



Saved By the SEAL

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Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: Dangerous.

Seductive.

Enigmatic.

That's Michelle. A Russian spy with secrets that could destroy us both.

I'm Jordan, ex-Navy SEAL, hired to protect her. But how can I guard my heart?

She's running from her past, seeking freedom in America. I'm her protector, her fake husband, her last hope.

Our attraction is explosive, forbidden, and potentially deadly. Every touch, every kiss, every shared secret pulls us closer.

But the lies between us are a ticking time bomb. Can I trust the woman I've grown to love, or am I just another mark?

Russian operatives are closing in. Her life is on the line. And the truth might shatter everything we've built.

She's mine to protect, to love, to save. And I'll be damned if I let anyone tear us apart.

Even if that someone is her.

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JORDAN

“I’ve heard a lot of good things about you, Jordan.” Who doesn’t want to hear those words said about them? It’s hard not to glow when someone recommends you for a job position. Especially one as prestigious as this. “Benji worked with you when you were a Navy SEAL, right?” I nod, too nervous to form words. “And he thinks that because of the work you did there, you’d be good here. You’ve passed all the screening processes and all my tests too. With flying colors. You’re one of the best I’ve ever had come through those doors, which is why I think it might finally be time to send you on a job.”

I bolt up straighter in my seat, my eyes blinking a little as I drink this in. At thirty-one years of age, it’s a little intimidating to be starting a new career, but I’m pleased too. I’m looking forward to knowing what the security world holds for me. I already know this isn’t going to be a typical security job. Benji has warned me how life-threatening and dangerous this role can be, depending on what job is given. But I worked for the military. I’ll be able to handle anything thrown my way.

“I’m looking forward to it.” I try to smile at Max, but it’s hard to snap out of the expected professionalism that the Navy brings.

“Good, because you’ll be protecting twenty-seven-year-old Michelle Lebedev.” He hands me a picture of a petite, buxom blonde with bright red lips and green eyes that I could only imagine a million men have fallen for. She looks a lot like a movie star, not the sort of real person who would be wandering the streets. I wonder if maybe she

is famous, which is why she needs taking care of. “She’s been sent to America as a spy for Russia. From what she’s told me, she’s expected to seduce powerful men for information.” My chest grows tight. This sounds a whole lot like Max wants me to protect an enemy of our country. As much as I want this position, I can’t do that. It goes against everything I believe in. “But it isn’t what she wants to do.”

“She reached out to you because she doesn’t want to be a spy?” My head is spinning as I try to take all of this in. It doesn’t make any sense to my extremely one-tracked mind which only wants to serve my country. “And she needs protecting?”

“Right.” Max’s lips purse into a thin, serious line. “She got her first taste of real freedom as soon as she stepped into America, and she immediately realized that everything she has been told about our country is wrong. Instead, she wants to live here to escape the oppression under which she’s had to live her whole life. She wants her own basic human rights.”

I gulp down the thick ball of emotion that lodges itself in my throat. “I don’t want to question you or anything...”

“I already know what you’re going to ask me.” Max looks totally amused by my interaction. “And I’m glad that you are asking because it means you’ll stand up for your instincts and what you believe. There have been times when my guys have had to go against the plan I laid out for them because their gut took them a different way, and they turned out to be correct. In this line of work, a plan can’t always work out because there are so many external factors that can’t be controlled. But yes, I do understand that might sound a little suspicious and like she’s trying to use us for a plan, but I’ve done my background checks. You can believe me when I say that I know we can trust what Michelle is telling us. This is all real. I know what I’m doing.”

It’s okay for him to be so confident, but my gut is screaming at me that all of this is

oh, so wrong. It just doesn't feel right. But I don't want to push too far and piss my boss off before I've even begun. If Benji can trust him, then so can I. I've had to learn to trust men like Benji with my life in the Navy SEALs, so I can simply apply that here and all will be just fine.

"Okay." I nod slowly as I actively choose to accept this. "So, she wants to live here in America from now on. Start a new life."

"Right, which we're going to help her with." The tension flows out of Max. I guess he was expecting more of a kick-off from me. "Since she's walking away from her mission and everything she's been trained to do, she could be in some serious trouble when it comes to her country. The Russians won't let her go easily, which is where you come in. We need to keep her safe from anyone who might try to attack her while she's settling in, and also to help her set up her life here."

"What does that mean, exactly? Housing? A job? Some kind of new identity?" I don't know whether this is a bit much. It seems a lot more than just protecting her. "Will I be given a plan of what to do? I don't want to mess things up..."

"I'll give you instructions on everything, Jordan. You don't need to worry. I understand that this is a new world for you and something which won't be easy for you to navigate alone. I'll be with you every step of the way."

I try to accept this, but still, things don't feel quite right. I can't easily put my finger on it, which makes it even more frustrating. It isn't that I don't trust Max. I'm going to have to put all of my faith into him. It's just that I'm worried. Spies are well-trained in manipulation, in Russia especially, and I'm worried that Max might be falling for her tricks.

"Maybe it'll be better if you meet her," Max informs me. "I thought that might be the case, especially with this being the first mission I'm sending you on, which is why

I've asked her to come here today. She'll arrive soon. Once you agree to take on this job, you'll spend some time speaking to her and we can get the ball rolling. How does that sound?"

I consider this, but only for a second. There's no point in my making a decision I'll later go on to regret just because I'm not too sure about it. I'm certain that if I discover this woman to be a manipulator, then I can sort it out with Max afterward.

"I'm ready to do this," I inform him with much more confidence than I feel inside. "I'm ready whenever you are."

"Right." Max bangs his hands down on the table in delight. "Well, I'll get us some coffees while we wait." He checks his watch. "Although I don't think she'll be long now. She's always been on time when I've met up with her."

