire.Something to be proud of, something true, something built on hard work instead of being propped up by lies, payoffs, and scandals.

“You think you’re so much better than me?”I could hear his laughter now, ringing out through the years, sending a cold chill down my spine.“You think you would be anywhere in this world if you didn’t have my last name, you pompous little prick?”

“If it’s the name you’re concerned with, you can have it,”I spat.“I would rather go through life as Travis Jones than let anyone think I’d have anything to do with a pompous, cheating bastard like you.”

I sat up straighter, fighting to keep my focus trained on the present instead of drifting toward the past.The middle-aged woman sitting to my right, Nancy Lewis, slid a stack of folders from the center of the table directly in front of me.“We’ve already

compiled an impressive list of candidates,” she explained. “All of them have strong backgrounds in shipping, logistics, and management. All are well-traveled, possess excellent educational credentials, and are ready to go. All we need to do is hire them.”

“Of course,” Frank Jeffries, another one of the Board, pointed out. “We’re more than happy to take any candidates you’re interested in into consideration. This isn’t a one-way street. And after all, you are the boss,” he concluded with a soft, almost self-deprecating laugh. Pretty soon, that laughter spread, meaning I had to force a pleasant expression.

Nothing irked me worse than fake laughter. It probably had to do with witnessing so many of my father’s sycophants kissing his ass over the years. He could’ve taken a shit in their open mouths, and they would’ve thanked him and asked for more. Who could respect someone willing to embarrass themselves that way? And for what? Pleasing the boss? Potentially earning a raise? Was that worth handing over dignity in exchange?

I had also witnessed him callously, almost gleefully, tossing those same people aside. There was always an excuse. They were mouthy, or they thought they knew better than him, or he wanted to shake things up, get some new blood circulating, the way a shark would.

“There is one point we wanted to discuss today.” Looking up and down the table, Nancy waited for everyone to nod in agreement before she asked, “Have you given any thought to the amount of time you plan on spending in your new offices? I ask because we’re trying to get a sense of the management you’ll need here. How many positions are left to fill, etcetera. It would be helpful to get an understanding of how hands-on you would like to be.”

“Oftentimes in cases like this...” Frank pointed out, “...relocation is involved. At least for the first six months. It would make sense,” he added, the others grunting their

agreement.“Especially if and when there are meetings required in, for instance, London or one of your other European delivery ports.”

He had a point, and it was one I had considered.A very large indignant part of me wanted to ask exactly who these people thought they were talking to like I had graduated from business school a week ago.“I’ve been giving it thought,” I explained.“Of course, as you know, I also have my daughter to consider.Any decision I make needs to involve what’s best for her.”

It would mean spending a lot more time here, and there was no way I could leave her in LA for that long a stretch.Not with Penny or any other nanny, no matter how much I trusted them.Even flying back on the weekends would mean missing too much time, time I wasn’t willing or ready to give up.It wouldn’t be forever, but this was a critical age for her.These were the days she needed me the most.

I was never what I would consider a micromanager, but facts were facts.I wasn’t about to leave something this big in the hands of a stranger.I would need to carefully vet my prospects if there was any chance of taking a hands-off approach or at least avoiding constant commuting back and forth.

“Thank you very much for compiling this information.”I gave the files a cursory glance.“I’ll be sure to review this carefully and discuss it with my advisers.We have roughly five months to nail this down, and while that isn’t exactly a generous timeline...” I added, “... that doesn’t mean we are cutting corners or taking shortcuts.I want this done right from the start, no excuses.I hope I’m making myself clear.”

Frank nodded.“Of course, Mr.Knight.All of this is entirely hanging on your word.”

Hanging entirely on my word.It sounded good.I couldn’t pretend otherwise.So long as we were all on the same page when it came to my word being law around here.

We wrapped up the meeting with me thanking them for taking the time to come out and tour the new facilities before we dispersed. I realized as I went through the niceties of chatting with a few of them that I was almost desperate to get back to the hotel. There were people waiting there for me, people I wanted very much to see.

By the third day of the trip, after spending countless hours sitting in rooms like the one I was leaving now, all I wanted was to do exactly what Penny and I had first argued about back at the house. I wanted to take my daughter sightseeing. Even if she didn't remember this trip years from now, I would. And I had already missed out on so much, no matter how present I tried to be. I looked back now and could laugh at myself while simultaneously kicking myself in the ass for thinking I was doing enough.

Then again, was there ever enough when it came to being a parent?

The question still rolled around in my mind during the ride to The Plaza. It was a mild, sunny day, perfect for lacing up a pair of sneakers and exploring. I laughed to myself when I imagined how surprised Penny would be. Strange, but it was her reaction that came to mind first. So long as she didn't remind me that she told me so, we would get along fine.

All things considered, though, I would take her playful snark over a negative reaction after what happened the other night. It seemed like I was destined to spend this trip questioning myself, looking back at my actions and hoping they didn't ruin anything. Personal feelings aside, Penny was too good with Sofia to risk losing her because I couldn't get my dick under control. It was unacceptable, not to mention the way it left me ripe for a hell of a lot of trouble if she decided to turn the tables and somehow blame me for coercing her or something like that.

She seemed like a levelheaded sort of person, yes, and she was sure as hell into it both times we fucked each other senseless before passing out. Still, there was no

predicting what a girl with student loan debt would do if there were a chance of a little blackmail in the mix. A man in my position was prime for it. What if she decided to wipe out that debt by accusing me of sexual harassment? It would be her word against mine, and I held all the power in our relationship. In this day and age, I couldn't imagine anyone not immediately taking her side.

Would she do that?

Doubtful, but I couldn't afford to be naïve, no matter how her tight, sweet pussy gripped me like a vice. My eyes drifted shut as the driver cut through Manhattan traffic, my thoughts drifting back. There was something unspeakably sweet about sinking deep into her tight heat. Sweet enough that I could easily develop a habit. Who would've guessed that under all that cheerfulness and almost guileless enthusiasm, there was a volcano waiting to erupt? I had taken her there, taken her past the point where she had any control over herself. There was no rush in existence that could possibly top it.

And I wanted more.

That desire pulsed through me with every step I took once I climbed out of the car and crossed the sidewalk, entering the lobby of the busy hotel. Riding up the elevator to the top floor seemed like it took an eternity. I was in that much of a hurry.

As soon as I walked through the door and into the living room, Sofia jumped up from the couch and ran at me, arms extended and curls bouncing. "Daddy! Daddy's here!" She almost took my legs out when she crashed into me, throwing her arms around them.

"Careful there." I laughed, picking her up. "What have you been doing today?"

"We made it a quiet day." Penny was on her way into the room with a bottle of water

in each hand. “We’ve been catching up on all kinds of movies and shows.”

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“We ordered room service.” Sofia was too excited to be held, wiggling out of my arms. I had to put her down or drop her. “It was so good! How come you’re back already?”

“Well, turns out I’m free for the rest of the afternoon. I wondered if you ladies would show me around town since I haven’t had much of a chance to check it out yet.” I stripped off my necktie and slid out of my jacket while they gaped at each other like they couldn’t believe it. “Well? Am I going out alone, or are you coming with me?”

Sofia’s shriek left me wincing as she ran for her room. “I’m getting dressed!”

“Let me help, for heaven’s sake,” Penny called out with a laugh. “Or you’ll end up wearing who knows what.” But she turned to me first, and I knew exactly what she was thinking when her mouth twitched.

“Don’t start,” I warned.

“Start what?” She was the picture of innocence. There might as well have been a halo over her head. “I was smiling. This is nice.”

“So you aren’t feeling even slightly smug that I came back earlier than planned so we can go out together?” I asked, removing my cufflinks. “Not the slightest bit?”

She screwed her mouth up like she was giving it serious thought before holding her thumb and forefinger an inch apart. “Just a tiny bit. But let the record show I was willing to let it go without saying anything.”

“Very mature of you.” I headed for my room at the far corner of the suite with her on my heels. “For what it’s worth, I gave it some thought and decided, yes, I could use a little time with her.”

And you. Not something I needed to say. That was the sort of thing I couldn’t take back. It was the effect she had on me. No matter how I told myself to keep it professional for Sofia’s sake, if not my own, all of it dissolved when we were in the same room.

Now that I knew what she tasted like and the sound of her moaning my name, I didn’t have a chance of going back to where we were before.

What made it impossible was her sweet but knowing grin once I reached my room and turned to find her in the doorway. “I’m sure you did,” she replied in a way that told me she was secretly patting herself on the back for getting through to me. She would patronize me a little, the way she would let Sofia think she had her way when, really, she had been nudged in a certain direction.

It had to be the air out here in New York because I would have lost my shit if we were back in LA when almost every word the girl spoke left me wanting to strangle her.

“I’m ready!” Sofia emerged from her room across the hall wearing leopard print leggings under a long T-shirt featuring a glittery neon rainbow. In her hands, she held a pair of pink, sparkly sneakers.

“At least we’ll be able to find her in a crowd if she wanders off,” Penny pointed out under her breath as Sofia waited for approval. She was so damn proud.

What the hell did it matter, anyway? I was facing the prospect of missing a lot of time with my little girl. No point in wasting any now, arguing over her fashion sense. “You

look great,” I decided. “Give me a couple of minutes to get changed. I seriously doubt I’ll find anything that compares with you.” Penny’s wide, happy smile meant almost as much as Sofia’s.

It was damn dangerous, letting her open me up this way, but what choice did I have? Something about her left me powerless to defend myself. No matter how I knew I should.

10

PENNY

By the time we got back to LA and settled into our routine again, one thing was obvious. I was officially sleeping with my boss. My rich, older, off-limits boss.

How was I supposed to help it? It was like that first night together unlocked a whole flood of wanting and needing, craving him every waking moment. I couldn’t open my eyes in the morning or close them at night without thinking about him. I wondered if he was thinking about me, or if we would spend any time together that day or night. I was living in the happy bubble that only existed when I had a big crush on somebody. Something fun, something that got my heart pounding whenever I heard his footsteps and made it sink whenever he left for the day.

It wasn’t always easy to turn my full attention to Sofia, but I did my best to keep her busy and happy. The next few weeks after visiting New York were filled with museum trips, park visits, trips to the library, art lessons in the spare bedroom, which Travis had agreed I could set up as a studio. Maybe using the word lessons was generous, though I was interested in her instinctive understanding of color and form.

“You have a lot of talent,” I told her, and every time I did, she seemed to grow a little taller and stood up straighter, proud of herself. If that were all I ever managed to do

for her, it would be more than enough. Making sure she was proud of herself and seeing herself as the smart, talented girl she is. Kids only needed somebody to believe in them so they could believe in themselves.

Cecilia, Travis' housekeeper, stopped in the kitchen on her way out. "Goodnight, ladies," she chirped as she swung a very large purse onto her thin shoulder. The woman was stronger than she looked. "I'll be back Thursday. And Penny, I left the dress with the grass stains soaking in the laundry room sink."

"Thanks," I told her, giving Sofia a knowing look. I'd warned her about sliding on the grass at the park. "See you Thursday."

"Will Daddy be home for dinner tonight?" Sofia sat on one of the stools in front of the kitchen island, swinging her feet as she colored once she said goodbye to Cecilia. Like most things she did, she took coloring seriously, choosing exactly the shade of pink she wanted before coloring in a bouquet of roses.

"He sure will," I announced, turning away from the stove, where I was simmering sauce for lasagna. "He texted to say his last meeting would wrap up soon, so that's why I got dinner started."

"Do you like Daddy?"

The question almost made me swallow my tongue, but I quickly reminded myself this was a four-year-old child I was talking to. She couldn't mean it the way it came out. "What do you mean?" I asked, keeping it light and casual. One of the worst things adults could do was project their thoughts and experiences on something an innocent child said.

"You know. Do you like him like I like you? Are you friends?"

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See, you idiot? Chill out. Maybe I wouldn't feel so guilty and nervous if I wasn't completely obliterating the line between the personal and the professional every time the man touched me without me stopping him. The fact was, it had never seriously occurred to me to stop him, not since that first kiss.

"We're friendly," I explained, greasing a baking dish. "We get along pretty well. One thing we always agree on is how awesome you are," I told her, winking when she looked up from her work.

"Do you know my friend, Ava?"

"Of course. You had a playdate with her today." We had spent the afternoon at the park with the girls playing while I chatted with Ava's nanny, Claire. She was a nice girl, and it was refreshing to talk to an adult besides Travis.

Sofia kept her gaze fixed on the coloring book, but the crayon in her hand didn't move. "Ava said her mommy and daddy were fighting a lot yesterday. Her mommy told her daddy she didn't like him. She said they were yelling a lot."

"Oh, I'm sorry that happened to her." Folding my arms on the counter, I lowered my head so we were close to eye level. This was an incredibly smart kid. Observant. Sometimes, that could backfire. "It's tough for mommies and daddies. They have fights. It's not that way with me and your daddy. I work for him. But just like I'm sure Ava's mommy and daddy still love her even though they're fighting, we both still love you even if we disagree about something. You don't ever have to worry about that, okay?"

“Okay.”The crayon moved again.“Can we have garlic bread with dinner?”

Kids.They could be a lot more resilient than people gave them credit for.“Sure thing.Just not too much, though.We don’t want garlic breath.”She was giggling by the time I started layering noodles, cheese, and sauce in the pan.

As I worked, my thoughts wandered.I hadn’t exactly been snooping around.I didn’t need to in order to notice a lack of evidence that there was ever a woman in Travis’ life.That put a stop to the idea of him being a widower unless he was so crushed by his wife’s passing that he couldn’t stand having reminders of her around the house.Possible, but probable?I didn’t think so.

The only other logical explanation was that their relationship had ended badly.Sofia was probably too young at the time to remember much about her mother.If it bothered her, not knowing the woman, she never let on.She didn’t ask questions about why her friends had mommies, and she didn’t.It could’ve been something she and Travis worked out a long time ago.I didn’t want to dredge up anything by asking about her, but if Sofia mentioned her, I wouldn’t know what to say or how to comfort her.

What woman would be stupid enough to pass up on a man like him?Then again, what was I saying?Just because he was fantastic in bed and extremely nice to look at didn’t mean he made a good husband or boyfriend.I had seen another side of him, too, and I couldn’t forget it.He could be short, dismissive, even ignorant.

He would be home any minute, at least according to the text he’d sent.And there I was, standing at the kitchen counter, making dinner to serve him when he got home.I only now realized that was how I saw it.

And that was dangerous.It was one thing for us to sleep together, but proudly presenting him with a lasagna dinner after a hard day’s work was venturing into

something much bigger and more significant than we really shared.

It wouldn't be the first time I got a little caught up in my feelings sooner than I should. One of my worst habits was going all-in on a new relationship, falling too fast. I didn't see the point in wasting time, screwing around, playing games. Why didn't he text me back right away? Did he mean it when he said he wanted to go exclusive? I didn't have the patience for any of it. If I liked somebody, I showed them. I made sure they knew because there was no point in assuming I could do it tomorrow when tomorrow might not come for either one of us. Not that I was trying to be morbid about it or anything. It was a fact of life which had been drilled into my head.

Once I popped the lasagna into the oven, I took off my apron. "All right, young lady. You know what that means. I think you should go up to your room and wash your hands and face, then get changed into the comfy clothes I put on the bed after we got back from the park. Sound good?"

"Sounds good." It took her a minute to put her crayons back in the box, then I helped her down from her stool, and she skipped through the kitchen, singing to herself. The Ava situation was already a memory.

The timing could not have been better. I was in the middle of mashing together butter and garlic for the bread when the front door opened. Usually, Travis would call out to let us know he was home, but not tonight. There was nothing but his quick footfalls to announce him. They got louder the closer he came to the kitchen, and I had to remind myself to breathe as I ran my hands over my hair to smooth down any flyaways. Silly? Sure, but I couldn't help it. I had a big crush on the hottest, most craveable man I ever met.

A man who smiled wide when he found me waiting in the kitchen. He looked around a little, his eyebrows lifting. "Upstairs," I whispered.

That was all he needed to hear to make him cross the room in a few long strides and grab my hips, drawing me close. "I've been waiting all day to do this," he murmured before treating me to a long, deep kiss. I wrap my arms around his neck, giving into every blush-worthy fantasy I had entertained during the day.

"It smells amazing in here," he grunted out between kisses, eventually burying his face in my neck and inhaling, causing me to shiver at the feel of his hot breath against my skin. "You smell better." The hand gripping my ass squeezed a little tighter, making me softly moan in approval. It was like the past couple of years without a boyfriend or anything resembling one made me ravenous. I couldn't get enough of him, his touch, or the heat he stirred up with every kiss. I closed my eyes and gave myself over to that heat, letting him back me up against the counter before he lifted me onto it.

I could barely stifle a squeal once he set me down. "What are you doing?" I asked, giggling as he devoured my neck. I was already wet and only getting wetter by the time I closed my legs around his hips and pulled him in.

"What do you think?" he asked, slipping his hands under my T-shirt, one of them cupping my breast. Good sense told me to pump the brakes and remind him who could come skipping in here at any second, but my body had other needs he was addressing. I couldn't bring myself to stop him when it was just so damn good being touched like this and being wanted so much that the first thing the man did on entering the house was basically attack me like it was all he could think about all day.

"Oh, fuck," he grunted out when I wiggled my hips a little, rubbing my pussy against his erection. "Do we have a few minutes to escape to the pantry?" His teeth grazed my earlobe, making me shiver and almost forget what was important.

"She'll be downstairs any second," I whispered, though that didn't stop me from running my fingers through his hair and moaning softly as he massaged me through

my bra.

“Later tonight,” he growled out, and it wasn’t a question. It was a command I couldn’t possibly refuse.

“Right after bedtime,” I promised, sliding a hand between us and cupping him. “Save this for me.”

“Fuck, you’re killing me.” He groaned, though something told me he wasn’t upset.

“Okay, okay.” I giggled while his tongue lapped at my throat. “We need to stop. Down, boy,” I added with a laugh.

“You’re gonna tease me like that and shove me away?” There was humor in the question, but stark need ran underneath it. He rolled his hips, thrusting against my palm. “You expect me to wait when you do this to me?”

“Just think how much better it will be later on.” He groaned again like the most miserable man alive, but I cut the sound off with another kiss.

One more.

I needed my fix.

A sudden tapping against the back door made us both jump. My heart was in my throat as I turned and found a complete stranger standing on the back patio, peering into the kitchen. She was tall, regal-looking, beautiful in a chic, belted dress that showed off a slim figure.

And the sight of her made Travis back away from me like I had a contagious disease. “Motherfucker,” he whispered, raking his hands through his tousled hair.

“Who is that?” I asked, my heart pounding at his reaction.

With a soft, almost miserable sigh, he muttered, “My mom.”

11

TRAVIS

“Then, we went to the Empire State Building,” Sofia pronounced the words crisply, clearly, giving them the importance they deserved. “And Daddy held me up so I could see everything.”

Mom hadn’t stopped smiling since Sofia came downstairs for dinner. She wiped her mouth with her napkin before gracefully draping it across her lap. “That sounds like so much fun. You are such a lucky girl.”