I can't stop my sarcastic brain from assuming that being punctual is part of her little manipulation game. Being on time, seeming to be a nice and friendly person... it has to all be an act, doesn't it? As Navy SEALs, we have always been trained to be so careful of spies. It's ingrained so deeply within me, I don't know if I'll be able to overcome that.

"This is a different line of work now," I whisper to remind myself. "Don't get caught up in old thought patterns."

I grab Michelle's picture and look at her some more, running my eyes over the image as if I'm hunting for some kind of clue that there's a darkness to her which Max can't see. Even if I don't let myself get affected by the way I've always been taught to think, I'll have to be on my toes at all times. I won't let Michelle out of my sight. To protect her, and America.

"I'm on to you," I tell her image, as if she can hear me through it. "You won't get one

over on me, I can promise you that.”

All of a sudden, I hear voices coming from the other side of the door. One belongs to Max, I can already tell that much. He’s returning with our coffees at last, but it sounds like he has female company. A woman, which means her. Michelle is here already, way before I’m ready for her, knocking me off-kilter and sending me into a disadvantage. I bet that was her plan all along.

I stand up, politeness coming first, as the door clicks open, and I smile at the people coming inside. If Michelle is going to manipulate me, then I’ll do the same to her. I’ll act like all is fine, when really, I’m watching her closely.

“I told you Michelle would be here on time.” Max chuckles as he enters the room first. “Here she is.”

Oh, my God. As soon as she appears behind my new boss, the world actually stops spinning. If I thought this woman was gorgeous to look at in the pictures, then seeing her in real life is on another level. She really does have an eye-catching, movie-star quality to her which leaves me a little breathless. I want to find words, but she has struck me dumb.

Shit. The attraction is real, the pull toward her is overwhelming, my pulse kicks up to a level I can hardly handle, and there is no way I can calm myself down. Even reminding myself repeatedly that this is the enemy and seduction is likely her game does nothing to snap my jaw shut. Michelle Lebedev is on another level of good-looking, and I’m a mess.

Don’t be an idiot, my brain screams at me. Snap out of this shit already. She isn’t worth it. She’s just a woman. A very dangerous woman who could unravel everything you have spent your whole life working toward. Stop staring now!

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But it does nothing. I don't think I stand a chance with her right now. I might too be weak at the fucking knees. I've never felt anything like this before. My connections with women have always been brief and meaningless because I've basically been married to my career and focused on working at all times, but Michelle has fucking swept me off my feet.

How the fuck am I going to handle being around her all the time without doing something crazy?

"My name is Michelle." She steps closer to me, taking the lead, and reaches out to shake my hand. The slight Russian twang in her accent, combined with her striking red lips, have me mesmerized. "Nice to meet you. Sorry, Max didn't tell me your name."

"Jordan." Finally, I take her hand, but that only serves to make things worse. Electricity jolts all the way through me, making my skin sizzle and my heart pound. What has she done to me? I'm in a goddamn state. "Nice to meet you too, Michelle."

This is going to be a whole lot harder than I thought it would be. I can't drag my eyes away from the green sparkles drawing me closer to her. I feel like I'm under Michelle's spell. If Max weren't in the room, I might be kissing her already, which is very freaking annoying because I'm the only one who knows that she can't be trusted. I can't fall for her now or we'll all perish.

2

MICHELLE

He does not like me. I can tell right away. One positive thing to come from my spy training is reading people well, especially men, and I can already see that Jordan doesn't trust me one bit. He thinks of me as the enemy, which I guess is an attitude that I'll have to get used to in America if I intend to stay forever, which I really, desperately want. It doesn't matter how much I've perfected English and speaking with the right accent—mostly—I'll always be on the outside looking in. Wishing for more.

Americans won't like having me in their country, especially if they ever learn that I was sent here as a spy, but my life is a lot more complex than that. It isn't as straightforward as it seems. I'm a victim in this too. I suppose I can continue to carry myself with the air of confidence that has gotten me this far, but the self-doubt will always remain inside me.

"Perhaps it would be useful for you to tell Jordan your story," Max encourages me. "Then you can both understand better."

"Okay." I suck in a deep breath before I begin. "Well, I was conned into spy training a few years ago by people whom I thought I could trust, but it turns out they betrayed me at the first chance they could get."

I hang my head low as a deep sadness overcomes me. I don't like recalling any of my time in Russia. It makes me very unhappy. People should grow up with a comfort blanket around them, and when they don't have that, it can be a real issue.

"So, it was not the life that I wanted, but once I was in, I couldn't get out. Not while I was in Russia, anyway. They trained me how to use my body and my sexuality to gain what I want."

Jordan's cheeks flame red like this makes him uncomfortable. I'm not too happy about it either, but I've had to grow accustomed to it. I've been treated like a vessel,

not really a human. My body has been made to feel worthless, aside from what it can get for Russia, so that's why I can talk about it with a coldness now. Because that's how I feel about myself.

“It was never what I wanted, but I felt trapped. In Russia, there was nowhere that I could go without their finding me. I settled into the idea that I had no choice but to live out what they wanted me to do, what they needed me to do... until I came here.”

A small smile plays on the corner of my lips as I think about the moment I first set foot on American soil. Immediately, the air felt easier to breathe. It was as if I had finally found where I belonged in the world. Something shifted inside me, and I justknew. I knew that I could make some positive changes in my life here. I could finally get everything I wanted.

“I sensed a freedom here in America, and I could see people living the sort of life that I wanted. A normal life with work, a home to call my own, dating normally...” I don't go any deeper into what I want in that department because I don't want to embarrass Jordan even more. I need to try and find a way to make him comfortable around me.

“And I felt like I could get it here. The people who wanted me to work for them gave me more freedom in this country, trusting me to do what they wanted. Which is when I began to put my plan into action to leave them behind, to start my own life. But I know what Russia is like. I know that I won't be able to do it alone, which is how I ended up searching for and finding Max. I need some muscle.”

I try to let out a little laugh, but it ends up sounding too strangled to be real. Now it's my turn to flame red with embarrassment. I avert my eyes away from Jordan and end up looking at Max. That man has been my savior in this horrible situation. I didn't think that he would trust me when I approached him, but Max seems to have a similar talent to me. He can tell when people are being genuine and when they really need his

help. I guess that's why he's so successful.

The cost of his security is high, but that's how I know it'll be good. That's how I know Max will take care of everything that he needs to and this military man will do the rest. This tall, muscular man with shaggy red hair, which I can only assume that he has grown out after he finished his military career, piercing blue eyes, and cheek bones to die for...

My God, he is the sort of man I could quite easily be attracted to, if I were looking to feel that way about him. I might be wanting to date normally and not just use my body to trade for information, but I can't even consider Jordan in that. He's someone I'm working with, and I bet he's very professional in everything he does. He is nice eye candy, though...

"So, erm, yes," I continue because the silence is getting a bit too thick for me to handle now. "That's all I want, really. The chance to be happy and free. I don't want to return to Russia or to have to deal with anyone I worked with before ever again. If they get hold of me, there's no telling what they will do." I can't hide the visible shudder running down my spine...

"And that's what we're going to focus on," Max jumps in. "Making sure that nothing bad happens to you and that you get what you want. That's what you came to us for, and between Jordan and me, that's what we will make happen."

I stare over at Jordan to see if he's giving me a similar kind of reassuring look, but he definitely isn't. He's still got an edge of distrust about him, which I suppose isn't going to vanish anytime soon. I'm going to have to work on that to make him finally see that he can like me in the end if he just gives me a chance. I'll just have to make the effort, that's all.

Our eyes lock, and for a moment, I feel a sizzle of emotions surging between the pair

of us. Some of them are bad, some of them a little better, but it isn't enough for me to feel comfortable. I'm not surprised when Jordan drags his eyes away because it gets too much for him. I feel the same, but I'm too weak to yank my eyes off him.

“So, let's see what we're going to do first,” Max comments idly, almost as if he doesn't sense the tension clinging to the air. Maybe he does, though, and he's just trying to dispel it before it gets too weird for all of us. “Since you can't stay in the safehouse for too long, especially since we're trying to set you up with a life here, the first task will be apartment hunting.”

Max taps his chin thoughtfully as nerves zig-zag through me. The idea of having a home here and having the first step on the ladder to my brand-new life is anxiety-inducing but incredible too. It's my heading toward the life that I've always wanted ever since I set foot on American soil. My new home will be my wings sprouting and freedom coming for me.

“Actually, I think it might be a good plan if you go apartment hunting as a couple.” Max's eyes light up. “If Jordan is going to be spending a lot of time in your home to begin with, until you feel safe, then it's good to have a cover story. One that doesn't lead to suspicion and word getting out about a woman with a bodyguard. That's going to draw attention, isn't it? People will be interested in you, which could end up causing us all kinds of issues. It'll end up being incredibly problematic.”

“Hmm, yeah, it might make me look like a celebrity.” I giggle. “Although, that isn't something I've ever wanted. I've never been interested in having the public eye on me. It would be a little funny, though... you know, if this weren't so dangerous.”

Oh, God, it really is dangerous, isn't it? Possibly more than I'm thinking, definitely more than Jordan and Max know. My life is in the balance, and now Jordan's is too. I do feel bad about it, but I suppose this is his job and he knows what he's getting himself in for. At least I hope so. I feel a little bit of responsibility for his life. I hope

this is all okay in the end...

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“So, I’ll get a plan finalized for this and maybe set you guys up to meet tomorrow.” Max nods encouragingly. “Michelle, you’ll be in the safehouse for one more night, then we will get you in place as soon as possible. Oh, and we also might have to change your look. We don’t want you to be recognizable to anyone. Your hair might have to shift.”

I run my fingers through my hair, sadness crushing through me as I do. There isn’t much that I own about myself, but my hair is one of them. My blonde locks have always been my signature. I’ve always loved them. They are the one thing that I got from my late mother and the only thing I can feel left of her. Without it, I don’t know who I’ll be...

But, I can’t let that be the thing that gets me caught. If Max thinks that I should dye my hair, then that’s what I’ll do. If it keeps my head on my shoulders, then so be it. It doesn’t have to be forever, does it? Hair will always grow back. It’ll end up the color it has always been eventually, won’t it? I nod along and let Max know that I’ll do whatever he wants.

“Yep, sure. I can do whatever I need to do.” I grin widely, my mouth stretching from ear to ear. “I’ll change whatever I need to. You just let me know what I need to do and I’ll do it. I’m here to be saved by you, whatever that ends up meaning.”

“I know.” Max rises from his seat and holds out his hand to me. I grab it and shake it right away. “I trust that you are in for whatever you need to do. That’s why we’re going to find it easy to keep you safe, Michelle. As long as you trust me, I’ll ensure that nothing happens to you. Jordan too. We’re here for you for as long as you need us to be.”

I shake Jordan's hand too, unable to deny the difference between the two. I could try and blame it on the nervousness that he makes me feel, but I know it's something deeper than that. I know there are some strange sensations blowing through the breeze. Hopefully, by the morning when I have to meet with Jordan once more, I'll be over it all and able to deal with him in a much better manner. If we're going to be together a lot, I need to get over this.

3

JORDAN

"It'll be fine," I tell myself as I head to the meeting place set up by Max for Michelle and me today. "It'll be okay. Max has made this all absolutely perfect, and there won't be a damn thing to worry about. He trusts her, so you should too."

But it feels like the racing chaos of the city is a little too much for me as I travel, a bit like life is speeding past me out of my control and there isn't a damn thing that I can do to stop it. Not sleeping much because of the nerves and discomfort for what will happen today hasn't helped me one bit. But I have to get over that. I have to keep remembering that Benji has recommended me, that Max has given him a lot of good work, that I have to put my faith into all of this for it to work.