“And today, I had a playdate with my friend, Ava, and?—”

I cleared my throat to get her attention. “Maybe you should give Nana the chance to get a word in edgewise,” I suggested. “She might have things she wants to tell you about too.”

“I love to hear all about everything you do,” Mom insisted, tapping one manicured nail against the tip of Sofia’s nose. She offered a radiant smile that did strange, painful things with my heart. Out of everything I lost three years ago, being able to see her more frequently was one that left me aching worst of all. Sofia had only been one when it all unraveled, and that fact made the ache even sharper. Not only for my sake but for Sofia’s. For Mom, too, since she obviously craved being able to see her granddaughter.

But given that I’d rather light myself on fire than walk into the family home again, it made things tricky.

The elephant in the room had not been addressed. Every time I glanced Penny’s way, she looked a little more distressed. She was obviously humiliated, being found the way we were when Mom pulled her surprise attack from the patio door. “I knocked at the front door,” she’d explained after the requisite hug and kiss on my cheek. “Nobody answered. I didn’t want to ring the bell since I was hoping to surprise Sofia.”

Well, Sofia wasn’t the only one surprised. Aside from a few meaningful looks my way when Sofia wasn’t paying attention, Mom played off the entire situation with her typical grace and good manners.

And once again, as I sipped from a glass of rich merlot, I asked myself how the hell she had spent so many years with the cold-hearted son of a bitch she had yet to divorce. It couldn’t be love keeping her with him—the man was about as lovable as a

cactus and would inflict more pain on anyone who made the mistake of getting too close. Her quiet gentleness was in direct contrast with his arrogance, the way he strutted around. The self-important prick. The thought of him tightened my chest and left me clenching my fist in my lap.

“Clearly, Sofia loves you.” Mom turned her smile toward Penny, who, at the moment, looked like she might have swallowed her tongue. She had no reason to be so nervous, but then that was easy for me to say. I wasn’t the younger employee in this situation—all the more reason why I had no business acting like a horny teenager as soon as the coast was clear. I had spent most of the day lost in fantasy, and by the time I’d pulled up in the driveway, my dick might as well have been leading the way.

“She’s the best,” Penny insisted with the closest thing to a genuine smile she had worn since Mom showed up. They were on common ground now, speaking the same language. “I’m lucky to be here.”

“And we’re lucky to have her,” I added before realizing exactly what I said. “As a nanny,”

I added because yes, that would help things. That cleared it all up.

Penny’s porcelain cheeks went red, and she suddenly became deeply interested in scraping a bit of cheese off her plate. Mom, in typical fashion, pretended not to notice anything awkward.

“I have a question for my granddaughter.” Mom turned to her, eyes twinkling. “How would you like to do something special for me for my birthday?”

“Yeah!” Sofia agreed. “Like what? Do you wanna have a party?”

“Something like that,” Mom said with a smile. “But nothing too fancy. Just a nice

dinner at home.”

That’s what this was all about?I set my glass down, settling back in my chair.I loved her, I was sorry she got caught up in the ugliness between Dad and me, but I didn’t appreciate her tactics.“Wasn’t this something we could’ve discussed between the two of us?”I asked as evenly as I could for Sofia’s sake.

“You’re right.Because it is so easy to get a hold of you,” Mom said gently, with a grin, but she wasn’t joking.Yet another little trick she had picked up through years of living with that bastard.Finding inoffensive ways to express her true thoughts.

The fact that she would have to do that in front of me, that she even thought she had to handle me the way she handled him, made me wish I hadn’t eaten so much of Penny’s delicious lasagna.My stomach was churning by the time I replied, “If I knew it was something like this, I would’ve made it a point to speak to you directly and politely decline.”

“What does that mean?”Sofia asked Penny, who sat silent, watching all of this unfold.Why did she have to be here for this?We had never talked about it.I went out of my way to avoid the topic of Dad beyond the night I explained why it meant so much to bury him professionally.That was merely a sliver of the entire story.This was not how she needed to find out just why I was determined to keep my personal life off the internet.

“It means I don’t think we can go to dinner at Nana and Grandpa’s house.”I pointedly ignored the way Penny’s eyebrows shot up at my announcement.“I would be happy to take Nana out to dinner wherever she wants to go for her birthday.We can all go together and make a big deal out of it.But not at the house,” I concluded.No doubt Penny had a million questions and thought I was acting like an ass, but she didn’t know.

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For that matter, neither did my mother. It was one thing we had agreed upon, Dad and me. Making sure she never knew what he did. How deeply, thoroughly, and unforgivably he had betrayed me. There were still times I wondered if it wasn't his way of getting back at me for throwing his job offer in his face years ago. Not that it mattered. The result was the same. He had broken our family irreparably. There was no going back.

Which meant looking like an asshole in moments like this, when the sight of Mom's disappointed face was a knife to my chest. It was a sacrifice I would have to make. Telling her the truth would be so much worse. I wouldn't crush her that way.

Her disappointment would have been bad enough. It was Sofia who turned to me, crestfallen. "But I want to see Nana's house. You never took me there."

I stared across the table at my mother, who I loved but at the moment would have happily thrown out on her ass for putting me in this position. She knew damn well what my answer would be, so she showed up in person and got Sofia on her side.

"It's all I want for my birthday," she insisted. "Just that. Dinner at home with you and Sofia. And you can bring Penny," she added, smiling at the girl who was so nervous she barely moved. Only her eyes darted back and forth like she was watching a tennis match.

"No." It came out of me like a shotgun blast. "That's not going to happen." Penny's face fell, but I would have to make it up to her. It wasn't personal. It had nothing to do with how I felt about her.

Or maybe it did because the idea of introducing her to him nauseated me. She was too good. He didn't deserve to breathe the same air she did.

It was a silent standoff between Mom and me, gazing at each other, both of us expressing a thousand words without speaking a single one.

"Please," Mom whispered. "I only want us to be together again for one night. He's never met her," she added like I needed to be reminded. Like that wasn't deliberate.

Sofia tugged my sleeve. "Can we go, Daddy? I'll be good, I promise."

"That's not what bothers me, sweetie." She sat to my right at the square kitchen table. I reached out and ran a hand over her curls. "I know you would be."

"Then how come we can't go?"

"You know what?" Penny pushed back from the table, wearing one of her patented, beaming smiles. "Let's go up to your art studio and find your new painting so we can bring it down and show your Nana. I know she would like to see it."

"I would love to," Mom assured them.

Thank God for Penny and the short attention span of a four-year-old. Sofia was out of her chair in the blink of an eye, tossing her napkin onto the chair before scurrying out of the room. "I'll be right back, Nana!" she called out as she ran. Penny shot me a single, panicked look as she followed.

That left the two of us. I could drop the act I only kept up for Sofia's sake, but Mom got the first word in. "I'm so happy to see you opening up again after all that ugliness," she murmured, obviously referring to my ruined marriage. Because why would she not twist the poker she'd skewered through my chest?

“It’s not like that at all,” I quickly corrected. “Don’t get ahead of yourself.” Though the reminder of my past couldn’t have come at a better time. I couldn’t afford to tie my future to Penny or any woman. It was purely physical, no matter how comfortable we got with each other. “Stop trying to distract me,” I murmured, shaking my head. “When you know damn well I’m furious with you for using your granddaughter against me.”

“Why do you think that’s what this is about?” she asked. “All right, so my methods might be a little sneaky.”

“I could think of a few other words to describe them,” I muttered under my breath.

“But Travis. Think about it. I’m a grandmother whose granddaughter has never stepped foot in her house. Your father has never met her.”

“Which I’m sure breaks his heart,” I retorted.

She rarely scowled, but my attitude inspired one. “You don’t know how he feels because you refuse to speak to him.”

Shifting on the chair, I replied, “I have my reasons.”

Please, please, stop pushing me. I’m doing this for you.

“Those reasons have fueled three years of a cold war?” she countered. “Can’t you let it go for one night after nursing your grudge for so long? All I want is a single dinner in my home with my son and my granddaughter. It’s my only wish. I don’t think it’s too much to ask, Travis.”

“I’ll do anything else you want. Not this.”

“Sweetheart.” She pushed her plate aside and folded her hands on the table. Her seven-carat diamond sparkled brilliantly. “I’m not going to be here forever. I don’t ask you for anything. When you told me Sofia would never step foot in my house, I was hurt, but I accepted it. I know better than to try to change your mind when you’ve made it up.”

“Yet here you sit, doing exactly that,” I pointed out.

“Which I suppose means this is very important to me. None of us has unlimited birthdays.”

A chill went down my spine at her choice of words. “Are you trying to tell me something?” I asked, thinking about Lex and his father. Alexander Landry had kept his cancer diagnosis secret at first, though by all reports, he was doing very well. But it was a wake-up call of sorts. There was no such thing as forever.

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Except when it came to how long I would hate my father. That, I could see lasting until my final breath.

“Oh, now,” she insisted with a gentle laugh, waving a hand. “I’m not trying to alarm you. I’m only reminding you of a simple fact. Please. This one night for my sixty-fifth birthday. All I want is dinner at home with my family. Can you please do that for me?”

“Nana! Look at my painting!” Sofia acted as Penny’s hype woman, leading the way while Penny brought up the rear with a canvas in her hands.

“That is beautiful!” Mom clapped her hands to the sides of her face. “My goodness! I think you have a real future as a painter!”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing,” Penny agreed as she set the canvas up on the counter using that god-awful cookie jar to prop it up from behind. “She just... gets it, you know? It’s hard to explain.”

“No, I see what you mean. There’s so much detail.” Meanwhile, Sofia just about burst with pride. I was content to sit back and leave them to it as I silently seethed. She had me between a rock and a hard place, and she knew it. Sofia was thrilled at the idea of going, and Penny wouldn’t understand my refusal unless I sassed up and confessed the part of the story I didn’t tell her. Part of the story no one knew except me, Dad, and the mother of my child. Otherwise, my pride wouldn’t let me admit it. What he did. What I found them doing together.

And there was Penny, the opposite of that vile bitch in every way imaginable. How was I supposed to explain this because she would want an explanation, I knew that

much damn well. Could I trust her with the most humiliating secret of my life?

Or would I only regret it the way I regretted almost everything about my ill-fated, short-lived marriage? Everything but Sofia, who hopped up and down with excitement as she described her painting to Mom.

No matter how I looked at it, I was fucked. I could be the villain who wouldn't give my mother her one simple wish, or I could be the villain who told her the reason Nicola and I split up was the fact that I found her fucking Dad in his home study. I would lose out either way.

Mom laughed happily when Sofia threw her arms around her legs. She patted the top of Sofia's head, smiling down at her before turning that smile my way. One full of hope. Silently pleading.

"Fine," I mouthed, watching her smile widen, hoping like hell I wouldn't regret this. That she wouldn't make me regret it.

12

PENNY

We were in Travis' office post-bedtime to go over his schedule for the next couple of weeks. At the moment, however, neither of us was particularly interested in discussing a schedule.

"So tight." His voice was an animalistic growl in my ear when he bent down over me. "This tight pussy. Fuck, you feel so good."

Not as good as he felt. Even when he dug his fingers into my flesh, holding my hips tight enough that I knew I'd have bruises, I didn't care. I loved it and wanted more of

it.I didn't know this side of me existed until him.Dark, almost.Hungry.

I arched my back, thrusting my ass into the air as he pounded against me.Every stroke meant the edge of the desk dug into my thighs as he took me from behind, but even that was good.A bit of pain mixed with the pleasure, making it even more intense, making me want to scream.

“Have you been thinking about my cock today?”he asked, lifting my right leg and propping it on the desk so he could take me even deeper.I pressed my knuckles against my mouth to stifle a shriek.

“Yes!”I gasped, pushing back against him, chasing my high now that he had me so close to the edge.

“I’ve been waiting for this all day,” he grunted out, moving faster, punishing me with the force of his strokes.“Dammit, you’re so good.I’m not going to last...”

I loved hearing him like this.So close to the end of his control.Lost in me the way I got lost in him every time we were together.It was simple, primal, undeniable.It didn't matter how wrong it was to fuck my boss.I couldn't imagine going without the feeling of him inside me, filling me, fucking me like it was the last thing he would ever do.I could let myself go.I could be free.

“Getting tighter,” he told me like I didn't know.“Are you gonna come for me?Are you gonna come over my cock?”

I could only nod since I was fighting so hard to be quiet.I didn't trust myself to speak when I wanted to scream the walls down.There was nothing like this.I wanted it to last forever.“Close... so close...” I whimpered, making him chuckle darkly in response.

Our bodies slapped together, the sound filling the room while I bit down on my knuckles, ready to ride out the orgasm that was about to tear me apart. I welcomed it and worked for it, with his rapid breaths pushing me even further. The sound of him using my body the way I used his was unspeakably hot.

“Fuck... come with me...” I begged when the tension was too much, once that familiar build of pressure in my core told me the end was coming. “Let me hear you come.”

I turned my head, locking eyes with him, and he let out a growl that rocked me. I went still in the final, breathless moment before the tension broke, and I came until my legs shook.

“Oh, shit,” he groaned out when it was over, slipping out of me. There was always a split second of sadness when he did that. I didn’t want to let him go. “I would say sorry, I couldn’t help but attack you the second you walked in here, but it seems like you enjoyed it as much as I did.”

“The day you hear me complaining about being attacked is the day that I’m either sick or halfway dead.” I pulled myself together, standing and letting my dress fall back down to its normal position around my thighs instead of being hiked up around my waist. If anything, it was safer for us to be together this way rather than walk the tightrope of not being discovered together. Even though we’d agreed on a rule where I’d leave his bed before dawn, I was always nervous about her finding us asleep together. I didn’t want to confuse her.

Tonight, it would be easier to go our separate ways now that we were both satisfied.

“Where’s my panties?” I asked, looking around.

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He bent to find them under the desk, but when I reached for them, he snatched them away. “Finders keepers.”

There was even something surprisingly hot about that. He tucked them into his back pocket, then settled into his chair with a contented sigh. He had gotten home late from the office and was still wearing his work clothes, which today were a little more business than casual.

I had started taking his shirt off as he’d spun me and bent me over the desk, and now he was finishing the process of unbuttoning. How was I supposed to think about anything having to do with work when so much of his bronze chest was visible?

“What were we supposed to be talking about again?” I teased, sitting on the edge of his desk, swinging my feet back and forth. “You’ll have to refresh my memory because I’m pretty sure you fucked my brains out.”

It was so good to hear him laugh. He had been so tense, stressed, and moody, much more so than usual. It didn’t take a genius to connect the dots. His shift in attitude started in the aftermath of that surprise visit from his mom last week. On the one hand, I didn’t want to overstep my bounds and pry into his feelings, but on the other, it hurt to see him like this. Of course, Sofia noticed it too. I didn’t want that for her. Tiptoeing around her father, knowing he was in a rotten mood and feeling like she had to somehow make up for that. It wasn’t fair.

But when he laughed and lit up my heart like a candle, I knew there was more to it than a concern for Sofia. I was concerned for him, worried. Maybe more than I should’ve been.

“Fine.” He ran his hands over his hair, which was mussed to hell after I ran my fingers through it. “Let’s talk scheduling. I have late meetings the next two nights, Wednesday and Thursday, but the latest can take place here over Zoom. Still, don’t expect me for dinner with you and Sofia. I probably won’t be home until her bedtime, and I’ll still need to touch base with a couple of the board members and the team I sent to the UK to meet with our partners out there.”

I did some quick math in my head. “It will practically be the middle of the night out there.”

“Sure, and I’m dealing with a bunch of jetlagged employees. They’re busy, too,” he explained with a shrug. “It’s the only time we can coordinate before getting caught up in meetings.”

His expansion was closer every day, but something still told me it was stress over his family issues that bothered him more. “I’ll keep dinner warm for you,” I suggested. “You can eat whenever you’re ready.”

“What would I do without you?” My heart beat faster when he reached out and took my hand, stroking the back of my fingers tenderly and offering an almost sheepish smile. “I would be lost.”

Why did he have to go and do things like that? If I weren’t careful, I could make the terrible mistake of falling in love. I cared too much as it was, wanted him too much. My typical habit. Jumping in headfirst, even when I knew how dangerous it was and that there might be dangers waiting under the surface of the water, things that could hurt me if I couldn’t see them.

“Otherwise, I’m going on a short trip to New York. Two days,” he explained, waving it off like it was nothing. “I’ll be gone the twelfth through the fourteenth.”

I had to be hearing things. “Of this month? August?”

“No, three months from now.” He chuckled, nodding. “Of course, this month.”

“But...” This was awkward. “I thought that was when we were supposed to have dinner for your mom’s birthday. On the thirteenth.”

It was the funniest thing. I watched in real-time as he shut down, pushing me away through his attitude, if not his actions. He was still holding onto my hand when he lifted a shoulder. “It is what it is. I can’t miss these meetings. They’re too important.”

“But you said we would be there.”

He dropped my hand, standing and going to the bar cart in the opposite corner of the room. “Things happen. She’ll understand. I’m sorry if I can’t bend to her every whim. I told her we could get together someplace else, wherever she wants to go. If that’s not good enough, I don’t know what to say.”

Who was this person? I knew he wasn’t perfect. Who was? I wasn’t under any illusions. But I at least thought he had the decency not to break his mother’s heart. “You would really do that?” I asked as my heart sank with disappointment, not only for his mom, who seemed like a sweet person, but it would break Sofia’s heart too. “Not a day has gone by since we had that dinner here that Sofia hasn’t talked about going to Nana’s house. She asks me every morning how many days are left before we get to go.”

Lifting his shoulders as he poured, he replied, “Sofia is going to have to get over it.”

His cold reaction left me staring at him in disbelief. I didn’t recognize the man in front of me. It was one thing to be blunt, even brusque, but this? “I don’t understand. How?—”

“Right. You don’t understand,” he agreed, turning on me, his eyes blazing. Normally, he would look at me that way, and my toes would curl. I would have to check to make sure my panties were still on. This was not one of those times.

“Help me understand,” I implored. “Maybe we can work it out together. There has to be a way.”

He took his time sipping his scotch, then closing his eyes, sighing. “Penny. I know you are committed to seeing the bright side of things. I understand. I respect that. But some things, there is no getting around with a positive outlook. This is one of them.”

“Would you at least tell me why?”

“You first,” he countered, folding his arms. “Tell me why you think you deserve to know.”

“I thought...” What did I think, anyway? A lot of things, too many things, most of which I didn’t have the guts to say out loud. Instead, I settled for, “I thought we were better than that. I really did.”

His brows lifted. “What? You thought sleeping together meant full access to every painful aspect of my past?”

“But there’s more. The way we acted together was like we were at least friends. I thought we were closer than this,” I replied while my heart did its best not to break. “I thought we had an understanding.”

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“It looks like you were wrong. Sorry to burst your bubble,” he said before drinking again. “Remember, this is all physical fun. Nothing serious. It’s nothing personal. It’s just the way I am.”