I check my messages from Max once more as I go, checking the meeting spot, reading the details of the apartments that he has found for us which have immediate vacancies, and ensuring that I take on board the warnings he included. He let me know now how much potential danger Michelle really could be in and the terrible things that could happen to her if she is caught. It does make me a little more protective over her, but I'm still going to keep my wisdom about me. I won't let her do anything to pull the wool over my eyes, if that's what she's intending to do. I can protect and watch her at the same time.

“You can do this,” I remind myself. “You know you can do this. You’ve been thinking about it all night. Just don’t lose your head.” That’s the main problem I have around her, losing my head in her presence because she’s so damn captivating...

But I’m not going to fall into that trap today. I absolutely refuse to. I won’t let her suck me in with her beautiful eyes and ruin me. Just because no one has made me feel like this before, it doesn’t mean that I need to get in a mess over the first woman who does. Perhaps it’s just my brain trying to let me know that I can open myself up to a relationship now if I want to. It was always too hard for me before. I could never quite manage it with my career, but everything is different now. Everything.

She’s there. It strikes me hard to lay my eyes upon her, to see her standing waiting for me. This is close to her safehouse, so I know she hasn’t gone far, and it’s an area where she can keep herself pretty much hidden away from anyone, but the anxiety radiates off her. I can feel it all the way over here. She’s nervous for sure, scared of what could become of her.

But that doesn’t necessarily make her an honest person. I can’t forget that. She still could be manipulating me. There is no guarantee that Michelle just isn’t really good at what she’s doing, even better than any spies who have come before her. I make sure my guard is up high, and nothing can penetrate through it as I cross the road to greet her. I need to stay strong.

“Jordan.” She visibly lights up as she spots me too. “Thank goodness you’re here. I was just about to contact Max.”

I check my watch. I’m not late, so I don’t know quite why she’s in such a flap, but I choose not to get into that with her. For now, I want to focus on what we need to do here. “I have a wedding ring for you. Did Max tell you he wants us to be married?”

“Yes.” She nods and takes the ring from me. Michelle’s hand trembles as she slides

the ring onto her finger. “He did tell me that. He said it’ll be better not to put my surname on the lease, but to use yours. Lebedev sounds very Russian and will also link to me easily.” She giggles girlishly. “But I’m sorry, I do not know your surname yet. I’d better learn it.”

“Miller.” Uh-oh, I suddenly realize how strange that’s going to sound. “So, you’ll be Michelle Miller. Will that work?”

She whispers Michelle Miller over and over to herself, I assume trying to get herself used to the odd-sounding name. Finally, she nods and grins at me. “You know what? Michelle Miller is a nice name. I think I’m going to like it a lot.”

I don’t even notice how infectious her smile is until I catch myself grinning back at her like an idiot. As rapidly as the smile creeps up onto my face, I smack it away because I don’t need to lose myself already. We aren’t even fake-married and looking for our apartment yet, never mind living together under one roof in the small place which her budget allows for...

“Right, let’s get going.” I cough awkwardly. “The sooner we can get to the addresses that Max has given us, the better. They are all pretty close to the center of town, which will help with any work that you might get. If you can avoid public transport, I imagine life will be simpler for you, but it’s also far enough away that you can keep to yourself if you feel the need to do so.”

“Well, since this is the first time that I’ve been outside in over a week, ever since Max took control of my life, I don’t think I’ll be out much. Locking myself away from the world makes things a lot simpler because I know I’m safe then. Outside scares me.”

Her face falls, and I can see an intense glimmer of vulnerability and fear. I kinda hope that’s real because it definitely seems so.

“I see. Erm...” Actually, as it turns out, I don’t really know how to deal with her vulnerability. “So, shall we go?”

The silence that fills the air as we walk to the first apartment is awkward as all hell. I would love to be able to find the right words to fill it, but I have nothing. My mind spins through all kinds of conversation topics, but nothing feels quite right. I don’t know Michelle well enough to talk about anything, which makes me incredibly uncomfortable. Since when did I get so weird?

“Here we are.” I point up to the first building. “Shall we go and check it out, Mrs. Michelle Miller?”

I expect her to laugh and take it as the joke I kinda mean it to be, but instead, she nods with a very serious expression on her face and reaches out to hold my hand. I almost comment on this because it’s so unexpected, but I snap my lips shut at the very last moment. If we’re married, then it’ll make sense that we hold hands. I slide my fingers through hers, feeling those all too delightful electrical sparks running through my body once more, and we head inside. Every step up to the apartment is just another chance for me to remind myself not to lose my head. Michelle is trained to be seductive. She’s built to have men falling at her feet. The one thing that I don’t want to do is end up as one of those guys. I can’t, whatever she makes me feel...

“So, this is the one you want?” I ask Michelle as we finish our tour of the second apartment. “You don’t want to see any of the others on the list? I think we have a few appointments set up if you want to see them first?”

“This is the one,” she tells me firmly. “I know what I want and what I like. This is it. This is where I want us to live.”

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Us. That's the part that's going to get me. I don't know if there is enough room for us both to live here for the time being. I know that this is Michelle's home and she can choose wherever she wants, but it doesn't seem big enough for two people to coexist within. Maybe a couple, sure, but we aren't actually a couple. There is only one bedroom, and not much maneuverability, but I suppose I'll just have to go along with whatever she wants. I'm just the accessory here.

"Great, I'll call Max and then we can sort out the paperwork." I force myself to smile. "Sound good?"

"I can get the paperwork done while you make your call," she reassures me. "I'll put your name on the lease for now, and then at some point, we can maybe break up, which is the moment that you'll move out. Whenever that time comes."

Thank goodness the guy who was giving us a tour has already gone back down the stairs. I wouldn't want anyone to hear a comment like that or they might get the wrong idea. Well, the right idea, since we're clearly planning a breakup, but all of that is meant to be discrete. I don't know how much Michelle understands that. Perhaps when we have all of this in place, we will have to hold a crisis meeting and get everything sorted out. Boundaries will help us both.