“So that means we can treat each other like less than strangers when our clothes are on? No, really,” I insisted when he turned away again. I marched around him and positioned myself smack dab in front of his face. “I am trying to be your friend through this, but I can’t be if you won’t let me in.”

“I don’t want to let you in.” He turned his back again, this time returning to his desk. “Don’t you get it? You don’t know. You weren’t there.”

“So tell me, dammit! What is so unfathomable? It can’t only be the stuff with your dad’s business. This is too big for it to be about that.”

“Congratulations,” he muttered, finishing his drink and plopping the glass on the desk. “You cracked the code. Way to go.”

There was no pretending that didn’t hurt. “Maybe you shouldn’t insult the one person who cares enough to help you.”

“I didn’t ask you to help me, goddammit!” He pounded a fist on top of the desk hard enough to make me jump. And when I did, when he noticed, his face fell a little. “Look. There is a lot of history you don’t have the first idea about, and I do not feel like sharing. Why is it not enough to tell you how much I cannot step foot in that house?”

“That’s more than enough, only?—”

“No.” He shook his head. “There’s no only about it. That’s it, that’s the story.”

“So you’re going to deny your daughter what she wants so much? And your mother? She adores Sofia. She’s desperate to spend time with her. What did she do to deserve this?”

“She didn’t do anything,” he muttered.

“Well? It would break her heart, and she was so happy.” And my heart.

He was breaking my heart when it had no right to be heartbroken. There were no promises. I was letting myself get too caught up, the way I always did. Wrapped up in him, knowing there was a good, decent person behind the façade he put on. It wasn’t my responsibility to bring that good side out.

Why did I feel like it was?

When he wouldn’t look me in the eye, I craned my neck, forcing myself into his field of vision. “Look at you. Look how far you’ve come, and all on your own. Don’t you want him to see that? Don’t you want him to know?”

His brows pinched as he gritted out, “I’ve warned you not to use that child psychology bullshit on me.”

“Who says I am?” I wasn’t. I meant every word, completely sincere. “Show him how much you don’t need him. Let him see how happy Sofia is without him in her life. How well she’s doing. What a good father you are. Better than he ever was, I bet,” I added.

All right, maybe I was using psychology on him, just a little.

But it worked. His lips twitched, and his eyes lost some of their hardness. “That’s true.”

“Of course it is. Throw it in his face, then. Make sure he can’t pretend he doesn’t know how amazing your life is without him, without his help, without anything of his influence. And who knows?” I added, why not go for broke? “He might end up regretting whatever it was he did to split you two apart. In fact, I’m sure he will.”

That was too much. I knew it the second his lips thinned into a scowl. “I doubt that.”

“Fine, but you get my point. Throw it in his face if you want to. Let him see. Let him know everything he’s losing out on by being who he is. And when it’s over, it’s over. No broken hearts. No guilt.”

Silence spread between us. I watched the anger drain from him and felt the energy shift until the air felt clearer. “This is going to come out entirely wrong,” he warned me. “But who the hell are you, and where did you come from?”

I could breathe again. We were on solid ground.

Or were we?

There was a tiny voice in the back of my mind that told me not to let him off the hook that easily. He had been mean and dismissive, and I deserved better than that. But seeing him grin was so much nicer than cringing under the heat of his scowl. Letting it go was easier than fighting it out and safer, too, since it meant not having to explain what right I had to be offended. He had his reasons for what he’d said. Why waste time fighting when there were so many other things we could be doing?

“Penny Anderson, Sacramento, California.”I gave him a quick salute before turning around and heading for the door.“And now, I’m going to take off all my clothes and step into the very large shower stall in my bathroom.Just in case that interests you.”

“If I ever pass up an opportunity like that...” he joked as his chair squeaked as he stood, “... you can have me officially declared dead.”

13

TRAVIS

Why am I doing this?

If I had a dollar for every time I'd asked myself that question over the past few days as this dinner loomed ahead of me, I might be able to pay for Sofia's future education. I should've stuck to my guns, refused to acquiesce. Some things transcended family ties and keeping the peace.

Like fucking a man's wife, especially when the man in question happened to be one's very own son.

"It'll be fine," Penny whispered, eyeing the way my leg bounced as we sat together in the back seat of my Mercedes. Sofia would normally sit between us but was too determined to see out the window to be caged in.

"Who says it won't?" I asked.

"Sofia does that when she's nervous or has to pee," she pointed out, nodding at my leg. "Which is it? Did you forget to go before we left the house? Even Sofia knows to do that."

"Remind me to laugh later," I muttered with a scowl, though I had to fight the smirk threatening to tug at my mouth.

"You're going to be fine." Her hand closed over my knee, and her touch took off the edge of anxiety threatening to cripple me. "Remember what we talked about. Show him you don't need him." If only it were that simple.

“Wow!” No need to ask Sofia if she was excited. Her eyes shone as we approached the house once we made it through the front gates. “It’s like a castle!”

Her childish opinion left me grinding my teeth in frustration. “It’s not that much bigger than our house,” I pointed out. From the corner of my eye, I caught Penny giving me a look, but she didn’t offer an explanation. She probably thought I was being immature, unwilling to give my father even a crumb of credit. It shouldn’t have pissed me off the way it did, thinking she was forming opinions based on a small slice of the full story. It was none of her business. It was none of anybody’s business.

“Now, remember what we talked about.” Penny adjusted the headband Sofia wore. “This might not be a running around kind of house. Don’t forget to say please and thank you.”

“I know that stuff,” Sofia informed her in a withering voice that made me worry for the day she became a teenager.

“Still, it’s good to remember.” We exchanged an exasperated look, and for a second, I could forget what I was heading into. We were two people who both loved the same kid. It was simple. It was real. In other words, the opposite of my childhood and my relationship with the man I swore I would never stand in the same room with again. I should’ve known better. There’s no such thing as never.

Gravel crunched under the tires as we rolled to a stop in the front courtyard. So much was the same—the pristine gardens, the palm trees reaching for the sky. Lights glowed inside the sprawling mansion, giving the illusion of warmth and comfort. At first glance, no one would guess there was a monster living inside.

“It’s impressive,” Penny whispered, lifting a shoulder when I shot her a sharp look. “I mean. Ew. Gross. What a nightmare.”

Her playful smirk left me scowling again. “You have no idea how right you are.”

She rolled her eyes with a sigh. “You could’ve done a lot worse. I spent my youth sharing a bedroom with two sisters. I would’ve killed to grow up somewhere like this.”

“Yes, it was every kid’s dream. Practically living in a museum where I wasn’t allowed to touch much of anything.” But it was not where I grew up. It was where I grew older. Growing up was the day I found those memos back in China, and if I hadn’t grown up then, I certainly had the day I walked in on him and Nicola.

I could hear her protests ringing in my ears as I climbed out of the car, taking Sofia’s hand once she hopped out. “It’s not what it looks like.” Who the hell did she think she was kidding? “I can explain.” Like my eyes were playing tricks. Like I couldn’t see exactly what was happening.

My father, fucking my wife, the mother of my child.

A child who now skipped happily beside me, climbing the wide steps leading up to the ornate entrance. The wrought iron grates in front of the doors were painted gold that gleamed richly but was nothing but paint. It was for show, like so many other things in this house. In this family. My little girl would never know I had a paternity test done after that day, no matter how Nicola swore up and down that I was Sofia’s father. The funny thing about trust was how once it was broken, all bets were off.

But I could say with confidence that I stood beside my biological daughter, with Penny on my left, as we waited for one of the staff to open the door. “Peter. It’s good to see you,” I offered at the site of the elderly butler. I figured he would’ve retired by now, but there he was, still answering doors and directing guests to the drawing room. “No need to show me the way,” I assured him, chuckling as we set off.

I doubted Penny was breathing as she looked around us, awestruck. “This is incredible,” she whispered, shooting me a guilty look. “All the art,” she explained, shrugging, then returned her attention to the paintings in their gilt frames.

“It is an impressive collection.” That much, I could admit. I wasn’t a complete asshole. “A lot of that is Mom’s influence. She’s the art lover.”

“So pretty,” Sofia whispered, staring in awe at the grandeur I had taken for granted growing up. We were hardly poor. She wanted for nothing, but there was a difference between living well and living in a museum. My parents had built a museum around themselves.

Mom stood beside the dark, cold fireplace, turning when we entered the formal drawing room. She looked radiant in a cream-colored dress that flowed gently around her ankles as she crossed the room with her arms outstretched. “There you are! I have been looking forward to seeing you!”

I let go of Sofia’s hand so she could run to Mom, and for a few seconds, everything was all right. It was almost worth having my stomach in knots for days when I witnessed her joy as she gathered Sofia into her arms and hugged her tight, smiling from ear to ear.

“Happy birthday,” Penny offered, hanging back.

“Thank you so much.” Mom stood, extending a hand. “You look beautiful. I’m so glad you could make it tonight.”

“I’m so happy I was invited.” Penny’s giggle went straight to my heart, loosening my chest, warming what was hard and cold when we first pulled up. She had considered wearing her red dress again tonight, but I shut the idea down as gently as possible. No way would I let her look like that in front of him. She had finally relented and worn a

classy, simple black dress after warning me of how I'd have to repay her afterward since she hated wearing the color. Some sacrifices I was happy to make.

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“Mom.” I kissed her cheek, then presented her with a small box. “A little something for you.”

“Having you here is more than enough.” Still, she unwrapped the box and opened the hinged lid. Her eyes went round before she softly gasped. “Oh, sweetheart, this is too much.”

“Put them on, Nana!” Sofia urged. I had let her take a peek at the pearl and diamond earrings, and Penny was kind enough to wrap them for me, something I was never any good at.

Mom pressed her lips together in a tight line, chuckling as she shook her head. “I’m going to save them for a very special occasion because they are very special earrings.” She reached out and ran a hand down the side of my face, tears shining in her eyes. Why couldn’t it always be like this? The two of us, acting like family, without...

“Good. We can finally get dinner started.”

Mom’s panicked gaze met mine. “Please,” she whispered as Dad marched into the room.

My breath caught at the sight of him. The years hadn’t made a difference. There hadn’t been that many of them, anyway. He was still the same bear of a man, bigger than life and twice as allowed. Only a touch of silver at his temples gave away the fact that he was getting older.

Sofia lingered close to me, her hand tucking into mine like she was nervous. That alone was more than enough reason for me to want to leave. She knew at first glance he was no good.

He stopped partway into the room, his feet shoulder width, hands on his hips. "And who is this?" he asked, staring down Sofia. "There's only one person you can be. You look just like your mother."

I was going to kill him. By the time this night was over, he would be dead. It wasn't what he said, but the way he said it and looked at me when he did. This from the man who begged me, for Mom's sake, never to tell her. He was sick and twisted enough to dig the knife in deeper, knowing I wouldn't say a word.

Penny's wide-eyed gaze told me how nervous she felt, but none of that was obvious as she stepped up, holding out her hand. "Mr. Knight. I'm so happy to meet you. My name is Penny Anderson. I'm Sofia's nanny."

"Are you now?" he asked, eyeing her up and down. His now soft voice brought to mind a slithering snake. It took everything in me not to throw myself in front of her as he approached, taking her hand in his before placing his other hand on top. "Penny, such a pleasure. I hope my son isn't too hard on you. If he is, you can always have a job with me."

Think of Mom. Think of Mom. Think of Mom. I was going to bite my fucking tongue off by the time night was over, and I had only been in his presence for half a minute.

Penny tipped her head to the side. "Do you have a little one who needs some extra attention?" she asked in her usual bright voice.

He blinked rapidly, his head snapping before he replied, "No."

“Then I can’t imagine what I could do for you since kids are my life.” Was I imagining things, or did she firmly pull her hand away from him when he wouldn’t let go? I stared at her, willing her to look at me when he looked away, but she didn’t notice or pretended not to, either way. She was watching him, her face an unmoving mask that gave away nothing.

“Now that we’re all together,” Mom announced. “Why don’t we go into dinner? Are you hungry, sweetie?” she asked Sofia, who gladly took her hand and walked beside Mom into the dining room beyond where we stood.

“Yeah!” Sofia almost shouted. “Penny said no snack this afternoon. I had to save my appetite for dinner.”

“Very smart of Penny.” Mom exchanged a smile with Penny as we took our places at the table. The leaf had been removed, making things a little more intimate, though I would’ve happily sat at the other end of the long table from the man who, at this point, still had not greeted me. Not that I cared. It was par for the course.

“Mr. Knight,” Penny ventured after I slid her chair into place, then took the seat beside her. She was at Dad’s left hand and Mom sat on his right. Again, no surprise. Mom probably knew I wouldn’t want to sit close to him. “Is it true this is the first time Sofia has visited your house? She’s been so excited about it.”

“Yes, indeed. This is the first time I’ve set eyes on this little cherub.” He knew the right words but not the feeling behind them. I didn’t buy the jovial act for a minute.

“But you two seem to know each other pretty well.” Penny looked across the table at Mom and Sofia, sitting side by side.

“Well, things happen.” Dad suddenly turned off the charm, clearing his throat, shifting in his chair. “We can’t always control how other people deal with situations.”

So it was a situation now. Not his destruction of everything I thought was mine. Not his deliberate destruction of my marriage.

“You know, that is something I tell Sofia all the time.” Our salads were placed in front of us, and Penny eagerly spread the silk napkin across her lap. “We can’t beat ourselves up over how other people react to us. Right, Sofia?” she asked.

Sofia’s head bobbed as she picked through the salad, trying to find something she liked. “Right. Like at school.”

“Exactly. When the other kids think you’re being a know-it-all, that’s their problem, not yours.” Spearing lettuce on her fork, she added, “Of course, we know you’re not really a know-it-all. That helps.” She turned her gaze upon Dad, chewing slowly, her eyes narrowing a little.

“You seem to know a lot about kids. Did my son make a good choice for once?” He inquired with such derision before picking up his wine glass and draining half of it in one gulp. Mom cast a pleading look at him from under her lashes, and he pointedly ignored her. Something he was good at.

“I wouldn’t worry about his judgment,” Penny assured him, chipper as ever. “He’s got a good head on his shoulders.”

“That must be a new development.”

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“Could you not?” I muttered under my breath, glancing at my daughter. All of this was going on over her head. She was too busy trying to make it look like she was actually eating her salad, though I knew damn well she didn’t want to. For once, I couldn’t blame her. I didn’t want to eat a bite of this man’s food.

“Let’s have a nice dinner,” Mom urged. I caught the way her fork trembled as she lifted it to her lips.

Sofia’s fork clattered onto her plate. “Nana! Show Pop-Pop the earrings Daddy gave you!”

“Pop-Pop?” Dad scoffed, holding up his wine glass for more. Under the brighter lights in the dining room, I could make out the broken blood vessels across the bridge of his nose and cheeks. His drinking was catching up to him.

“That’s what she wants to call you,” Penny explained with a wink at Sofia.

“I don’t get a say in this?” He snickered.

“Don’t worry,” I grunted out. “It’s not like she’ll get the chance to see you after tonight, anyway.”

“Please,” Mom whispered, shaking her head a little. Maybe she could sit back and let this son of a bitch walk all over her. That didn’t mean I had to do the same. It made me think back to when I used to question why he did what he did. Why he would humiliate me and wreck my life. It took time, but I finally figured out the answer.

Because he could.

No one had ever stopped him from doing what he wanted to do. No one ever made him consider the consequences.

It was easier to stay silent for the rest of the meal. I ate quickly, determined to get this over with, ignoring my lack of hunger in favor of plowing through my food. More than once, Penny nudged me under the table with her foot, but I ignored that too. It was safer to check out until our dinner plates were cleared. I had hardly tasted a bite of the chicken, which Mom had carefully and lovingly cut up for Sofia.

“Are we gonna have birthday cake?” Sofia leaned back against the padded chair and patted her stomach. “I have room in my tummy.”

Even I had to laugh. All of us did, except my father. “Will you be having cake tonight, Penny?” he asked her, well into his fourth glass of wine by now. One corner of his mouth tugged upward as he asked, “Do you think you have room in that cute little dress you’re wearing?”

I pushed my chair back, blinded by rage, but Penny spoke first. “I’m sorry,” she said in that bright, friendly voice. “But I don’t understand the question. Can you repeat it for me?”

Son of a bitch. That simple question took a lot of the heat out of my reaction. I looked at Dad, who once again blinked like he took a surprise hit. “You know it was a compliment,” he mumbled.

“How? I’m curious.” Her aggressive cheerfulness was on full display as she angled her body in the chair to face him. “Is telling me my dress is too tight a compliment?”

“Dear,” Mom whispered to him. “Please.”

“Since when do I have to apologize in my own home?”he barked, making Sofia jump.

“Since when does it matter where you are?Sweetie,” Penny continued, turning toward Sofia.“It’s okay.I was just a little confused, that’s all.”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Sofia fretted all of a sudden.

“I’ll show you where it is,” Mom offered.It was clear she was looking for a reason to get out of the room.Her nerves were fragile in the first place.

“I think it would be better if we go once Sofia is finished.”I stood, shooting him a single, withering stare before pulling out Penny’s chair.It was either that or kill him where he sat.

“Back in my day,” he muttered after draining his glass.“A woman knew how to take a compliment without getting mouthy.”

“Back in the day,” Penny replied.“Gentlemen knew the difference between a compliment and a come-on.Maybe you don’t think I know the difference, Mr.Knight, but I do.And it’s no wonder this is the first time that child ever stepped foot in this house.I wouldn’t want to bring her here, either.”

His mouth fell open, his eyes bulging, but she knew she had the last word and wasted no time marching from the dining room.

“You make me sick,” I told him, following her retreat.His soft, derisive laughter followed me through the drawing room, but taking Penny’s hand out in the hall somehow made all of that go away.I led her to the powder room, where Mom waited outside the door with her hands covering her face.

“Hey,” I whispered, giving her a hug.“I’m sorry.I really am.”

“No, this was my mistake,” she groaned out, sniffing. “I should’ve known better.”

She lowered her hands to reveal tear-filled eyes. “You must think we’re awful,” she told Penny.

“Not at all,” Penny insisted with all of her usual warmth and understanding. “I’m only sorry this had to happen on your birthday. You should come back for dinner another night,” she offered. “I’ll have Sofia help me make a cake for you. It would make her so happy.”

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Mom's face lit up. As usual, Penny knew the right thing to say. Just like she knew the right thing to say to Dad. Sometimes a quiet word delivered with a smile could be much more effective than the cruelest insults.

That was still on my mind on the ride home as Sofia pouted over the lack of birthday cake. "We'll make one for Nana real soon," Penny promised. When she put an arm around my daughter's shoulders, there was something so right about it.

My heart swelled as I watched Sofia melt against her and close her eyes.

Over the top of her head, holding Penny's gaze, I whispered, "I want to see you after bedtime."

I planned on thanking her for what she did back there.

All night long, in fact.

14

PENNY

The door to Sofia's room had barely closed when Travis practically attacked, telling me he had been waiting for me to finish saying goodnight after he did. Nothing about the way he acted while helping me put her to bed had hinted at the animal raging inside.

"She's still bummed—" I didn't get the chance to finish the sentence when his mouth

covered mine, wiping away every thought I had as his body forced mine against the wall. There was no room for thought when my endless, unquenchable thirst for him roared to life.

Something about what happened tonight made me want him more than ever. To be close to him, to hold him. Somewhere along the line, he had missed out on so much. I understood him better than I ever had.

His hands ran down my body and up again as he picked me up, holding me close to his chest as he carried me to his room. My heart was pounding out of control, excitement and anticipation sweeping me up the way Travis had swept me up in his arms. There was no question what was about to happen, no question of whether I wanted it. Some things were inevitable. I was beginning to think this was one of them.

He kicked the door shut once we reached his room, carrying me to the bed and sitting with me in his lap. I settled down against his rigid dick, wiggling my ass while he worked his hands under my dress. His mouth, hot and greedy, moved up and down my throat before his tongue dipped between my breasts and made my pussy clench.

I whimpered. His teeth caught the top of the dress and pulled it down until his tongue could sweep around my nipples, tightening them almost painfully. "Mm... just like that."

"You are so fucking perfect," he growled out against my heaving chest, every sweep of his tongue sending lightning bolts of sensation straight to my clit. My fingers ran through his hair, holding his head close as I ground against his erection.

I was dripping wet by the time his fingers worked under my thong, gliding through my slick folds, and I couldn't help but ride his hand. What was happening to me?

I felt free.

Wild.

“Ride me,” he gritted out, lying back. I scrambled off his lap and slid the thong down to my ankles, watching as he undid his belt and fly. I pulled a foil wrapper from a box in his nightstand and opened it, unrolling it down his shaft, his eyes transfixed on my every movement.

I didn’t bother taking off my dress, straddling him and guiding him inside me. There was no time. He was so needy, and I knew that need. The kind that would never be fulfilled, though I would never stop trying. I couldn’t.

“Oh, shit,” I breathed out, adjusting to the size of him, the way he stretched me to my limit. I could take him deeper this way, set the perfect angle. When I leaned forward with my back arched, the head of his cock rubbed my G-spot while my clit ground against his pelvic bone. Stars exploded behind my eyelids.

“I could watch you do this all night,” he groaned out. His hands were all over me, caressing and groping, setting me on fire, making me move faster, taking him harder, following my body’s needs to the sound of his strangled grunts. He reached behind me, unzipping the dress, and I pulled it over my head, taking him faster while he cupped my breasts, burying his face in them when I leaned over him.

“You feel so good,” I whispered, racing to the finish. My body was trembling, and a sheen of sweat broke out over my skin. I had never felt this alive. This whole.

“Look at you.” His fingers sank into my hips, pulling me down, working me the way I worked him. “Riding my cock. Throwing your head around, tits in my face. So fucking hot. Fuck, so tight.”

I was getting tighter the closer I came to finishing. He felt bigger, wider, but that was my pussy clenching around him in the seconds before I gave myself over to complete

bliss.

“That’s right,” he grunted out, still working me up and down his cock as I shivered and moaned. “Squeeze your pretty pussy for me. Make me come.”

He slammed me down against his base one last time, then threw his head back, grunting his way through his release. I was pretty sure a tornado had just run through the room from how dizzy and weak I was by the time I fell to the side, flopping on my back with a soft sigh. “That was intense.”

He didn’t react, really, only pulling back the duvet and waiting for me to crawl up the bed before draping it over me. I was still trembling, fluttering inside, almost a little embarrassed at how hard I came.

He didn’t seem embarrassed. He seemed pretty damn pleased with himself as he slid between the sheets and lifted his arm to make room for me against his chest. This was what I needed. His warmth, his solidness. “I’m sorry if I caused any trouble tonight,” I whispered.

He tensed a little, and I wished I hadn’t said it, no matter how heavy it had weighed on my chest.

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“You didn’t.I’m sorry for what he said and how he was.I can’t say I didn’t know it would be that way, but knowing something is going to happen and witnessing it are two different things.He always goes further than I imagined.”

There’s still something he’s not telling me.I felt it just as clearly as I felt the soft sheets under me and the beat of his heart beneath my palm.There was something else he was holding back.But he was stubborn and didn’t trust easily.

I was naïve to think he would feel like he could trust me, no matter how much we have been through together.No matter how many nights I spent in his bed, sneaking out before dawn in case Sofia decided to wake up early and come looking around for her grown-ups.It hurt a little, the sense that he was holding me at arm’s length.What could I do to make him understand I wasn’t going to use anything against him?I wasn’t going to hurt him.

If there was one thing I picked up during that nightmare of a dinner, it was how much he must’ve been hurt by that monster at the head of the table.“Can I tell you a secret?”I whispered in the dark, touching my head to his shoulder.He grunted softly, and I continued, “I didn’t know people like him existed.Not really.”Just mentioning that awful man left a sour taste in my mouth.I could find something good in just about anybody, and some people challenged the hell out of me while I tried.But Harrison Knight was a lost cause.

“Yes, he’s real.”His chest rose and fell in a sigh.“Now you know why I didn’t want to go.There is nothing human in him.He doesn’t bother trying to hide it,” he murmured as his hand stroked my hair.It was a good feeling, the kind I wanted to sink into.

“I’m really sorry I pushed so hard to go,” I whispered. “I should have trusted your judgment.”

“You couldn’t have known. But yeah,” he added with a snort. “Maybe trust my judgment. I know what I’m talking about.”

“Okay, don’t break your arm patting yourself on the back,” I grumbled, nowhere close to being serious.

“Please...” He laughed. “I had a special rich guy surgery that lets me pat myself on the back without injuring anything.”

“Hmm. I figured you had enough money to pay someone to pat your back for you.”

He snapped his fingers, scowling. “Dammit. Now she tells me.”

Somehow, I managed to laugh with him, though the questions in the back of my mind refused to quiet down. How could a sweet woman like Mrs. Knight stay with a man like her husband? Duty? Did she really love him? Or was she dependent on him? I couldn’t imagine being trapped that way, and I was more glad than ever I would never fall into that trap. Even if I had a man like Travis at my side, something long-term, I would want a job of my own—security I didn’t have to rely on anybody else for. Life could change in the blink of an eye, after all.

“I’ll tell you something,” he offered, lifting his head a little to look at me. He was wearing something close to a grin. “I didn’t know there were people like you, the way you describe your family. Loving and supportive, spending time together. I didn’t know families like yours existed, and now that you’ve met mine, you can see why,” he added with a snort of laughter.

“But your mom is so sweet.”

“She is.”His voice softened with fondness.“Anything that’s ever been good about me is thanks to her.Even when Dad insisted I had a nanny when I was growing up because all of his friends’ kids had nannies, she went out of her way to find the right one for me.”

“I’m glad she did, even if I don’t envy those poor women.Whoever they were.”

“Hey.”He gave me a brief, halfhearted scowl.“I was a perfect angel.”

I was thinking more about his dad harassing those women, but bringing him up wouldn’t help anything.“A perfect angel?Hang on a second,” I said, scooting away from him until I was on the other side of the bed.

“What are you doing?”he asked.

“Getting out of the way so I don’t get struck with a bolt of lightning after the lie you just told.”

“Not a chance.”He grabbed me and pulled me close no matter how I squealed and wiggled.“If I get hit, you’re coming with me.”

It scared me a little how good it felt to be with him when he was lighthearted like this.How easy it was to care.The more I learned about him, the more I wanted to know.The better I understood him, the more I dreaded the day when my six-month contract was up.There was still plenty of time on it, more than three months, but already there was an ache in my chest that got a little stronger every day I came closer to the end.I wanted to live in the moment, but there was always part of me looking toward the future.Wondering, hoping but too afraid to voice those hopes.

But wouldn’t it be nice if he didn’t want me to leave?Now that I knew Sofia and loved her more than I thought possible, I couldn’t imagine saying goodbye to her or

her daddy. The idea left me chewing my lip to hold back a wave of emotion.

For now, our laughter died down, and we settled into silence, lost in our thoughts. I wanted to stay awake, to absorb as much of this as I could, but sleep showed up and pulled me under.

Leaving me to dream about a future that might never be, no matter how much I wanted it.

15

TRAVIS

“You’re leaving early.” Lauren offered the observation without any further comment as I strode from my office. I had to remind myself she didn’t mean anything by it, even as the observation brought me up short and left me wondering who she thought she was talking to.

“I can catch up on anything else I need to work on at home.” Was she hoping I would send her home early since I would be gone for the rest of the afternoon? She could keep hoping. There was too much admin work to juggle. “You know how to reach me.”

Why was it so difficult for me to admit the truth? Sofia was starting school next week, and I wanted to spend a little time together. Between that and the ever-looming expansion kicking off in early December, I would see less of her than ever. I always knew that was possible, even probable.

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Until now, it hadn't affected me so deeply. All that mattered three months ago was finding a nanny to keep her safe and occupied while I took care of what was important.

Incredible how suddenly everything could turn upside down.

And it was no secret who was responsible.

The thought of Penny brought a smile to my lips as I left for the day, silently acknowledging those who greeted me in passing. She had changed everything, point blank. There had never been a time I didn't look forward to seeing my daughter at the end of the day, but now I hurried home. I could hardly wait to be with both of them since that was the only time I truly felt good. Even happy. At peace. Not even when I was married had I ever ducked out of work early, eager to get home. That probably should have been a sign, but what did I know? Back then, I still had faith in people that vows meant something.

The thought of Nicola threatened to tank my good mood, which was why I pushed her out of my mind, determined to focus on what was working in my life. The expansion was going off without a hitch. My partners in the UK and the Mediterranean were fully on board, working out the final details of our agreements. I could imagine taking trips out there, showing Sofia the wonders of Europe, taking her to look at all the art she could handle. She thought Mom and Dad's collection was impressive? Her head would explode when she saw the Louvre or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Thinking about it made me impatient, anxious for time to pass faster so I could do all of those things. But then that was a mistake, wasn't it? I didn't want her to grow up too fast, either.

Penny would love to hear that. I could see her smile in my mind as I drove home, chuckling to myself. It made her genuinely happy watching Sofia and me together. All she wanted was for the people in her life to be happy, something that took me time to realize, but it was clear now. Something fundamental had shifted between us the night of Mom's birthday party—a seismic shift, the kind that could rock even the strongest foundation.

Strong enough to leave me wondering if letting her go in December was the right thing to do.

The question rang out in my head, past the point where I parked in front of the house. There was squealing and splashing going on around back, and my heart lifted. I decided to head that way rather than going inside.

“Look at me! I'm a mermaid!” There was more splashing, though Penny's laughter rang out over it.

“Be careful!” she called out, still laughing by the time I opened the gate and let myself in.

“What is all the commotion back here?” I asked. There was nothing like Sofia's excited squeal when I came into view. The sound filled me with the deepest, most profound sense of gratitude. It was humbling knowing such a sweet, innocent soul was so damn happy, and all because I showed up. I had never thought about it before. How had I missed it?

“Look, Daddy! I'm wearing my floaties!” Sofia raised her arms overhead, staying close to the wall at the edge of the pool.

“That's good. Safety first. You look great out there,” I added, grinning at her in her goggles, her curls plastered to her head.

“What brings you home so early?” Penny asked, getting up from her chair close to the pool’s edge and greeting me. She was temptation personified in a white two-piece, more modest than the sort of bikinis I was used to seeing on the beach, but hot as hell nonetheless.

“I realized there was nothing I could do in the office that I couldn’t do here.” With Sofia happily occupied and several feet of space between us, I lowered my voice. “And there’s plenty I could do here that I can’t do there.”

Her cheeks flushed pink before she glanced behind her to where Sofia practiced her doggy paddle. “We have all night.”

My dick liked the sound of that, twitching in my shorts. “You know just the right things to say, don’t you?” God, I wanted to touch her. Her hair was dry, telling me she hadn’t gone in the water, too busy looking after Sofia.

“Daddy! Watch me!” Over Penny’s shoulder, I saw Sofia climb out of the pool. “Watch me jump!”

“Be careful!” I called out. At least she was wearing those blowup things on her arms, but still. They would do nothing if she fell on the concrete. “The patio is slippery.”

I then lowered my head close to Penny’s ear. “Like other things I plan on getting slippery.”

“You’re incorrigible,” she scolded, though it was clear she didn’t mean it. She wasn’t wrong, either.

With a growl, I asked, “Whose fault do you think that is? You do it to me.”

A high-pitched squeal split the air and stopped my heart a second before a loud splash

signaled Sofia falling into the water. She wasn't in the shallow end this time, either.

"Sofia!" Penny called out, marching to the far end of the pool. "What did we talk about? No jumping in the deep end."

Something was wrong. "Sofia?" I ran across the cement when there was nothing but frantic motion in the water. She was struggling for some reason.

"Sofia!" Penny's scream sent birds rising from the trees a second before she dove in. I kneeled at the pool's edge, holding my arms out and taking Sofia in them once Penny lifted her above the surface. She was coughing, choking, struggling to breathe.

"Honey. What happened? What did you do?" Fuck, I wasn't looking. She couldn't answer, too busy coughing up water, fighting for air.

"Turn her over!" Penny barked, climbing from the pool. "Across your leg, face down." I did as I was told, gripped by fear, cursing myself. Once Sofia was in position, Penny delivered a series of firm pats against her back that sent more water splashing onto the patio. Before long, Sofia was breathing more easily, relaxing a little.

I wasn't relaxed. "What did you think you were doing?" I asked, gathering her in a hug. "You know you're not supposed to go in the deep end."

"I was gonna dive..." She was trembling, clearly scared. "And I fell in. There was water up in my nose and my mouth."

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“She panicked and might have aspirated,” Penny muttered, running her fingers through her wet hair to get it out of her face. “She should go to the hospital. Just in case.”

“I agree.” I grabbed a beach towel from the lounge chair and wrapped it around Sofia while Penny pulled a cover-up over her head and shoved her feet into sandals.

“I’m okay, Daddy,” Sofia insisted as I walked to the car with her in my arms.

“I just want to be sure.” Fuck me, what if? There was no end to the ugly images racing through my mind by the time we set off with Sofia in Penny’s lap.

She didn’t say a word, staring straight ahead, gently rocking Sofia. I wondered if she knew she was doing it or if she was too far away to notice. A tear trickled down her cheek, but she made no move to brush it away.

* * *

“You were right to bring her in.” The doctor was warm, kind, sitting with us once he finished examining Sofia. She was happy as could be, watching television from a hospital bed in the ER, sucking on a lollipop. I kept one eye on her, watching through the glass door between us.

“She’s all right, isn’t she?” Penny asked. She looked and sounded like she was ready to lunge, eyes searching his face. She had barely said a word since we got there, settling on silently pacing the waiting area, chewing her nails until there was hardly anything left. Nothing I said seemed to get through to her.

“She’s fine,” he assured her, patting her knee. “But it’s always a good idea in cases like this to double check, which is why I’m glad you came in. Sometimes, a kid can look just fine, they can act normally, and no one would know they aspirated water. Sometimes, it can lead to serious complications. That’s not the case here,” he concluded. “She’s just fine. From now on, she shouldn’t be jumping into the deep end until she’s a stronger swimmer.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” I shook his hand, but Penny was too overwhelmed to speak, wrapping her arms around herself and staring at the floor as he left.

“Wait right here,” I said softly, heading to check on Sofia, who barely glanced at me, her attention glued to SpongeBob SquarePants on the screen. Her carefree giggles felt like a small relief, a stark contrast to Penny’s anxiety visible on the other side of the glass.

“I’ll be back in a minute, sweetheart,” I told her. Returning to Penny, I sat beside her and placed a gentle hand on her back, waiting for her to meet my gaze. “See?” I said softly. “She’s fine. These things happen.”

“I wasn’t watching. She could have...” She ducked her head before the tears began to fall. She covered her face with both hands, shaking and sobbing. I didn’t try to tell her to stop. I didn’t bother brushing it off, insisting there was nothing to be upset about.

Rubbing her back, I murmured, “Things happen, but you got her out of there quickly. Quicker than I reacted.”

“What if she... I can’t... I can’t go through that again.” A fresh burst of emotion tore its way out of her in the form of wracking sobs.

“No. Don’t do that to yourself.” She didn’t resist as I pulled her into my arms, holding her, rocking her the way she rocked Sofia in the car. “That didn’t happen this

time. You were there to help this time.”

“I wasn’t before!” Wrapping her arms around me, clinging to me, she sobbed, “I didn’t help b-before! H-he needed me!”

Jesus Christ. Just when I thought I had faced everything I could handle today. Her words, paired with the heartbreaking emotion behind them, threatened to crack my chest open. “You didn’t know,” I whispered in her ear, stroking her wet hair as she almost clawed my shirt to pieces. I wouldn’t have cared if she did.

“And I almost let Sofia drown! I would never, ever forgive myself.” Her tears soaked into my shirt by the time she lifted her flushed, wet face, eyes searching mine. Looking for answers. For absolution.

“Hey. I was there too. It was my fault for distracting you.” That was the truth, and every word was another weight on me. It was my fault. “People do stuff like that all the time without thinking about it. You didn’t panic. You got her out, you took care of her, and you’re here now. You did everything right.”

Her chin quivered, and her body shuddered, but she whispered, “Really? You’re not just saying that?”

“How long have you known me, and you think I would just say something for the sake of saying it?” I laughed softly, pulling a brief smile from her. “I mean every word, Penny.” Running a thumb over her cheek, I caught a fresh tear. “No one would ever question how devoted you are,” I told her. “Accidents happen. It wasn’t your fault just like it wasn’t your fault before. Don’t blame yourself.”

“If I had only woken up when he left.” Her gaze went unfocused as if she was staring through me. “I could’ve gone with him. Or stopped him. Something.” I had the feeling these were words she had spoken to herself countless times. “Sometimes I dream

we're back at the camper, and Josh is leaving, and I'm begging him not to go. Sometimes, he's out in the water, and I fight and struggle to reach him. He keeps getting farther away, calling my name and begging for help. But he's too far away..."

"Penny." I pulled her close to me, aching for her, her brother, and her family, but mostly for her—for the anguish in her voice and the way she shook almost violently in my arms. "Penny, Penny, it's not your fault. You couldn't help him then, but you helped my daughter today. You saved her." Pulling back, I held her tear-stained face at eye level. "You have to forgive yourself. You need to."

"It's so hard," she whispered, shaking her head. "All those years growing up, I was responsible for everybody. Nobody had to force me into it. That's how it was."

"I'm sure that was a lot," I murmured, gently brushing damp hair back from her forehead.

"It kind of became a habit." The breath she released was deep, shaky. "I guess I've been beating myself up worse than I realized."

"It sounds like you have, sweetheart." I was tongue-tied and awkward, unsure of what to say. I only knew I had to make her feel better. I couldn't stand the idea of her suffering any more than I could stand Sofia in pain. "Because if there's anyone who deserves a little forgiveness, it's you. I've never met anyone who deserves it more."