"Sure, whatever you want. Thanks, Michelle. You go and get all of this squared away."

I can't seem to stop myself from admiring the curve of her ass as she walks away from me. I know that I shouldn't, but the rational side of my brain is completely overshadowed by the side of me that just wants to see her. She's so deliciously curvy,

it's impossible. And the sexy, short dress that she has on today is unbearable. I hope she doesn't always intend to be so revealing because she'll draw a whole heap of unnecessary attention her way. She needs to fly under the radar as much as she can.

Once she's out of sight, I sigh heavily to myself and head over to the window to take a look out at the view while I call Max. Actually, while this apartment might be a lot smaller than mine, it's got a nice view out the window. I could look at it for a long time... or is that Michelle? Much as I keep trying to get away from it, she's the one I can't stop thinking of.

I grab out my cellphone and call Max, needing to speak to him before I go too far down that rabbit hole.

"Hi, Jordan." He sounds pleased to hear from me, which gives me confidence once more. "How's it going?"

"Michelle has picked an apartment. I just wanted to let you know to cancel all the other appointments."

"Good, great..." He pauses thoughtfully for a second. "And things are okay with the two of you? I know you had doubts..."

I still do. They aren't going to shift, but I fear for anyone else being put on this job. I think my suspicion of Michelle is what will allow me to keep on top of things. I won't fall for her seduction no matter what she tries.

"Yeah, things are fine," I tell him in the end. "I can make this work. I don't have any worries. There have been no signs of danger so far, but Michelle is definitely very worried about being outside, so I'll have to help her work on that."

"Right, exactly. That's good. If she wants to have some kind of real life here, then

she'll have to find a way to get out into the world and to do it safely. With you working with her, I know she'll be able to achieve that."

I hope he's right. If Michelle is who she pretends to be, anyway. I guess I'll find out...

4

MICHELLE

"That's all you have?" Jordan looks at my packed bags, which I can basically carry with one hand, in surprise. "I thought that you'd have moved here with all kinds of stuff. You haven't bought anything while you were in the safehouse?"

"I don't like going out," I shoot back instantly. "It makes me really anxious. I haven't had a chance to go to the shops. All I have is what the Russians sent me with. It's all crazy, sexy stuff because they wanted me to seduce people."

Again, Jordan blushes, and I feel a heat rushing through my body too. I probably shouldn't have said that. My God, when did I get so used to talking about this kind of stuff that I forgot about boundaries? I need to remember how to behave in the real world. Especially if I'm going to try and slot into American life. I shove my suitcase into the bedroom, never to mention it again.

"Well, I can always take you shopping," he tells me awkwardly. "I guess that's going to be a big part of changing your look, isn't it? And if the clothing you have is all sexy, then it won't help you with getting a job and things, will it?"

"Right." I don't know what job I'll be any good at, but honestly, I'm willing to throw myself at anything. "I can do that."

“And Max mentioned coloring your hair, didn’t he?” Immediately, I touch my blonde locks, knowing that I’m going to miss them like crazy. “So, that’s something we’re going to have to look into too. As soon as possible. You need to look different.”

It’s a gut punch, having to change everything about myself because of this, because I truly don’t think I deserve it, but I really do just have to go along with it. I need a new identity to help get me through this. Who knows? I might even like it. I suppose I’ve always been trapped in a little box and I haven’t been outside it, so I need to just try. See what works for me.

“What I’ve heard from Max,” Jordan continues, not seeing the internal battle I’m having, “Is that he’s getting your papers worked out so as soon as he’s got it all in place, we can move in the right direction. We can set your life up as you want it.”

“Do you know what sort of clothes I should get?” I ask him curiously, hoping that it’ll be a million times better than the thigh-skimming dresses and skirts and the low-cut tops which I don’t like one bit. “For work and everything like that?”

“I don’t know,” he admits cautiously. “But I’ll sort it out with you. I think together, we can make it work. You aren’t one of those people who loves shopping, then? I was hoping that you might have some idea of what you want.”

I let out a little laugh. “Sorry, that’s never really been me. Maybe that side of me will unleash in the store.”

“Are you hungry?” The sudden change of subject throws me off guard. “We don’t have any food in the fridge yet, so I wanted to know if you want to go out? We could get out the house for a bit and fill our stomachs. How does that sound?”

I have a feeling that the awkwardness is getting a little too much for him and he wants to get out of these four walls so he can breathe a little easier, but unfortunately,

I don't know if I can stand it out there. For me, being locked away is so much better. I absolutely love it. I know that none of the Russian agents can get me here, least of all Alexander, the asshole boss of the whole spy operation in this area who will be the one to tear me apart if he finds me. I can only assume by now that Alexander has tracked down the cellphone I dumped in the trashcan, however far away I did it, so he knows I'm off the grid. He'll destroy me.

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“I don’t know if I can handle going out.” I fold my arms protectively across my chest. “I’m sorry. I’m starving, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to go to a restaurant or something like that. I don’t know if I can be out in public again...”

My breaths get caught in my throat. I begin panting desperately, unable to calm myself down. The idea of being outside again with cool air washing over me is too much. I keep seeing Alexander staring at me as he pulls the gun and kills me.

“Okay, it’s okay.” Jordan rests his hand on my shoulder to attempt to reassure me. “We don’t have to go out. We can order takeout. We can eat in here. I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking when I made that offer. We will get food to eat here.”

It takes a while for the tight knot of anxiety to loosen. The idea of being out there in the world for another time today, even with Jordan protecting me, is too much for me. I can’t do it. I need to be locked away inside this place for as long as I can.

“Are you sure?” I finally gasp out as I lift up to reach his eyes. “I’m sorry, I know that’s an issue...”