Impulsively, I kissed her, letting my lips linger against hers. She tasted like chlorine and salt and that special something unique to her. Tension flowed from her body as she melted against me, and I could not have been more relieved that it did. When I pulled back, she was smiling. The spark of hope I had come to depend on was back in her eyes.

"Come on," I said, taking her hand before standing. "Let's get her out of here, maybe

stop for burgers on the way home.It's a hanging-out-in-front-of-the-TV kind of night if there was one."

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The gratitude shining in her eyes did funny things to my heart, but I wouldn't have changed it for anything. Even though I knew it couldn't last forever, that she would have to leave in a few months, and we were never supposed to be anything to each other, anyway. The warmth she stirred up after I'd spent so long feeling cold meant pushing any thoughts of the future away in favor of enjoying the present.

Wasn't she always talking about living in the moment, anyway?

16

PENNY

"Are you sure?" His voice was low, hesitant, but the tension in his grip and the way his breath hitched told me just how much he wanted this. I braced myself against the shower wall with both hands. With his hand wrapped around my throat, he pulled my head back, and I turned so our mouths could meet.

I nodded, my breath hitching as I whispered, "I'm on the pill, and...I trust you."

His fingers tightened around my hips, his forehead resting against mine. "God, I've wanted this for so long," he murmured, his voice thick with restraint.

The first moment he pressed into me, skin to skin, his sharp inhale was the only sound I heard, sending a shiver down my spine. "So much better this way," he rasped against my ear, his voice trembling. "I can feel all of you."

God, he felt so good, filling me up like he did.

I braced myself against the shower wall with both hands, pushing back against Travis' deep, sure strokes. The hot water spraying down on us was nothing compared to the heat between our bodies. The friction built with every stroke, and the tension in my core went tighter. I didn't know where he ended and I began. I only knew he could never, ever stop fucking me. I would die if he did.

"So much better this way." His voice was a breathless rasp against my ear. "I can feel you around me."

His free hand slid down over my breasts, massaging them before traveling farther south and cupping my pussy. "I want to feel you come on me," he moaned, moving faster, his body slapping against mine. "I want to feel every second of this tight pussy squeezing me."

"Yes..." My head fell back against his shoulder. I was lost, totally locked in this moment.

If only it could last forever.

He took my unhappy grunt that escaped my lips before I could stop it as encouragement, driving himself harder, hitting places in me no one had ever touched.

And never will again once I leave.

No. I couldn't think about that. The orgasm that was so close a second ago started to fade. I didn't want to lose it. I didn't want to lose this.

The thumb he used against my clit was miraculous. It sent bolts of fire racing from my core, radiating through my limbs. That was what I needed. "Yes, just like that," I begged, arching against him, biting my lip to keep from shouting as the wave built, towering over me.

“That’s my girl,” Travis grunted out, pounding me mercilessly. “Let me feel it. Let me feel that pussy squeeze me.”

I came with a strangled cry, grinding my teeth, barely holding back the sound. These little early-morning get-togethers were dangerous, especially with Sofia on her new school schedule, which meant her internal clock wouldn’t let her sleep in.

A shattering orgasm rocked me head to toe, leaving me weak by the time Travis poured himself into me in a rush of warmth. His deep, throaty grunts touched something inside me, deep down inside, tainting my post-coital bliss with the lurking fears that had been growing in me day after day.

“Oh, fuck, you’re so good.” He pressed his lips to the side of my neck, sighing. “The best.”

Maybe it was wrong, but his comment made me giggle. “The best? The very best?”

“What’s wrong with that?” He slipped out of me, then reached for the body wash. We were supposed to be showering, after all.

“There’s nothing wrong with it. I just find it hard to believe. I mean, you could have anybody.” I grabbed the shampoo to wash my hair while he lathered up his chiseled chest and torso. I would never get tired of looking at him. Even now, with my body still tingling and his cum dripping down my thighs and coming down from the sort of high only he could take me to, I wanted to reach out and touch him. To trace the topography of his abs, to follow the happy trail of dark hair that led down to his impressive length.

There was no satisfying my craving for him.

But something would have to satisfy it, and soon. It was almost Thanksgiving. Time

had flown by on wings, and Travis was only a couple of weeks away from the expansion going through and the first ships setting sail.

He would fly out to Manhattan the first week in December to officially put his new offices into production. There were days on end when we hadn't seen each other while he dealt with business both out there and back here, where he still ran an extremely large and very busy company. There hadn't been any mention of what he would do with Sofia when he was out there. I wanted to ask as the curiosity was killing me, but every time I got the chance, I wound up chickening out.

Because as much as the unknown was torture, there was still room for hope. Hope that he would keep me once the six months were officially up. Hope that he would tell me he didn't want me to leave him but that he didn't want me to stay as a nanny, either.

He hadn't said the words. I was stupid to think he ever would. He'd never given me any indication I was staying, and even great sex didn't guarantee he would want a future. The love we shared for Sofia wasn't enough to build a relationship on.

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The accident with the pool had brought us closer, no doubt about it. At least one good thing had come out of a living nightmare that brought up all of the pain of losing Josh. Travis' kindness had even helped me understand how much blame I still placed on myself. But it still didn't mean he felt anything for me.

What if he was only trying to be kind? What if all of that bonding wasn't enough? For all I knew, he was already looking for a replacement for me. Otherwise, I couldn't think of a reason why he wouldn't bring it up.

The water was hot, but I shivered when an ugly thought occurred to me. I wanted to push it away, to ignore it, but it only loomed larger as I rinsed out my shampoo. What if he didn't want to say anything because he was worried we wouldn't do this anymore if I knew my job was almost up? I wanted to believe he was better than that. I needed to, or how was I supposed to live with myself after not only throwing away all of my principles but letting him into my heart? Letting myself fall for him the way I fell for Sofia.

My thoughts were still in turmoil by the time we finished showering and toweled off in his bedroom. "You know, if Sofia is going to New York with you for the grand opening, she'll need a coat," I pointed out. "It's cold in New York now, and she's probably grown since last winter."

"Good thinking. What would I do without you?" He winked at me as he passed me on the way into his dressing room. "I figure she can miss a couple of days of kindergarten for this. Colton and all the rest of them can't wait to see her again. They offered to have us stay with them rather than at a hotel, but I'm on the fence. I like privacy at the end of the day."

“Is that so? You didn’t care about your privacy last night when you pulled me in here.”

His eyes flashed when he turned back to grin. “And I made you come three times in the privacy of my bedroom, didn’t I? You know what I mean, smartass.”

Amazing, the way I could joke when my heart was sinking around my feet. Just ask him, you idiot. It was right there on the tip of my tongue. Am I going with you? Will I still have a job? Are you planning on getting rid of me without ever warning me?

Facts were facts. I’d made more than enough money to get a place somewhere and support myself for at least a handful of months before I would need to start earning a living again. But there was one problem.

I didn’t want another job.

I wanted to stay here...

... with them.

If only this were only about employment. That was the trickiest part. I couldn’t untangle the personal and the professional. The physical and the logical. Because I never should’ve slept with him in the first place. But I had, and there was no running away from reality.

There was also no running away from everything I had to do today. We would have Thanksgiving dinner here at the house—Mom and Dad had invited me home the way they did every year, and I might have considered accepting if I wasn’t worried that my time with Sofia was running short. I would make dinner for the three of us with Sofia’s help, and I wanted to get out to the store to pick up some of what I would need.

I laughed to myself on the way to my room to get dressed, remembering how shocked I was when Travis suggested we order a prepared meal from a restaurant. As far as I was concerned, half the fun of Thanksgiving was putting time and love into the food.

While he had a breakfast meeting before heading into the office to catch up on work, Sofia and I went to the supermarket. When she wasn't angling for some way to score extra treats, she was the ideal companion, oohing and aahing over the giant turkeys and asking a hundred questions.

"What's your favorite Thanksgiving food?" I asked. Not that she had many Thanksgivings under her belt, but they had been talking about the holiday at school lately.

"Pumpkin pie," she replied, maybe half a second after I asked the question. Locked and loaded with an answer. "We need whipped cream!"

"That sounds like a good idea." We talked about making pumpkin place cards for the table, and she picked out three small decorative pumpkins to add to the cart.

"You know what comes after Thanksgiving?" Her hazel eyes sparkled up at me.

"December?" I guessed, holding her hand and steering the cart with the other. An older woman overheard us in passing and chuckled.

"Yeeeah," Sofia sighed. "But what holiday?"

I pursed my lips and pretended to think about it while she groaned and huffed. "You'll have to remind me," I concluded with a shrug.

"Christmas! Santa Claus! Will you help me write my list for him?"

I wanted to crumple up in a ball on the floor, right in the middle of the cereal aisle. "Of course," I agreed because what else was I supposed to say? It depends on whether or not I'm still around? Your father hasn't given me the first clue whether I'm going to have a job after the first of next month? A contract was a contract. He was a businessman.

But it still didn't make any sense. It didn't feel right. We were more than a boss and a nanny. I was making Thanksgiving dinner for the three of us, for God's sake! I was more than an employee.

Everything looked different by the time we got back to the house, where Sofia ate lunch at the counter. I put away the groceries and made up a list of anything else I needed. I would wait a few days before buying the produce since it was only Saturday. The biggest turkey I could find was now defrosting in the refrigerator. Travis had talked about living on turkey sandwiches for a few days after Thanksgiving, so I wanted to be sure it would be enough.

As I made the list, my thoughts kept drifting off. What was wrong with me? There was a lot on the line here. I needed to know if I would have a job next month and if he wanted me to work with a new nanny to get her up to speed on Sofia's routines. She was what mattered in all of this.

Whatever happened, it would be for the best. Everything always turned out for the best.

Strange, but that was getting harder to believe.

At least when it came to this.

I considered taking a nap when Sofia took hers. Travis had kept me up half the night before the grand finale in the shower this morning. I needed to get my head on straight since I planned on talking to him after Sofia's bedtime. He'd told me this morning he would be back in time for that, if not dinner.

It was time to put myself out there and let the chips fall.

First, I went down to the kitchen to run the dishwasher. The house felt like mine after living here for almost six months. I knew every inch of it. I loved the spaciousness, the airy feeling. We had laughed so much here. How could I say goodbye? Maybe I wouldn't have to. Would I even have a choice?

I was halfway up the stairs when the doorbell rang. Thinking of Sofia, I hustled to the door before the bell rang again and woke her, pulling up the app connected to the doorbell camera along the way. There was a tall, willowy woman standing out there. Large sunglasses covered a lot of her face when she slid them up and nestled them in her thick, dark curls.

Instead of opening the door, I activated the microphone through my phone. "Can I help you?" I asked, watching her.

"I'm here to see Travis." She looked around, finding the camera and leaning in until her face was clearer. "And Sofia."

There was something about her that sent goose bumps racing up my arms. She was

familiar, though I had never met her. Why was my heart pounding? “They’re not available,” I told her. “Can I tell them who stopped by?”

“Sofia isn’t available? She’s four.” The woman folded her arms. “Who am I speaking to?”

“An employee of Mr. Knight.” Who was very, very suspicious. “And you are?”

Her pouty lips tugged upward at the corners. “I’m Sofia’s mother. And if this is the woman who thinks she can take my place, I have a few words for you too.”

17

TRAVIS

“Why don’t you head home and enjoy your holiday a little early?” I had the pleasure of watching my assistant’s eyes go perfectly round at the suggestion before pointing out, “We are as ready as we’re going to be at this point.”

It was hard to believe, but what I said was true. We were as prepared for the launch of our new East Coast operations as we could be. The month of November had been spent going over every last detail, anticipating all possible emergencies. Nothing short of an act of God could throw us off at this point. Even then, there were contingency plans in place for worst-case scenarios.

“Only if you’re sure,” Lauren mumbled as she started getting her things together at her desk. She knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth, especially on a Saturday night when she could easily have been out having fun.

“You’ve given me enough of your free time. We’ll catch up in person after Thanksgiving, and of course, it would be helpful if you could keep me abreast of

anything that comes through that seems like an emergency. Other than that?" I shrugged. "Get out before I change my mind."

She left so quickly, I was surprised she didn't kick up dust in her wake. "Happy Thanksgiving!" she called out over her shoulder, and I laughed softly, heading into my office to close up shop. It was an impromptu decision, giving her the next couple of weekdays off, but I wasn't naïve. Very little ever got done during a short week. The office was due to be closed starting Tuesday evening. Most people merely passed the time at their desks until then.

This was unusual for me. Understanding why a person would be in a hurry to get the hell out of the office and be with their family. I had no doubt a lot of that stemmed from my lack of any warmth in my own family. Any love I'd ever gotten from Mom was soon countered by my father. He sure as hell had never made holidays a priority.

I had a reason to hurry through getting home now. I doubted I'd be able to take it easy next week, the second to last before we launched our ships from our own private terminal at Port Liberty in Bayonne. But in between times, I would be with the people I wanted to be with most. I was the luckiest son of a bitch alive. And finally, I was starting to appreciate it.

Though it made no sense. On paper, nothing about Penny and me worked. She was too young, too innocent, naïve about so much of the world. Too sunny, too bouncy. We had made no promises beyond keeping things purely physical. It was wrong for me to act like we had something more, even in my own head. But I was tired of the notion. Telling myself it didn't mean anything every time we were together, when she fell asleep in my arms, or when we laughed over the sort of inside joke only we understood. I was lying to myself, and those lies were coming to a head sooner than I wanted to admit.

Now that I was on my way home, where Sofia would more than likely be in bed, but

Penny would be waiting up, there was one topic at the forefront of my mind. I had nothing else to distract me from it. Sitting in the back seat as the driver navigated the busy streets, I turned the problem over in my head. How to approach asking Penny to stay with us since that was the only conclusion that made sense?

Something reared up in me the way it had been doing for the past few months every time I considered keeping her with us. That part of me, not far beneath the surface, was unable to accept the idea of trusting. She had done nothing but show me how honest and true she was, but there was still no shaking the memory of having a rug ripped out from under me all at once, with no warning. I understood too well waking up one morning and thinking my life was as perfect as it could be—a thriving business, a beautiful wife, a daughter who made the sun rise and set for me. And by lunchtime that same day so much of it came crashing down.

Could I risk that again?

Could I put Sofia through it?

This wasn't all about me. Could I trust Penny not to make me regret letting her into my life? Did I have it in me to make her happy? To be the man she needed? Could I balance this new phase in my career with a new relationship? Then again, I'd been balancing it for months. Not that we were in an official relationship, but we were together in practice if not on paper. Would it be that much of a difference? To say, "Penny, I want you to stay in our lives, but not as a nanny. I want to take care of you and Sofia. I want us to be a family."

What if that wasn't what she wanted? She loved Sofia. That was obvious, but was it enough? Was I enough? I always thought I was for Nicola, and look where that got me.

It didn't matter. The past was just that. It was time to suck it up. I was lucky Penny hadn't pressed the issue yet, but that wasn't her style. Six months were almost up,

though, and she wouldn't stay silent forever.

In other words, it didn't matter whether or not I was ready to officially welcome this woman into my life. I would never be ready. Some things a man had to do before his brain could catch up and talk him out of the best thing that ever happened to him.

The idea of what I was about to do filled me with the sort of nervous anticipation nothing else could touch. Not even the thought of the splashy event we planned for the opening could touch the sort of pulse-pounding excitement that flowed through me once I stepped out of the car in front of the house. Home, sweet home. Our home? Would she want that? My heart raced with anticipation as I jogged up the steps and through the front door.

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Profound silence greeted me like I'd stepped into an empty church. It made me soften my footsteps as I roamed, searching for Penny, ready to blurt the question out. Will you stay? Could we make this more than physical? The kitchen was empty, without so much as a tea kettle on the stove to indicate she'd made a cup to unwind. Maybe she wasn't in the mood to unwind.

My dick thickened at the idea and added a little speed to my progress. I left the room after double-checking the locks on the patio door, intending to head upstairs. Maybe she was waiting for me in bed. I untucked my button-down shirt on my way from the kitchen, stopping only when I heard a sound coming from my office.

All right, then maybe she had decided to surprise me at my desk instead. There was no shortage of pleasant thoughts playing in my head like scenes from a porno by the time I rounded the open doorway.

She wasn't waiting behind my desk, wearing nothing but a smile. She wasn't stretched out on its surface, either, offering herself.

She sat in one of the two leather chairs facing the desk, tapping her fingers against the arm, drinking from what looked like a glass of whiskey. I had never seen her drink hard liquor before.

Right away, my senses went into overdrive. There was something ominous about the whole situation. "Long day?" I ventured, watching from behind her as she took another sip from her glass.

"Very long."

This wasn't like her. Facing away from me, she offered a flat answer that revealed nothing. My heart flooded with dread as I approached. "What happened? What did I miss?" What was I talking about? There was one reason she would act the way she did, and it made my heart plummet. "Sofia? Is she?—"

Shaking her head, then turning it partway to the side to glance over her shoulder, she replied, "She's fine. She's in bed, dreaming of pumpkin pie with extra whipped cream."

"Then what's going on?" I poured myself a drink because instinct told me this might go easier with a little liquid courage. It was the energy in the room, the way it seemed to suck all the air out until it was a challenge to breathe. "Are you all right?" I asked, turning her way. She was blank-faced, without the usual spark she carried. There was no radiance. No...her.

"I don't actually know." I waited for one of her typical, cheerful quips to follow that but was disappointed. Who would ever have guessed I would one day crave that irrepressible positivity? She adjusted the leg of her yoga pants, touching a fingertip to a small hole. Anything so long as it meant avoiding my gaze.

"Talk to me," I urged, choosing to sit next to her rather than take the desk chair.

"There was a visitor today." She crossed her legs, folded her arms, lowered her brow, and pierced me with a sharp look. "Maybe you're the one who should talk to me. Maybe I would've been better prepared."

It was better when she stared at her lap. "You're going to have to start speaking English because I don't understand."

Her chest rose and fell in a sigh. "Sofia's mommy was looking for her."

No. Not this. I was prepared for almost anything but this.

I reeled the way a man did when he'd been blindsided, lost in a fog but at the same time fighting to control the sudden spike of adrenaline. Somehow, I managed to speak over the roaring in my head, forcing air through my tightened throat to ask, "What do you mean? Be specific."

"Nicola." The name hung in the air for a moment, poisoning it. "We had a long talk through the security system. I'm sure you can look at the footage if you would like a recap." She wasn't angry. She sounded sad, confused. Empty.

I was angry enough for both of us. Furious, enraged, my blood pressure shooting through the roof as I pictured that worthless bitch's face in my head. "She had the nerve to come here?"

"She wanted to see her daughter."

"You believe that? She wanted to fuck with me!" I snapped. Her already pale complexion went ghostly white when I jumped out of the chair, ready to tear something apart. "What did she say?"

Leaning forward, she left her empty glass on the desk. "Like I told you, you can watch the recording."

"Fuck that, tell me now." My shadow draped across her frozen form when I stood over her. "What did she say to you? What did she tell you about what happened?"

"Sh-she said you were divorced." She wasn't so ballsy now, almost whispering. "And that she hadn't been allowed to see Sofia in years."