“I’m sure. I don’t mind eating inside. I’m just hungry, that’s all.” He grins at me, showing dimples popping in his cheeks. “I’m willing to eat anywhere. Do you have anything in particular that you would like? I’m easy. I eat anything.”

I suggest Chinese food because as far as I can understand, everyone likes Chinese food. I do too, and if it’ll do anything to ease the tension between us, then I’m all for it. I just want this time to run smoothly with Jordan, that’s all.

“Right, well, I’ll give you time to unpack, and I’ll put in the call and order us some food, then.”

“You aren’t going to unpack your suitcase?” I nod toward the small bag he has with him. He talks about me not having a lot of stuff, but look at him. He doesn’t really have anything with him. But I suppose he isn’t going to be here forever, is he? I am. Hopefully, unless Alexander grabs onto me and ruins everything, of course. But I’m not planning for that. “There’s room.”

“I can live out of a case.” He grins back a little cheekily, if I’m honest. “You don’t need to worry about me. But don’t worry, if I’m sleeping on the couch, I won’t make any mess of your living room. I’ll look after this place as if it’s my own.”

Ooh, I like it when he’s cheeky with me. It sends a shiver of delight running down my spine. Not that I can think of him in that way, especially not if we’re living together. Because he has me breathless, I can only nod and quickly make my escape into my room. I quickly close the door behind me and rest my weary body up against it to try and catch my breath as much as I can.

Wow. My head is spinning. I’m a mess. I’m feeling a little jittery being this close to Jordan in this enclosed space. Maybe we should have found a way to go out instead. Perhaps I should get over my fear... but I suppose I’m going to have to find a way to get used to being around him. I can’t not, can I? If we’re going to live together until I’m safe, which could be a long time.

Unpacking my case doesn’t help, looking at the negligee and the skimpy clothing. It all screams sex, which of course it’s supposed to, but it doesn’t help my current mood. I might as well have flames licking all over my skin. God, what is it about Jordan? Why does he have me all dizzy with far too many emotions I can’t explain well, even to myself?

“Why am I even bothering to hang all of this up?” I mutter to myself with a head shake. “I don’t want to wear any of it.”

I’m half looking forward to going clothes shopping so I can at least have something that I’m comfortable with, but I’m nervous about it too. Especially if I’ll be doing it with Jordan. It’s pretty... intimate, isn’t it? As an experience. Not that I’ve ever been shopping with a man before, but to me it seems like it’ll be deeper than touching one another. But maybe that’s just because I’ve been so trained to think of touch as a tool. Maybe that will change when I find a man I really like.

“But not Jordan,” I whisper quietly to myself. “Just because he’s good-looking, doesn’t mean he’s the one.”

Eventually, I drag myself out of the bedroom right at the moment the food arrives, which is great because I’m actually starving now. I don’t know what it’ll be like eating with Jordan, but I’m willing to give it a try. It might even be fun.

“I ordered some of everything, so there’s bound to be something you like here.” He spreads it out on the dining table which is thankfully here with the rest of the furniture. “I hope, anyway. But let me know if you don’t like anything.”

“No, there is plenty here. Thank you for all of this. It smells delicious. I appreciate it all. Wow, what a feast.”

We take our seats and start to eat, which unfortunately brings with it the awkward silence once more. Every so often, one of us will say something to try and start a conversation, but it doesn’t quite pan out at all. It’s almost as if we aren’t quite connecting, which is strange because I think we’ve done pretty well today. We’ve managed to survive it all with ease.

There’s still an element of distrust, too. I can feel it emanating from him. I think he

might be trying to overcome it a little, but it remains there, clinging to the air. Even becoming his 'wife' for the day hasn't done anything to dampen that. I guess it's going to take more time. Eventually, I'll show him that I'm everything I promise to be. I'm not a spy, I'm not someone who shouldn't be trusted. I'm just trying to escape a shitty situation that I've been forced into.

"Wow, I think I might be stuffed," I eventually declare with a giggle. I want him to see the warm-hearted side to me. I want him to know that I can be liked by him. "I don't think I've eaten that much in a very long time. I'm so full, but honestly, that was delicious. The nicest Chinese meal that I've ever eaten. Thank you very much, Jordan. It was sweet of you."

"Oh, well, you're welcome." He doesn't know how to handle the kindness, the compliments. It makes him bashful, which is actually kind of cute. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. No, don't pick up the plates. I'll do the dishes. I don't mind, before you argue."

He's going to insist, I can sense it, and I don't have the strength to fight back right now, so I simply nod in agreement instead. It's been... well, not the worst thing in the world hanging out with Jordan, but there is a definite unease that I want to get away from. I need to be back in the bedroom where I can be by myself and get my head in order.

5

JORDAN

What the hell? A scream so loud, so shrill it rockets through my brain, shocks me awake. I was in the middle of a really nice dream then, which makes this even more dramatic to me. It's so shocking that my blood runs ice cold. I can't take it. Instantly, I feel terrible for sleeping. I definitely shouldn't have done that on my first night

while protecting Michelle. I've fucked up really badly, and Max is going to absolutely kick my ass for this. I'll deserve it too. I messed up so badly it hurts my chest.

Too many horrible scenarios encase my brain as I soak in that nasty sound. I hate the idea of anything happening to Michelle. Right now, any concept of her being the seductive spy who's actually the bad guy vanishes into nothingness. She's a poor, innocent woman who wants to escape a horrible situation, and I've failed in helping her. I've ruined her life.

I leap up and run into Michelle's bedroom without even thinking that this might be inappropriate, bursting into her private space. I just need to save her, and I've become utterly convinced that someone has caught her already. The Russians whom I've been warned are terribly dangerous are already here, and they've caught Michelle already. She's going to be killed...

"Michelle?" I swing the door open, but no light floods the room which means I can't see what's going on. I lean back and flick on the hallway light so I can at least see who I need to attack. Whoever is here, I'll take them down, I'll do whatever I need to. I'm not losing Michelle. I refuse to fuck up like this already. Especially listening to the blood-curdling, sickening scream, the one that's actually making it challenging to keep the vomit inside. I might have been in hundreds of different terrible situations in my life, but none of them have felt quite as dramatic and painful as this one. "Michelle? What's going on? What's happening here?"