"That's it? That's all she told you? And you believed her?" I should've known. It was

all going too well.I was too close to happiness.

“Of course, I didn’t believe every word, though you haven’t given me much to base my skepticism on up to this point.I’ve wanted to ask you about her,” she confessed in a soft voice, almost cowering but staring me in the face regardless.“I didn’t because I thought you would share when you were ready.I didn’t know you’d been married.I didn’t know whether you were divorced or what.”

“What difference would it have made?”

Her eyelashes fluttered, and her mouth worked before she muttered, “It would have been nice to have an idea.So one day, when Sofia’s mother, your ex-wife, showed up at the front door, I wouldn’t be so stunned.”

“She was never supposed to come back here,” I growled out, my hands curling into fists.

Fists, which Penny eyed warily when asking, “And what made you think she would stay away?”

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“Let’s start with the money I gave her. The millions.” I sounded out the word slowly. “That money was supposed to keep her away from here, away from me, as far away as possible. So I would never have to see her face again. So she would never know my daughter.”

“You’re both her parents.”

“Nicola forfeited that, and she knows she did.” What brought her back? Why now?

Who was I kidding? I knew exactly why. The only surprise was that it took him this long. It had been three months since our disaster of a dinner. Maybe it took Dad time to stew for a little. Once the inevitable hangover cleared, he had time to replay every moment of that night to the point where his blood boiled and outrage started festering in his gut, burning a hole in him.

Incredible. The girl was still innocent enough that she could look stunned. “Are you telling me you paid her off to never come back?”

“What does it sound like I’m telling you?” My laughter was cold, short-lived. “Yes, that is exactly what I did. And she agreed to it, goddammit. She signed on the line and agreed to take that money and get as far away as she could go.”

“What did she do?”

Not this. Never this. That day, I told myself no one would ever know because it would mean admitting what a blind asshole I was. How they humiliated me. “I don’t want to get into it.”

“She knew about me.I mean, not that it matters,” she added, looking at the floor.“She accused me of trying to take her place.”

“Take her place?”My laughter filled the room, cold and disbelieving.“That would be difficult, seeing as how she was never a mother to Sofia.”Now, it all made sense.That was how he got her back here.Telling her about Penny.Telling her there was another woman moving in on which should’ve been hers.I had no doubt he played it up.Made the whole thing seem like a bigger deal than it was.I brought my slut to family dinner, something tawdry like that.

“But why?”She insisted on challenging me, getting up and following me as I paced the room’s perimeter.“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Why do you need to know?”I countered, almost shouting over the memories.Shock.Disbelief.The way he didn’t even bother to pretend to be sorry.

“Because I care,” Penny insisted behind me.“Don’t you get it?I care about you and Sofia.What is so wrong with that?”

“Some things... I won’t share.I can’t.”

She was too quick, darting in front of me, stepping up until her tits brushed my chest.“What do I need to do to show you I only want to help?”

“Some things can’t be helped unless you can go back more than three years and change things.Can you do that?Maybe you can take me all the way back to before I married that lying, cheating bitch.”

“All right.”She held up her hands, nodding.“She cheated on you.That’s despicable.And I am sorry.Why couldn’t you just say it?I’m sure it must be difficult, but it’s nothing for you to feel responsible for.”

This was too much. Listening to her fighting to understand, as if such a thing was possible. My chest ached, and I could hear the blood rush in my ears. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, and we need to drop this now,” I warned. What was wrong with me? Why did I think I could get away from the whole ugly thing? I told myself the money would be enough, and it had been until that bastard met Penny and made the mistake of thinking he could take advantage of her. That was what pulsed at the heart of the matter. Penny hadn’t fallen for his bullshit. She had called him on it.

“Stop pushing me away,” she pleaded. “Whatever it is, I’m here for you. It can’t be?—”

“She fucked my father.” As Penny’s mouth slowly dropped open, I threw my hands into the air. “Now you know. Happy? Or do you want the details?”

Sanity had decided to take a break. I was too far gone now. Pushed too far. With my hands on her shoulders, I guided Penny to one of the chairs and sat her down, then sat on the edge of the desk. Leaning down so we were at eye level, I began, “One day, I headed over there, thinking we had plans to meet up for lunch before I went back home, but Nicola’s car was parked in front of the house. I figured, good, she’s already here with Sofia. I walked into the house, went to Dad’s study.” My voice failed me for a second. “And there they were,” I continued. “She was laid out across his desk, and he was pounding her. My own father. My own wife. Thankfully, she had half a mind to leave Sofia with the nanny.”

I couldn’t stand the distraught look on her face for another second. The horror, despair, and pity. Standing and turning my back on her, I concluded, “Now you know why I swore I would never step foot in that house again.”

Once I fell silent, her short, ragged breaths filled the air. “Why didn’t you?—”

“Tell you? Why didn’t I share the most humiliating moment of my life?” Laughing, I

turned to find her eyes welling and her face flushed, which did nothing to ease the storm raging in me. “Congratulations. Now, you are one of four people who know what happened that day. Do you understand now? I want her nowhere near my daughter. She forfeited the right to be a mother. And you might be interested to know this is the first time since she packed her bags and disappeared that she has dared show her face.”

My drink sat untouched on the desk. I grabbed the glass, throwing back the contents all at once. The liquor burned its way through my chest, but that was nothing compared to the burning, pulsing rage threatening to blow my chest open.

“I am so sorry that happened.” God, the pity dripped from her voice, and the sound left me grinding my teeth in something close to hatred. Not for her—not really. I resented her reaction a little, but my hatred was reserved for the man who set all of this in motion years ago.

Through my teeth, I gritted out, “I don’t need your apologies.” What did I need? That was the problem. I didn’t have the first idea. Once again, I thought I had everything in place. Nothing but good things on the horizon. Until he died, there would always come a time when that bastard insisted on fucking everything up.

“It doesn’t have to mean anything.” She stood, her head thrown back with that persistent positivity of hers. “It’s a blip on the radar. It doesn’t have to set you back. Now, I’m glad I didn’t let her in, and I never will. She doesn’t deserve a place here.”

What did she expect? To comfort me? For me to fall into her arms? I could hardly look at her, thanks to the way she looked at me.

Like some broken thing.

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“I want to be alone.” Walking to the window, I added, “Thank you for listening, and I hope you understand that story goes no further than this room.”

“Okay...” Her disappointment rang out loud and clear, but she was out of luck. I had embarrassed myself enough for one evening. For the rest of my life. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” I said, gazing out the window and seeing nothing beyond the glass. How could I, when that afternoon in the study kept playing on a loop?

Penny took the hint and left me alone without another word.

Alone was good. I was safer that way. If anything, I could thank Nicola for reminding me of her betrayal before I made the mistake of opening myself up to someone new.

I’d made the right choice.

But I didn’t have to like it.

18

PENNY

How did everything fall apart all at once?

For days, I thought it over. I dissected every word, every glance, every conversation we had ever shared. I thought... well, I used to think a lot of things, and obviously, I had deluded myself every step of the way. Because an entire five days passed in

which Travis never once made an effort to make up for the things he said and the way he acted.

Even worse than that, he basically became a ghost, only haunting the house early in the morning and late at night. I would hear his footsteps in the hallway after I went to bed. Once or twice, those footsteps slowed down close to my door. I would hold my breath, waiting for him to knock. Or maybe to fling it open all at once.

He never did.

He kept walking, pacing his bedroom, the sound loud and clear when I poked my head out to listen.

I, of all people, understood what trauma could do, and what he had described to me qualified. I didn't want to imagine the ugliness of finding out my spouse not only cheated on me but did it with one of my parents. Not that I would put anything past his father.

But to take it out on me?

Not only on me.

I wasn't the only one feeling the change in the atmosphere.

"Why is Daddy sad today?" Sofia asked, helping me set the table for Thanksgiving dinner. To think, I had looked forward to it so much. Now, the thought of sitting down at the table with him only filled me with dread.

"He's not sad. He's busy." That was the safest response and not entirely untrue. He was busy taking his pain out on someone who only wanted to help. I was being naïve, thinking that was possible. If all of the time we spent together and everything we

shared wasn't enough to prove I cared about him—even loved him—nothing would work.

For now, it was a matter of going through the motions. Keeping things normal for Sofia's sake. Pretending I wasn't brokenhearted, imagining his pain, wishing like hell he would trust me. Why wouldn't he come around and at least speak to me instead of avoiding me like the plague?

Dinner was supposed to start at four. I pulled the serving dishes from the oven, where I'd been keeping the sides warm, then called out, "Turkey's served!" I could almost believe I felt cheerful.

Sofia's feet pounded down the hall. "Come on! Gobble gobble!" She had spent the day making turkey noises, something I was starting to wish her teacher had never demonstrated. Her hand was wrapped around Travis' as she pulled him along behind her.

He looked tired. A night spent pacing would do that. I took in the circles under his eyes, the way the corners of his mouth tipped downward. Still, seeing him after days of getting nothing but the occasional text about Sofia was a gift for my bruised heart. It leaped in my chest as he sat in his appointed chair.

He managed to glance my way before announcing, "Everything smells great." His gaze darted away, and it took everything in me not to beg him to look at me, talk to me, hold me. What had I done that was so wrong?

Sofia's excitement straightened my spine as I approached the table with a platter of carved turkey to go with the potatoes and other sides. Somehow, I managed to smile, saying, "Here we go. Eat up."

"Mashed potatoes, please." Sofia couldn't notice my weirdness or her dad's distant

attitude when she was so hungry for all of the food.“And turkey and rolls.”

“And green beans,” I added.She heaved a sigh but nodded.

“This is delicious,” Travis murmured after taking a bite of turkey.“Really good.”

“Thank you.”Wow.This was almost as awkward as dinner with his parents.

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I forced a grin for Sofia and managed to choke down bite after bite of food I couldn't taste. Why was he doing this?

"Penny?" Sofia asked, carefully scooping potatoes onto her fork. "When we go to New York, can we see the big Christmas tree?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat, glancing at Travis before asking, "How do you know about that?"

"I was telling my teacher about going to New York for Daddy's work." The pride in her voice almost brought me to tears. "She told me about it. Can we go?"

I swallowed a mouthful of turkey, gazing across the table and waiting for him to react. No way would I make a promise and break the poor girl's heart when I didn't keep it. He noticed my attentive stare and cleared his throat. "Penny won't be coming with us. I thought it would be nice, just you and me. Rose and the other moms out there can't wait to hang out with you when I'm busy with work."

So that was the answer. He had worked the whole thing out, arranging childcare and everything. He had thought it out and never bothered to bring it up until he was backed into a corner. A sizzle of pure disdain raced through me and almost stood my hair on end. The coward.

"Why aren't you coming?" Sofia's big hazel eyes turned my way, still innocent and unaware of what was really happening. That her dad thought I was good enough to bend over his desk but unworthy of a little respect. And definitely not worthy of being part of his life.

He spared me, speaking up when I couldn't. "Well, honey, we need to remember Penny's time with us is almost up."

I set down my knife and fork, shaking, staring down at my plate. There was no hint of caring in his voice. He might as well have been reading from cue cards. How could I have deluded myself into thinking there was something real between us?

Because that's what you do, dumbass.

I'd find someone who needed fixing and push up my sleeves, ready to jump in. It was all so obvious when I looked back. The dinner at his parents' house had been the turning point. When I knew he had to be hurting, that he never knew his father's love and approval. That was when my heart cracked open to let him inside because if there was anything I was a sucker for, it was taking responsibility for the people around me.

And all the time, I was only dealing with a younger version of Harrison Knight. I had nobody to blame but myself for the crushing pain in my chest and the roaring in my head. Travis had already shown me who he was, but I didn't want to see it.

"What? Why? Why are you leaving?" Sofia's pitiful, high-pitched question gave me no choice but to compartmentalize and unplug myself from the situation because if I let myself feel any of this, I would fall apart. I would shatter. And it wouldn't do her any good.

"It's not that I want to leave," I ventured, speaking slowly, trying to find the words that would help her. "I love you. Please, don't think this means I don't love you. But..." I couldn't go on. Not when she looked so stricken.

"You don't want to be with me?" she whispered in time for the first big teardrops to overflow onto her cheeks.

Before I could say a word, Travis set down his silverware. “What did Penny just say? She loves you very much. But this is her job, and the job is up now. Maybe the two of you can see each other again sometime.” Something told me he didn’t mean that. Something told me he had no intention of setting eyes on me again after this.

“I’m sorry, sweetie.” Using my napkin, I dried her tears as I fought back my own. Maybe if I hadn’t pushed him to tell me about Nicola, this wouldn’t have happened. He wouldn’t resent me.

What little fun there was dried up once the conversation was over. I wasn’t so afraid to look at him anymore. There was none of that stomach-fluttering, heart-racing uncertainty anymore. I was now positive about quite a few things, like how I was going to give him a piece of my mind.

He wanted to throw me out of his bed, his home, his life? Fine. I wouldn’t go quietly.

“Can I watch TV?” Sofia set down her fork after picking sullenly at what was left on her plate.

“You didn’t finish your beans,” Travis pointed out, gesturing to her plate with his fork. Either he refused to see the pain and distress she was in, or he chose to ignore it. Didn’t he see what he was doing? He hated his father probably for doing the exact same sort of shit he was doing to Sofia now. Pushing her feelings aside, pretending they didn’t exist because it was easier for him to shut down.

Just like he was shutting down with me.

“Go ahead,” I replied, ignoring the beans in favor of lovingly combing my fingers through her curls. My wink at least made her frown waver a little. “Later on, we’ll have lots of pie.”

She got out of her chair, hesitating, then hugged me. "I love you, Penny," she whimpered.

Travis shifted in his chair. I could see him from the corner of my eye as I wrapped my arms around her. Do not cry. Don't make it worse. "I love you too. I love you so much, sweetie."

"Then don't go," she begged, her head on my shoulder.

"Sofia." Travis' voice was firm, almost sharp. "What did we already talk about? This isn't Penny's decision. It's mine."

I pressed a kiss against her forehead, smiling for her sake. "You go ahead and watch TV." She didn't need to be around for what came next. All of the love I had nurtured in my heart for him before I ever knew it existed was beginning to harden. To turn cold. Because by turning away from me, he was turning away from her too, ruining her life because he couldn't handle his shit.

I waited until I could hear the television in the living room before setting my napkin aside and pushing my plate away. "Congratulations. You've given your daughter a Thanksgiving to remember."

"I'm sorry. Were we supposed to tell her you would be joining us in Manhattan? Would that have made things easier?" He wouldn't respect me by making eye contact, finishing what was left on his plate. At least one of us seemed to have an appetite.

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I folded my arms on the table, lowering my voice. To hell with keeping the peace. To hell with glossing over everything with a positive word. Some things needed to be said. “Listen to me because I mean every word of this. You are a cold-hearted son of a bitch for what you just did.”

His head snapped up. “Listen to you,” he muttered, releasing a silent laugh.

“Laugh it up,” I whispered fiercely enough to wipe the smirk off his face. “She’s not laughing. She’s heartbroken.” So was I. It was a miracle I was still breathing now that my heart was in tatters. I channeled it, used it to fan the flames of the anger I felt for Sofia’s sake.

“What would you rather do? Get her hopes up?”

“Dammit, if this was what you wanted, you should’ve told her ages ago. To give her the chance to get used to the idea.”

His nostrils flared, and his jaw ticked as he set his silverware on his plate. “I have my reasons, which are my business. She is my daughter, which makes her my business, as well. Thank you for everything you did for her, but none of it gives you the right to lecture me.”

“Bullshit,” I spat. It was rewarding watching him react in surprise, even shock. Satisfaction poured over me, warm and comforting. “We both know what this is all about, so why don’t we drop the pretenses and get straight to it? You hate the fact that I know about what happened in your past. You hate the idea that we might get close, and I might hurt you. You hate it so much, you would kick me out of your life if

it means not getting hurt again, no matter how it affects your daughter,” I concluded.

He absorbed my whispered tirade without reacting, waiting until I went quiet before asking, “Are you finished? Or is there some other brilliant insight you want to share?”

You are just like your father. It would’ve felt good to get that off my chest and out in the open. There would’ve been a solid few seconds when I was on top of the world, knowing I had slid the knife of truth between his ribs. But then, those few seconds would end, and my pride would sour. I’d have to live the rest of my life knowing I had hurt somebody I used to love. Still loved. If I hadn’t, none of this would’ve hurt as much. Instead, I bit my tongue, screaming inside but staying silent.

He tossed his napkin onto his plate, shrugging. “Let’s call it what it is, Penny. We had fun. You were good with Sofia, and you never have to worry about getting a glowing recommendation from me. I have nothing but positive things to say.”

“Then why?” I demanded, tapping my fists against the table as hard as I dared. “Why are you making me leave?”

“This was a six-month contract.”

“To hell with your contract! You could extend the damn contract if that’s what really matters, but it isn’t. Right?” Folding my arms, I sat back in my chair, fighting the impulse to run, scream, and cry. I forced myself to face him head-on. “Well? I’m right, aren’t I?”

His sharp jaw ticked again, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of assuming it meant he was fighting his emotions. Denying himself. He was probably working to come up with another excuse for his cowardice. “What do you want me to say?” he asked.

“I want you to tell me why! Why did you change?” There. It was out. I couldn’t take it back.

“Maybe I realized how wrong it was for things to get out of hand between us in the first place,” he suggested. There was no smirk this time. Nothing but flat, emotionless words my brain refused to believe. “Or maybe you saw more between us than what existed.”

Had I? Dozens of memories flooded my mind all at once—memories of dinners together, the secret grins we used to exchange whenever Sofia said something funny, the day we took her to the hospital, him taking my hand after we walked away from his father’s dinner table, and the absolute security I felt at his touch. “I can’t believe that. I won’t.”

His shoulders lifted. “That’s up to you.”

He wouldn’t give an inch. I had to get through to him. I had to make him see. “You’re not just a cold bastard. You’re a coward.”

That did it. He arched an eyebrow, his eyes glittering. “Excuse me?”

His reaction gave me the courage I needed to keep going, and once I did, the words came pouring out. “You heard me. You are a coward. I am sorry terrible things happened. I am sorry you were betrayed. But to use that as an excuse to push me away? That is pathetic. You don’t have the guts to try again. You would rather break Sofia’s heart. You are just like—” I stopped myself just in time, swallowing the urge to compare his cowardly actions to those of his father. I couldn’t do it for Sofia’s sake. Things were already so heated, and he didn’t understand that behind the cold mask he wore were actual feelings.

I bit the inside of my cheek. It wasn’t worth it. It was best if I left quietly.

His mouth twisted, his expression darkening with irritation. “Now, who’s the coward?”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning you can pretend all you want that this... whatever it is,” he muttered, waving a hand at me. “Is all for her sake. Why don’t you admit you forgot the terms we set? It’s not my fault if you got the wrong idea. I never led you on.”

My God. He was right. He never led me on. He never gave me a single hint we would stay together, personally or professionally. I had made everything up in my head. This was on me for giving him so much of my heart without being asked for it.