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I can't instantly see what's going on here. I can't lay my eyes on anyone in particular. I can sense danger, but I can't see it. I hate not being able to see it because I can't stop it that way. Michelle is thrashing away under the blankets, fighting off an assailant, but I can't see the attacker at all. Even as I whip the duvet off in an attempt to help, there isn't anyone there.

"Michelle?" Oh, God, I don't think this is an attack, after all. I think it's a nightmare or something. That strikes me so hard I can hardly breathe. I'm all fired up, ready to fight back, and there isn't anyone to beat down. I don't quite know how to handle this. "Michelle, what's going on? I..." I take a step back because I'm a little weirded out by this. "I don't know what to do here."

Do I walk away? Am I supposed to leave her sleeping here, suffering the nightmare? It feels wrong to do so. I don't like it, but I think it might be the correct thing to do. I've heard that you shouldn't wake someone in this sort of situation, but it feels wrong. I can't leave her in the middle of this. It's horrible. She has so much pain on her face that I can hardly stand it.

"Michelle." I touch her gently, just because I'm afraid of her reaction. "Michelle, is everything okay?"

She bolts upright. I jump back, but she reaches out and yanks me back toward her. Much to my surprise, she wraps her arms around me and hugs me to her, sobbing hard against my chest. I can't do anything but hug her right back.

"Someone is going to get me," she wails, as if someone has his hands around her neck right now. "Alexander will get me. He's going to follow through on those

threats and tear my organs out, Jordan. I'm so fucking scared. I'm terrified."

She speaks with much more of a Russian twang as she yells these words out. I can see that I'm getting to see more of who she is underneath the surface. This vulnerable, terrified side of her needs me to be close to her. She won't let me go.

"No one is here, Michelle," I say in a quiet, soothing voice while gently stroking her back. "It's only me. I think it was a dream."

"But Alexander... Alexander... he was..." She pulls her eyes up to look at me, still a little glazed over as if she hasn't quite woken up yet. "He was saying all these things to me, telling me that... that he's going to kill me, and... he was here."

"No one's here." God, I'm so relieved to be able to say this for real. "Only me and you. This Alexander isn't going to do anything to you. No one will do anything to you when I'm with you. Max hired me to work with you for a reason, and it's because he trusts me to keep you safe. I'll make sure that no one can get to you. You're safe when you're with me. I promise you."

She clings to me tighter, still weeping against my shoulder, but I can sense that she's calming down a little bit. I do everything that I can to keep on with that, to keep her cooling down. I don't like seeing her all wound up like that. It hurts me to see her so sad and distressed. Perhaps there is more to her trauma than I've allowed myself to believe.

"So... sorry," she mutters in the end, her voice shaking with emotion. "I didn't mean to crack like that..."

"Is that something that happens often?" I ask her cautiously. "The nightmares, I mean. Do you suffer with them a lot?"

She offers me a one-shouldered shrug before she begins nodding. I don't think she was going to tell me the truth at first, but now I'm glad she's being honest. I can't help her if she doesn't open up to me about this. Especially when it's this bad.

"I've been suffering from nightmares ever since I got dragged into this spy world," she whispers while pulling back and wrapping her arms around herself like a protective barrier. "It's never been what I wanted and it's a terrible world. But escaping it is worse. It's what I want, it's what I need, but it scares me. I kinda feel like I'll always be looking over my shoulder for someone to attack me. I'm terrified that my boss and other people I've worked with will be out to kill me."

I grab onto her shoulders and stare firmly into her eyes because right now, I really need her to hear me. "Michelle, nothing will happen to you when you're with me. I swear to you, I'm here for you, solely to look after you, to protect you from everyone coming your way. I won't let anything happen to you. You can trust me with this. You don't need the nightmares anymore."

My words are flooded with passion. I really do mean them right now. I know I might be skeptical of her and her intentions, or I have been, but now, I'm much less sure. She really does seem to have a lot of terror inside her right now, and I need to calm that down. I'll say anything to make her feel better because I can't stand this. I want her to be okay.

"Will you stay with me?" She clings to my top and keeps me with her. "Please? I just need to feel you beside me right now. I don't want to be alone. I'm scared that the nightmares will come back once more. I can't cope. I need you with me, Jordan."

I nod immediately, even if I'm not too sure that's the best course of action for either of us. "Of course, whatever you need."

I've promised her that, and I do intend to follow through with that. Even if it makes

me uncomfortable, which lying on the bed alongside her will definitely do. But Michelle needs it. She lies back on the sheets in her skimpy night wear, which I presume is all that she has at the moment, and she indicates for me to lie beside her. Where she pats the bed, I crash down and curl up beside her. Michelle wraps her arms around me once more and snuggles herself close to me as if we're a married couple.

My God, I can't remember the last time I was in bed with a woman like this, holding on to her and not planning my escape before it gets awkward and feelings are caught. But there is no escape from this situation. I'm here. I'm staying.

What if Michelle really is everything that she says she is? I think to myself as I watch Michelle finally drift off to sleep. What if I'm wrong about her? I judged her before I even got to know her, but tonight, I'm not so sure. What if she's just lovely?

I kinda feel like she might be at the moment as she lies in my arms. I'm no longer convinced that she's to be watched as I thought. The Russian agents really do have her terrified in a way that I don't imagine anyone could put on. Unless Michelle is the best actress that I've ever come across in my life, that was all very real. That nightmare was crushing her badly.

Max saw something in Michelle. He tried to tell me that she could be trusted, and perhaps he was right. I should have listened.

I sigh heavily and lean my head against hers, breathing her in. It doesn't help that she smells absolutely delicious, so beautiful that I want to taste her. Not that I will, of course. I have no intention of following through on that urge, but it's there all the same.