I was wasting my time trying to force him to admit something that didn’t exist in the first place. He was the boss. I was the naïve employee. I had wasted six months on a fantasy. “You need to talk to Sofia,” I whispered, defeated.

“Once again, I can handle my daughter on my own.” He pushed his chair back, wearing a scowl that turned him into the image of his father. Again, the impulse to let that insult fly was tempting, but I loved him too much to do it.

Some people didn’t want to be loved if it meant opening themselves up to being hurt. He was one of them. That fear was stronger than anything he might have felt for me.

So strong, I sat at the table long after we were finished eating, staring at the blank nothing that was my future now that I knew for sure I could never be enough to make him forget the past and take a chance on life.

TRAVIS

“To the East Coast branch of Knight Shipping.” Spencer lifted his glass my way, beaming from the other end of the table around which our friends sat, along with Colton, Lucian, and the rest of their group. The women had gone home with the kids, with Rose offering to take Sofia back to the hotel for me. She and Eloise were making good friends in spite of their age difference.

“I’m sure they’ll all fall asleep before you guys wrap things up,” she had pointed out as they were leaving. “We can take the girls home with us once you get back to the hotel.”

She was an angel, but then everyone had been so welcoming from the beginning. Now, we celebrated tomorrow’s events, marking the first day of business and the culmination of months of work. It didn’t feel real, facing the results of everything I had poured so much of my time and effort into. My crew had flown out to celebrate with me. We were hours from the launch of the Sofia II, and yet it didn’t feel real. I was almost numb going through the motions.

“You’re getting some great coverage,” Clayton observed, nodding in Lucian’s direction. His family company, Diamond Media, had made a point of getting the word out in their extensive list of publications and social media accounts. It felt wrong, thinking of my father at a moment like this, but his face came to mind as I sipped a glass of truly excellent scotch. Let him open to the business section of the paper and see he hadn’t broken me. That I could absorb the hits and move forward despite him.

“So, what happened to that nanny you had with you last time?” Noah asked, wincing when I scowled. “Sienna told me not to mention it, but she’s not here. And I’m curious.”

“We sort of assumed things ended badly,” Miles admitted. “But it’s none of our business.” He exchanged a look with Noah, who lifted a shoulder.

“The contract ended, and she went on her way.” To hell with savoring my drink. I poured the rest of it back, then signaled for another from the server waiting discreetly in one corner of the room. Dammit all to hell. I had managed to go an entire five minutes without thinking about her too.

“But she was good, wasn’t she?” Spencer asked, his head tipping to the side as he studied me down the length of the table.

“It seemed like she was a great fit,” Lex added, looking at me like he’d never seen me before. “I know she got on your nerves, but?—”

“She got on your nerves?” Colton asked. “It seemed like you got along great. And she was fantastic with Sofia.”

Every word they spoke ratcheted up the already unbearable tightness in my chest. “I don’t want to talk about it.” Already, we had spent too much time on the topic. They might as well have poked at an open wound. I covered it up, but no matter how I tried to ignore the pain, it was there. It was raw, and it ached with every beat of my heart.

I had dealt with pain before. I could do it again. That wasn’t enough of a reason for me to keep her around. “She was an employee, and she isn’t anymore.” Only uneasy silence followed my announcement. What was so wrong with making a staffing change?

“Remember what we talked about?” Lex asked. He refused to take my warning stare for what it was. God forbid he take a fucking hint for once. “The whole revolving door of nannies? Did the girl steal from you or something? Did she hurt Sofia?”

“No!” I tried to laugh it off, but even I heard how flat the sound was. “Can we drop it?”

“What did you do?” Spencer rolled his eyes, groaning. “Did you run her off? And no, I’m not going to drop it,” he grunted out when I shook my head at the ceiling. “We’ve seen you go through a harem of shitty nannies who couldn’t take care of your kid, and you let go of the first really good nanny you’ve ever found.”

“I didn’t run her off, dammit. It was better for her to go. Better for both of us.”

Silence fell over the table again, but that didn’t mean there weren’t half a dozen conversations going on as glances were exchanged, eyebrows raised.

“You stupid ass.” Clay leaned over and shoved me, and he wasn’t playful about it. “You fucked her, didn’t you?”

“I’m not talking about this.”

“Oh, he fucked her,” Lex decided, and I was starting to regret ever inviting them out here.

Colton shook his head, smirking. “Sleeping with the nanny. The oldest story in the book.”

“Man, you had to notice the kind of difference she made with you.” Unlike the others, Spencer wasn’t busting my balls. He seemed downright concerned. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you were a hell of a lot more fun to be around when she was

waiting for you at home. We went for drinks around Halloween, remember? You were like the Travis I used to know.”

“That’s true,” Lex agreed. “I didn’t notice how dark and negative you went until you weren’t like that anymore. The timeline matches up. Penny showed up, you got better.”

“There I was, thinking the women had already left for the night.” My joke didn’t get me anywhere, but then it wasn’t really a joke. “I’m not looking for a lecture. I’ve got too much on my mind with tomorrow coming up.”

“If you had half a brain in your head, you would go get her.” Spencer held up his hands in surrender when I glared at him. “That’s all I’m going to say.”

I couldn’t think about this with so much else on my mind. Not alone, and definitely not in front of them. Colton was smart enough to change topics, talking about the upcoming holidays and how they planned to spend the second half of the month at their cabin in Vail. Their conversations faded to the background while I brooded over my scotch. Everything would be better in time.

They didn’t understand.

They never would.

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Neither will Sofia. The thought of her made my heart sink. Nothing I did could make her happy. No amount of promising everything we would see together in the city when I had free time. No amount of promising all the fun she would have with Eloise when I was busy or that the rest of my time would be hers. It wasn't enough. I wasn't enough.

It wasn't yet midnight when I pushed back from the table. "I should get to the hotel, let Rose off the hook. She's already been so kind." Colton offered to go with me to pick her and their girls up.

With promises to see each other in the morning the rest of the group split up, everyone heading to their respective hotels and homes.

"Listen," Colton offered on our way out to his car, where a driver waited. "I'm not saying I understand what's going on with you right now, and I don't believe that having kids makes me an expert, but Rose sent me this."

He handed me his phone, where a text from his wife read like an accusation.

Rose: The poor kid is so sad. I heard her crying when she was getting her pajamas on, and she said she misses Penny the most at bedtime.

I hadn't caught my breath by the time he tucked the phone in his pocket. "If all of this is because you got too close to Penny, but Penny wanted to stay, you should have tried to hang onto her. We all saw the way you looked at her when we had dinner last time you were here. You wanted to feast on her, not the meal."

There was no use in arguing. I had already argued with myself since that night in my office when I bared my soul and immediately regretted it. “It’s not that simple.”

“It never is, or maybe it’s just that we make things more difficult for ourselves than they need to be.”

He let me keep my thoughts to myself the rest of the way to The Plaza, where Rose sat curled up on the sofa in the front room, watching a movie. “She’s fast asleep,” she whispered on our way down the hall. Her girls were asleep in the third bedroom, the room Penny had slept in the last time we were here. The room where we were together that first night.

I should’ve taken a different suite.

“Thank you so much,” I told Rose as she and Colton carried their daughters to the front door. Both girls were out cold, the way only little kids could sleep. What I wouldn’t give for that kind of sleep.

I would drop Sofia off at their penthouse in the morning, where she would stay with their nanny, Bianca, and their girls. We confirmed those plans before they left, then I locked the door and turned off the television. Not that I’d be able to sleep. I was a kid on Christmas Eve, bursting with nervous energy and anticipation.

And guilt. Enormous, crushing amounts of guilt. Guilt, which left me reaching into my pocket for my phone. I might not be able to set things right with Penny, but I could return Mom’s multiple phone calls over the course of dinner. I’d promised to check in with her sometime before the ship launched, but of course, other things kept getting in the way.

Standing at the window overlooking Central Park, I called her, ready to apologize for leaving her hanging all night. “Hi. Sorry, I’m only getting back to you now,” I

murmured when she answered.

“It’s all right.I knew you would be busy.”

Something in her voice made me stand up straighter, pay closer attention.“I take it you are still not coming out?”I asked.It was a long shot, thinking Dad would let her make the trip to support her son.

“Sweetheart.”She heaved a sigh.“As much as I would like to be there with you, I’ve decided to take a trip on my own.You don’t need me there, feeling the way I do.I’m on my way to the airport now.”

“A trip?What’s going on?”And why did she sound like she was on the verge of tears?“What did he do?”I blurted out because it was the only logical conclusion.He did something to her.He finally broke her spirit.

“I’m sorry.I am so sorry.”Soft weeping reached my ear from thousands of miles away.“I wasn’t going to do this.I only wanted to wish you luck tomorrow.I’m going to your Uncle Stephen’s house in Monterey for a little while.”

Mom’s older brother hated my father as much as I did, if not more.Uncle Stephen hadn’t been in the same room as him in at least ten years.“But why?What happened?Do I need to come out there?”

“Absolutely not.”Then she whimpered.“I wish you had told me.”

I closed my eyes and braced myself.“Told you what?”

“I wouldn’t have pressed the issue for so long if I had known what he did.”

Fuck everything.

Fuck him, fuck Nicola, fuck the weeping Mom tried to silence but couldn't.

"How do you know?" I asked, wincing at the sound of her pain.

"She came here. At first, I thought I was imagining things. I couldn't be hearing her voice. You insinuated she was unfaithful when the two of you split up, so I was understandably angry and wanted to ask what right she had to enter my house. I found her in the study with your father. She was shouting, he shouted over her. She blamed him. Told him..."

"You don't have to say it," I urged.

"No. I want to. All this time. It needs to be said." She drew a halting breath. "She said it was his fault. That if you hadn't caught them together, none of this would've happened. The divorce. She would have her daughter. She would have her husband. He accused her of taking the money and running, not caring until he called and bought her a plane ticket to town. It was ugly and vicious."

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“But she did talk about me catching them together,” I muttered. So I was right. He had brought her to town to ruin what little happiness I had managed to piece together.

“Yes, she did.” She released a choked sob. “Oh, Travis, I can’t imagine how terrible that must’ve been for you.”

“You were never supposed to know.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I know who he is. I’ve always known. I was willing to look the other way, and that was my decision. But there are lines a person does not cross.” Something fierce leaked into her voice. “I wish you had told me what he did to you. I could have made an informed decision before this. If anything, I’m most upset that you didn’t think I could handle it. Is that what you think of me?”

“No, Mom. I wanted to spare you. That’s all...” I paused, thinking about her choice of words. An informed decision. “You aren’t going to Monterey for a short trip, are you?” I asked.

She left me hanging for a silent beat, then replied, “No. I don’t plan on going back to your father. We’ll settle everything through our lawyers.”

“I should be out there with you. You shouldn’t go through this alone.”

“I’m not alone. I have your uncle and your aunt and my friends, all of whom I’ve been wanting to visit, anyway.” She managed to laugh. “Is this what freedom feels like? I’ll be fine, probably much better off. I only needed a push, and now I wonder why it took me this long to leave.” She cleared her throat, then continued in a firmer voice,

“Besides, you have big things to do. I’m so proud of you, honey.”

Now that the truth was out, my tongue felt looser. There wasn’t anything holding me back now from letting her know how I felt. “I’ve done most of it to spite him, to be honest with you.”

“And you’ve been successful beyond anything he predicted.” It wasn’t only my tongue that was loose now. “It drives him mental, seeing how you’ve expanded. Knowing you were able to forge relationships he could only dream of. You inherited his business savvy, but he doesn’t have your savvy when it comes to people.”

“I got that from you,” I pointed out. There was a deep sense of satisfaction, no doubt, knowing I got under his skin. That it killed him to see me eclipse him.

Strange how it didn’t change anything. There was no award for driving Dad crazy.

“You got a lot of things from me,” she agreed with a soft laugh. “More than you know, I think. I only hope now that you’re able to take a step back and put as much effort into the rest of your life as you have into your business. Know that my heart is with you tomorrow, honey.”

The rest of my life. Yes, I had to manage that now. I had achieved my ultimate goal, leaving Dad in the dust where he belonged. One question echoed along with my footsteps after the call was over, and I walked down the hall to Sofia’s room. What now?

She was so innocent, pure, sleeping soundly as I watched from the doorway. Why shouldn’t she? She hadn’t destroyed the first good thing to come into her life in years. She didn’t have the memory of Penny’s tearful pleas to keep her awake.

There hadn't been any pleas after Thanksgiving dinner. She had shut down, only making one request the day she moved out. "Take Sofia to the park before I go. I couldn't stand her being here when I leave." I had done that after the two of them said their goodbyes. All things considered, it felt like getting off easy.

It wasn't. It meant sitting and watching my daughter go through the motions of playing before giving up and sitting next to me on a bench. Telling myself to go back and stop her. That it wasn't too late to take back the things I said and the way I said them. If I admitted I loved her, it might make things right.

And I did.

It took knowing she was leaving and that I had pushed her away to realize how I felt. Sitting in the park, staring at the rest of my life without the promise of her waiting for me when I got home. That I would never hear her and Sofia giggling in their art studio or baking cookies together. I would never touch her again. So many nevers, all of them piling on me until my back was ready to snap.

By the time I came to my senses and returned to the house, I was too late. She was gone. Smart girl. I would only find another way to hurt her. She deserved better.

Now, a week of fighting the desire to reach out and apologize was biting me in the ass. I crept to the bed, reaching down to run a hand over Sofia's head. What kind of stupid shit convinced himself a four-year-old could handle something so sudden?

She stirred, turning her head to blink sleepily at me. "Go back to sleep," I whispered, bending down to kiss her forehead. "Sweet dreams." One of us should have them, anyway.

"Daddy?" she murmured in response. "Are you mad at me?"

“Of course not,” I said it abruptly, almost brusquely, since being angry with her was the last thing on my mind.

She paused for a big yawn, asking, “How come you sound like it?”

“I don’t mean to,” I confessed.

“Do you still love me?”

“Honey.” Sinking to one knee next to the bed, I met her eye to eye. “Listen to me. There is never going to be a day when I don’t love you. Nothing you could ever do or say would make me stop loving you. You are the greatest kid in the whole world. You are always loved. Okay?”

She nodded, but for some reason, her chin kept quivering. “What about Penny?”

Of course, that’s where this is coming from. “What about her? You told her to leave. Did she do something bad? She liked you, she told me so. You were friends.” Her eyes shone thanks to the tears in them.

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“Sometimes, friends disagree about things. They end up getting in fights or deciding they can’t work together anymore. But I didn’t tell Penny to go because I was angry,” I insisted, weaving a web of lies with every word that spilled out of my mouth. “The job was over.”

“But I still need her!” The tears overflowed, followed by more. “You don’t know all of our nighttime songs. You don’t know how to make banana chocolate chip cookies. You don’t do all the voices in my books when we read at night. You’re not the same, Daddy,” she concluded.

Wiping her cheeks with my thumbs, I said, “I’m the same daddy I’ve always been.”

“No...” she sniffled, “... you’re not fun Daddy anymore. I miss when you were fun.”

Out of the mouths of babes. Her words soaked into my head and lit up places that had been dark for weeks. Like the faint trail of sparks as a firework climbed into the sky before it exploded.

My explosion came in the form of getting on my feet. What the fuck was I doing? I didn’t have the first idea. I only knew this was the first moment of complete clarity since the night I told Penny everything.

“I’ll tell you what,” I offered as I pulled my phone from my pocket. “You get to sleep now. I have a big surprise for you in the morning. We’ll be getting up very early.”

“To go to Rose’s house,” she said, yawning again. “I know.”

“No, honey.” After giving her forehead another kiss, I tucked her in again. “Something else. You’ll see.”

It would take time to get the jet fueled and crewed, but I had no doubt we’d be on our way by dawn at the latest. Before reaching out to my pilot, though, I sent a group text announcing my plans for tomorrow had changed.

20

PENNY

“In spite of everything, it is nice to have you home for a little while.” Mom offered an apologetic smile on her way to the table, holding a steaming mug in each hand. “And now I get to take care of you, which you know I miss doing, especially now that everybody’s left the nest with your sister away at school.”

There was something about being home with her and Dad. I could stick my head in the sand and lick my wounds. I needed a break to think things over after something I thought I was prepared for ripped my heart to shreds.

They would be in New York now. Today was the big day. It was coming up on eight in the morning here, meaning there was probably around an hour until the first ship sailed, and everybody celebrated and patted each other on the back.

I accepted the coffee Mom handed me. She remembered how I liked it. “Nobody has ever made a cup of coffee as good as yours,” I told her with a happy sigh after taking the first sip.

“I pride myself on that.” She reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear before settling back in her chair. On a sunny, peaceful morning like this, I could usually see the bright side of anything. Normally, my heart would be full of hope. Why waste a

beautiful day feeling sad?

I had finally found something that tanked even my spirit. I wasn't strong enough to overcome this. Just the thought of trying left me staring into my coffee cup, blinking back tears. How could he? Did I ever mean anything to him besides hired help and a good time after Sofia was in bed for the night?

Sofia. "I miss her," I confessed in a whisper, picturing her dimples and bright eyes. Was she happy? Was she having fun in New York? Would Travis take her to see the tree? It occurred to me that was what bothered me the most. Would he listen to her, pay attention to what she needed?

"I know, sweetheart. You have such a big, loving heart." Mom smiled at me in her familiar way. "Sometimes, the people who love the hardest are the ones who hurt the easiest."

Staring into my mug, I decided, "I've learned my lesson. No more letting myself get attached so fast. I should've known better."

"Are you talking about Sofia now?" she asked. "Or her father?"

"Both..." I sighed, though it was Travis I was thinking about. I was still waiting for him to call and tell me he'd come to his senses. When would I grow up? "I'm not saying I'll never love anyone again because I don't want that to be true. I want to have that courage. Just... I'll guard my heart from now on." And I wouldn't give it away unless I knew the guy wanted it. Never again. It hurt too much.

"Tell me something positive that came out of this experience," she suggested.

I had to be truly heartbroken because her suggestion made my teeth grind together. Was this what I put Travis through? Who knew it was so irritating to be told

to look at the bright side when it was nowhere to be found?“I don’t know.He did help me with some of my feelings about...” Nope.Wrong topic.I should’ve rattled off something nice about Sofia instead.

Mom nodded slowly because, of course, she understood without me needing to speak Josh’s name.“How did he do that?”

I explained the accident in the pool, leaving out the part where we were flirting shamelessly at the time.“I don’t think I understood before then how guilty I’ve felt all these years,” I mused.“Like I should’ve saved Joshie somehow.When Sofia was struggling in the water, it was like reliving every single nightmare I’ve had since he drowned.Not being able to rescue him.”

“Honey.”Her palm cupped my cheek, a familiar gesture sweet enough to make me want to cry.“I hope we never made you feel guilty.”

“No, never,” I insisted.“I did it all on my own.”

“Eh, maybe we did have something to do with it.”The crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes deepened when she narrowed them.“We gave you too much responsibility from a young age.It wasn’t up to you to rescue Joshie, honey.I am so sorry you ever felt like it was.”

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“I know.I just have to remind myself.I’m getting better at it,” I insisted when her features pinched in pain.“But it’s not easy.I guess it’s still better than carrying all that unresolved guilt around.”

“Then, even though this bigshot acted like a real jerk...” she decided, “... the time you spent with him was worth it.”I could see her point, and it left me feeling slightly less miserable.It was better than nothing.“As for what comes next...” she continued, going back to her coffee, “... you can take all the time you need.Why not look for a job out here, stay in your old room?”

I loved the offer, at least on the surface.“Lizzie and Sarah will be home for winter break next week, right?I don’t know if I can go back to sharing a room with my sisters.”

“We’ll move the girls into Bryan’s room.Just for now.It’s not like he’s using it, living all the way out in Chicago.”Funny how she came up with that all of a sudden.Almost like she had already thought it through.“It’ll be nice having so many of you back home.”

The fact was, I didn’t have that much of a choice at the moment.It would take time to find an apartment in my price range, which right now was basically as cheap as I could find.I wanted to save as much as I could since there was no guarantee how long it would take to find another job.

It was good thinking about these things because they distracted me from the hurting.If I didn’t stop trying to move forward, I would sink.

There was a soft knock at the front door. We exchanged a glance as Mom stood, wrapping her homemade cardigan around her thin frame. "I keep telling your father we need a No Solicitor sign for the front door," she grumbled, running her fingers through her gray-streaked bob and leaving the room.

I nursed my coffee, wondering about my next move. Staying here would solve a lot of problems, but did I want to settle down in Sacramento? I had always seen myself living in LA or nearby. Maybe San Francisco? But real estate was so expensive there.

I didn't realize how long Mom was gone until she came back. I was so deep in thought I'd lost track of time. "Was someone trying to sell you something?" I asked.

She shook her head slightly. "It was someone for you." A soft, bewildered laugh bubbled out of her when she stepped aside in the doorway. Finally, a small tornado came tearing through, one with bouncing brown curls and hazel eyes that gleamed.

"Penny!" Sofia squealed as she ran to me with her arms out. I turned in my chair and caught her just in time, pulling her close before I knew what was happening.

"Oh, my gosh! Oh, sweetie, I missed you so much!" I covered her face with kisses, squeezing her again. "What are you doing here?"

My question shook me out of my surprise. The kid hadn't walked all the way here. She wiggled out of my arms and hopped up and down in front of me, clapping. "We surprised you! Daddy surprised me, then I surprised you!"

"Where is Daddy?" I wiped away my joyful tears, looking toward the doorway, waiting with my heart in my throat.

And then he was there, and all the love I thought I talked myself out of feeling came roaring back as strong as ever. I drank in the sight of him, feasting my eyes on every

line of his face, on lips I craved, in the eyes beautiful enough to make me forget everything I thought I knew. I practically had to hold onto my chair to keep myself in place and not run to him the way Sofia ran to me.

“You’re supposed to be in New York.” Sure, way to go. That’s exactly the first thing I should’ve said.

“I’m where I need to be.” He slid a glance toward Mom before his attention bounced to Sofia.

Mom clapped her hands together softly, beaming down at Sofia. “How about we go in the living room and turn on the TV? Can I get you something to eat?”

“We got breakfast after we got off the plane.” Sofia gave me one last squeeze. “I missed you a huge lot.”

“I missed you a huger lot.” It was like being in a dream. Was I still asleep? Did I want to wake up if I was?

The second she was out of the room, I closed my eyes and pulled in a deep breath. He was here, and he was using his daughter to manipulate me. I hadn’t spent a week beating myself up and suffering through the memories to betray myself by giving in. “This is so unfair,” I whispered, breathing through the heart-fluttering confusion my body was going through. I couldn’t make it easy for him.

“She’s been missing you like hell.”

Opening my eyes, I replied, “Maybe you could’ve called me so I could talk to her.”

His broad shoulders lifted beneath a black cashmere turtleneck. “I didn’t think you would want to speak to me.”

“I never said anything about speaking to you.”

“Fair enough.” He sighed. How the hell was he standing in my parents’ kitchen? How was this my life?

“Why are you here? Why today?” I checked the clock on the wall. Eight fifteen. They must have left when it was still dark. “You should be out in New York, at the harbor. Everyone will be expecting to see you.”

“You think anyone will remember this in a year? Even six months?” He shook his head with a derisive snicker, sliding his hands into his pockets. Except for his pained expression, he looked better than I remembered, which was saying something. His turtleneck was a little much for Sacramento weather, but I had the feeling he wasn’t planning on staying long. “I was out there, and I realized it wasn’t right,” he admitted, his features pinching together, emotion throbbing in his voice. “I didn’t care about the big celebration or the notoriety. It wasn’t like I could enjoy it when all I could think about was you.”

“Really? Why were you thinking of me?” I asked. The longer he stood in front of me, the more I remembered how it felt to be rejected with no explanation, without even the consideration to apologize. I wasn’t so tempted to throw myself into his arms anymore. I had already made it too easy for him to crush my heart.

“Because I made a mistake. The worst mistake. Everything you said on Thanksgiving was true. You see straight through me. Maybe that was part of why I had to turn away. I couldn’t handle being seen that way. You have more courage than I do.”

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Now I knew I was dreaming. Travis Knight admitting he was wrong? Admitting he was a coward? What really blew me away was how much I wanted to correct him and make him feel better.

I still loved him.

I didn't want to hurt him.

Somehow, I managed to keep my mouth shut before he continued. "The truth is, I love you. I didn't know it was possible for me after everything that happened back then. Nicola came back and reared her ugly head, and it reminded me of everything I thought I had gotten past. You helped me get through it all. I was only afraid to admit it."

I liked the words he used. They made my heart flutter like a hummingbird's wings and had me blinking back tears. I couldn't cry. Not yet, not over words he might not mean. I couldn't jump in headfirst and break my heart this time. "What about her?" I had to know. He hadn't mentioned her after that night.

A brief smile passed over his mouth. "Oh, that was easy. All it took was my lawyer reminding her lawyer that according to the terms of our divorce agreement, she was not supposed to step foot on my property again. She made a mistake, standing right in front of the camera." He rolled his eyes and snickered.

That was a relief. Sofia didn't need to be all mixed up in her mother's craziness.

But Sofia wasn't the only one involved here. I could not keep ignoring my

feelings. “You were right. I was afraid to admit you crushed me. And you threw it in my face,” I added when he cringed.

“I was on the defensive. I was stupid.”

“You were,” I agreed. “And it would be stupid of me not to worry you’d do it again. How do I know you won’t shut down on me and block me out?”

“I will never stop hating myself for that.” He pulled up the chair Mom had sat in earlier, leaving it close enough that our knees touched. I wondered if I should push my chair back, but I didn’t want to. I wanted to be closer. “It was all out of fear of the past and shame. Embarrassment. I’m not proud of myself. And I am so sorry you had to suffer because of it.”

His touch on my hand was tentative. So incredibly missed and craved too. “I love you. I didn’t want you to leave. The night we fought, when I told you everything, I walked in the front door ready to tell you I wanted you to stay with us.”

I wanted with all my heart to believe him, but the memory of sleepless, tear-filled nights wouldn’t let me. “Are you just saying that?”

He shook his head firmly. “Absolutely not. This week without you has been hell. And the week before that, before you left. All I wanted was to touch you and hold you because when I do, my life finally makes sense. You and me, we make perfect sense.”

Like the perfect sense, it made for my hand to fit against his. I almost didn’t want it to. I didn’t want to make it possible for him to hurt me again, but at the same time, I let him entwine his fingers with mine. “How do I know somebody else isn’t going to show up one day and throw everything upside down?” I asked since there had been no preparing myself for Nicola. “I can’t go through that again.”

“I’ll tell you everything there is to know about me. You’ll get sick of hearing about me before long, but it’ll be worth it if it means you know me and trust me the way I’m ready to.”

He lifted my hand and pressed his lips to my palm, closing his eyes. “Please,” he whispered against my skin. “Come back with me. Let me love you.”

How could I say no to that? I couldn’t. I had no choice but to lean in and throw my arms around his neck. “I love you,” I whispered through the tears streaming down my cheeks. “But don’t ever do that again.”

“I won’t, I swear.” He stood and pulled me to my feet, his arms closing around me and pulling me tight against him. “I will never hurt you again.”

His mouth found my ear, my jaw, and my cheek before landing on my upturned lips. Yes. My heart soared, and my head spun as everything I wished for came true all at once. Life was too short to hold grudges, to be afraid. It meant taking chances and having a little faith. Not out of some misguided compulsion to avoid the hard things in life, either. I wasn’t running away from anything now. I was running toward it. I was ready to do that.

But first, reality knocked on the back of my mind. “What are we doing? You’ve got this huge event you’re missing. Shouldn’t you go back? Can you even do that?”

“I’m not going back without you. The ship can set off without me, but I should make an appearance at the party tonight.” With another kiss, he announced, “I’m going to need you on my arm.”

“Are you sure? I mean, I’m?—”

“The woman I love, in the sexy little red dress you wore that night.” He didn’t have to

describe it further than that. We both knew exactly what he meant.

“That’s a summer dress. I’d freeze.”

“Then we’ll have ten dresses sent up to the suite for you to choose from when we get there,” he suggested. “But we need to get moving. What else do you need? You can do your hair and makeup and all that on the jet. We’ll stop along the way to the airport for whatever you need.”

I could barely think with everything he threw at me. “This is crazy. Do you know how crazy this is?” Yet it felt so right. All of it.

Especially Sofia barreling into the room. “Are you friends again? Are you coming with us?” she asked, taking my hand in hers.

This might have been the best part. Getting the chance to say, “Yes, sweetie. I’m going back with you. I’m not going to leave you again.”

Her joy-filled shrieks were music to my ears.

* * *

Here we were again. Just like before. In the same suite at the Plaza, putting Sofia to bed after picking her up from Colton's and Rose's penthouse. For some reason, it seemed like none of them were too surprised when I showed up at the big party that was held down at the pier owned by Travis' company. My head was still spinning a little after all the champagne and dancing. Tonight felt like a new beginning, and new beginnings needed to be celebrated.

But now, we would celebrate in other ways. I closed the door to her room before crossing the hall to the master bedroom. He was waiting, his shirt unbuttoned, the duvet pulled back. The sight of him was a key turning in my ignition, making my engine roar to life.

Hours spent fighting to keep our hands off each other left us crashing into each other at the foot of his king-size bed. It was familiar and new at the same time, with every touch feeling like the first. He was wearing too many clothes, and I started solving a problem with trembling hands while soaking in every hot, frantic kiss. He tasted like rich, smoky scotch, a flavor I would always connect with him.

"Fuck, I love you," he grunted out between kisses, his hand sliding up my back and taking hold of the zipper to my strapless, dark red de la Renta. I felt like a princess in it, sophisticated, beautiful. That didn't mean I wouldn't help him take it off me since I wanted the touch of his hands more than anything. He reclaimed every inch of my skin as he laid me back on the bed, then traced the same paths with his mouth and tongue.

I lost myself to pleasure, letting it take over for everything else. Pure sensation. The heat building spread to my pussy, making it flood for his tongue to lap up once he settled between my thighs.

Tears of joy rolled down the sides of my face and soaked into my hair as he explored me again, taking his time, licking my aching pussy like he was starved for me. His fingers slid inside and massaged my G-spot in time with his tongue over my clit.

My legs closed around his head and squeezed as a sudden rush of heat raced over me. "I'm coming!" I gasped just as it happened, and my hips shot up off the bed. He held on, riding it out, forcing me to take everything he gave. His deep, throaty grunts wound themselves around me and made the heat explode again. I was a shuddering mess by the time he let up, growling and grunting as he chafed my inner thighs with his scruffy cheeks.

"Come here." I held out my arms, which he fell into after he finished stripping down. I never expected to have him like this again, stretched out over me, with his weight settling on me. So close, our bodies fitting together like puzzle pieces before his wide head pushed inside me.

I gasped into his mouth, his tongue darting out to stroke mine. "Every inch of you," he whispered, working his way in, driving me crazy the longer he dragged it out. "I need to feel every inch. You have no idea how much I missed this."

"I think I do," I whispered back, locking my legs around his hips and pulling him deeper. I needed all of him. All my life.

"You were so beautiful tonight." He pulled back slowly and treated me to another long, slow stroke. This was what I needed. Letting it build, working into it. Staring into his eyes. Feeling his soul touch mine.

“Thank you for wanting me there. With you.” God, he was so big all over, and I took my time refreshing my memory while my fingers traced every ripple of his muscles.

“You are the only woman I want with me for the rest of my life. Forever.” He punctuated the word with a sharp thrust that made me gasp through my teeth. “Always.”

My nails sank into his shoulders, and I nodded, working with him once the heat was too unbearable. “Always,” I whispered. “You and me.”

He moved a little faster, and I matched his rhythm and pace until the bed creaked, and I couldn’t hold back anymore. “Yes! Yes!” I hissed, jerking my hips, losing control as I arched my back when the wave broke. He followed, groaning against my neck. The rush of warmth and his helpless moans unleashed something in me. It opened the floodgates and let all of the emotion flow through. I was still trembling in his arms, weeping softly when he lifted his head in confusion.

“Oh, fuck. What happened? What did I do?” He rolled to the side and looked me over like he was searching for an injury.

I could only shake my head at first, touching a hand to his cheek. “No,” I whispered. “I’m okay.”

“Why are you crying?” He gathered me in his arms again, gentle now.

I clung to him, letting him hold and rock me until I could explain. “I’m just so happy. I missed you so much. I didn’t think this was possible. I still feel like it’s not real.”

“It’s real. We are real. I love you, and this is the first night of the rest of our lives together.” He chuckled softly against the top of my head, and my heart opened wider at the sound. “After the day we’ve had, we should probably get to sleep. Somebody

expects us to take her to see the tree at Rockefeller Center tomorrow.”

I couldn't wait. For tomorrow, the day after that, and every day that followed.

EPILOGUE

CLAYTON

Sometimes, everything lined up perfectly. Fate had a way of stepping in and giving me everything I needed. At the moment, it was giving me a sought-after meeting with none other than Alessandro Rinaldi, one of the best-known and wealthiest hoteliers on the West Coast. He owned properties in California, Nevada, and Oregon, and for decades, his family name had been synonymous with quality and hospitality.

But nothing lasted forever, including a career. The old man was ready to retire and had made it known months earlier that he was looking for a successor. Considering he only ever had one daughter and was too old-school and chauvinistic to give the business to her, the path was open for me to snap up his empire and make it part of my own.

It wasn't my fault he never had a son and refused to get with the times. Who was I to argue with tradition?

The things I told myself when I was staring at the prospect of doubling my properties.

His already-lined face wrinkled like a bulldog's when he smiled and shook my hand, taking his seat at his desk. Behind him on the walls, lined up along the credenza at his back, were memoirs, photos, the story of his life laid out in pictures and commendations.

“I'm an old man,” he pointed out once we exchanged pleasantries. “I would rather

secure my legacy now, while I'm alive, to choose my successor than wait and let somebody figure it out once I'm gone."

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“I completely understand. I wouldn’t leave anything that important in the hands of anyone but myself. I don’t trust anyone’s judgment the way I trust my own.” That was the truth, too, more than an empty platitude to make the meeting go smoothly.

“I’ve done a lot of research over the past several months,” he explained. “My people have visited properties up and down both coasts. I wanted them to see how things were run, especially since they know what to look for and could be spies, in a way.” He shrugged, chuckling. “A man does what he has to do. Let’s cut through the bullshit. You impressed me across the board. It’s uncanny somebody your age understanding the finer points of hospitality the way you do. It’s all about the details.”

“That’s my motto,” I assured him. “We go above and beyond every day for every customer.”

“That’s the way to do it. That’s how you earn lifelong friends instead of customers who will forget you by the time their trip is over.” He lifted his glass of wine in a silent toast, which I returned. “It’s always a plus when a couple of businessmen can cut through the bullshit and see eye to eye. I knew I was making the right choice.”

My skin tingled, though I did my best to conceal it. It wouldn’t do any good to jump, to look too eager. “Can I take that as confirmation you’ve decided to sell your properties to me?” I asked, keeping my tone light.

“I’ve decided to make the offer,” he confirmed, and I leaped with joy inside. This was what I had been working toward. It was time to stop building from the bottom up and focus on rehabbing businesses that could have done with some improvements. The Rinaldi properties would need to be updated, rebranded, but they already ran like

well-oiled machines. The only way I would be able to scale my business without tearing my hair out would be to invest in properties like his.

After that first rush of triumph passed, it gave me the chance to reflect on his choice of words. “You’re worried I won’t accept the offer?” I asked with a generous laugh. “Were you planning on taking me to the cleaners over this? I can assure you, I have fairly deep pockets, and I am motivated to buy.”

“Exactly how motivated are you?” With his elbows on the armrests of his high-backed chair, he tented his fingers under his chin. “Because I have a rather unusual arrangement in mind. Nowadays, anyway. Back when I was a boy, it wasn’t so unusual. More a matter of tradition.”

Was he going to ask me to provide a family tree? Have a blood test, see where I came from? He was known for his so-called traditional ways, falling back on the old days. He valued family, honor, all of that. What did it have to do with me?

He soon explained. “You know I have a daughter. The apple of my eye, though I do wish she would’ve been born a man. She’s got the head for business, but not...”

The genitals? I kept my thoughts to myself, waiting for him to finish.

“Anyway,” he continued with a sigh. “I want to make sure she’s taken care of when I’m gone. And she does love managing the properties, traveling around, overseeing operations. I wouldn’t want her to lose that. It gives her purpose.”

“Do you want me to keep her on as an employee? Of course,” I agreed. All things considered, it wasn’t too much to ask. A manager with an already robust understanding of the properties could only be a good thing.

“I’m looking for more than that.”

The door opened behind me, and I turned, startled to find a raven-haired young woman standing in the doorway. “Papa? Oh,” she murmured, her gaze drifting over me before returning to him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you’d be in a meeting.”

He waved her in, smiling. “No, Mira, please come in. This is Clayton Manning.”

A cloud passed over her face, hardening her expression and narrowing her steely gray eyes before she offered a curt nod. “Of course. The heir apparent.” There was no need to guess how she felt about that. She practically bored holes through me with those angry eyes. What a shame since there was a tight body under her fitted suit.

“Not so apparent,” her father corrected. “Because, as I was just about to tell him, there is one major condition. If it’s not fulfilled, the deal is dead in the water.”

“And what is that condition?” I asked once my curiosity got to be too much.

“The man who acquires these properties and takes over my family business must also wed my daughter.” He beamed at her. “My Mirabella. So there will still be a Rinaldi in the owner’s family.”

My mouth fell open before I looked her way, hoping she would laugh, that this was all a prank, a little light hazing to welcome me into the fold.

Considering her jaw damn near hit the floor, I had the feeling she was as shocked as I was.