I tell myself not to sleep because I want to be alert just in case any of Michelle's intense fears come to light, but I find myself drifting accidentally. The comfort of being close to Michelle and feeling this warmth flowing between us is intoxicating. It

creates a storm cloud of desire to start bubbling and popping in the pit of my stomach. I don't want it to be there because it's hard to contain, but I can't exactly stop it, can I? I don't have any choice but to try and shove it down further. Hopefully, so deep down that I can't feel it anymore so I can focus on the important things to me, such as my professionalism.

If she really is a lovely person, though, if there isn't anything wrong with her, then I might be in more trouble than I first thought. She'll be difficult to resist if she's sweet too. But I'll do it. I'll make sure that I don't cave. Not only will I fuck things up between me and Michelle and this job, but Max will kill me too. I want to impress him, especially right away, and I'm sure that hooking up with a client is such a strong rule that it doesn't even need to be written down. Breaking it instantly with Michelle will disappoint him in every single way. I can't do that. I mean, it isn't like Michelle will be the only woman to make me feel this way, is it? I'll find someone else. Eventually, I'll find The One and then all of this will be forgotten.

Well, hopefully, anyway. Right now, I can't ever imagine forgetting Michelle, but then I'm smack bang in the middle of things. There's time...

6

MICHELLE

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Oh, no. The painful, ice-cold shame washes over me before I even fully wake up. I don't dare open my eyes yet to see what I've unleashed. I might have been in the middle of an incredible dream just then, but in the middle of the night, the nightmares came for me once more. They came for me so painfully that the screams vibrated in my chest and shook me awake. I saw so much blood rolling off me and so many ways in which Alexander wanted to take me down, it was too much.

I shouldn't be suffering from these nightmares anymore. They might have haunted me in the safehouse, but I was alone then. I didn't have anyone to protect me. I thought that as soon as Max provided me with protection, then it would be okay. I could try and blame it on the fact that Jordan clearly doesn't have a lot of good feelings about me, but as soon as I popped my eyes open and I saw him there, I instantly felt a million times better. I threw my arms around him and refused to let him go.

At the time, it was the only logical thing to do. I needed Jordan in my arms to know that no one could get to me, but now in the cold light of morning, which I can see even if my eyelids remain closed, I'm embarrassed about the whole thing.

He's going to think that I'm crazy, hugging him to sleep all night. He might even think this is proof of my still wanting to be a seductive spy. I mean, it doesn't look great, does it, my dragging him into bed with me? This is a weird situation.

And now, I'm going to have to accept the day, open my eyes, and have a terribly awkward conversation. But first, I need to ensure that the duvet is covering me completely. Until I can have some night wear that I'm actually comfortable with, I only have what I was sent to America with and it really isn't great. It's much too

revealing for my liking. He probably saw everything...

Okay, I think desperately to myself as I attempt to gear myself up for the worst. I know this isn't going to end well and it's terribly problematic for me. Time to just do this already. Rip the Band-Aid off quickly and see the gaping wound underneath.

I count to three inside my mind before I dare to peek even the smallest bit, but as soon as I get even the smallest glimpse of the room, the tension floods from my body. I'm alone. At some point either in the night or this morning, Jordan must have scooted off to give me some much-needed space to wrap my mind around all of this. I have no doubt that he needed that too. I must have confused the poor guy as much as I have myself. Oh, it's just so humiliating.

"Michelle, you absolute moron," I mutter angrily to myself as I throw the sheets off me. "You mudak."

Sometimes, in a situation such as this one, only a Russian insult will do, although I need to tone down anything to do with my home nation while I'm attempting to slide under the radar. If Alexander and the others are out there looking for me, they will want signs of my being Russian. Max and Jordan can only do so much. I need to help myself too.

Luckily, I don't exactly have a lot of happy memories from home, so putting it behind me won't be too much of an issue. I should be able to overcome that with just a little bit of focus on what I say and do all the time. It shouldn't be a problem at all. Maybe if I had been forced to leave behind some happiness, things would be different, but that isn't the case.

"Don't even think about it," I hiss at myself, knowing that I'll only get annoyed and upset if I do. "Focus on the now."

I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror as I pass it and pout out my bottom lip. I really do have too much skin on show. I'm going to have to suck it up and head out to the shops as soon as possible. Max seems to work fast, so I'm sure he'll have all my documents sorted out soon enough, which will allow me to get moving with things. However anxious all of that makes me, I know that the only way I'll finally be happy is to pursue it all. I have Jordan protecting me at the moment, anyway, my fake husband, so I'm not going to get all tied up in knots about what might happen when he won't allow it.

I don't want to leave the room just yet, and the bathroom involves my going outside, so I search through my clothing first to see if I have anything to cover me up before I'll brave facing anyone. I don't really have anything like I'm looking for. I would kill for an oversized tee shirt to cover me up, but I settle on my most skin-covering clothing before heading to the door.

Only I don't leave right away. I can't. My heart is pounding with far too much anxiety for that. I need to hear him first, to know that he's out there, and to hopefully get a sense of his mood...if that's something you can achieve while listening to footsteps. But I don't notice the sounds, that's not what hits me first, but rather the intense smell of something delicious cooking.

I didn't think that I could possibly ever be hungry again after last night and all that Chinese food, but whatever Jordan is making smells nice enough to have my stomach rumbling and growling with excitement. Turns out I'm actually starving.

"Good morning." Jordan's voice is friendly and welcoming as I push the door open a crack. He doesn't sound like someone with a chip on his shoulder when it comes to the events of last night at all. Could it be that he forgives me? "I hope I didn't wake you. I just thought that we could do with a big breakfast when we have a lot to tackle today. Is that okay?"

“We have a lot to do?” I practically creep into the living room. I can’t help but wonder when it’s finally going to feel like this place is mine. This place will be mine for the foreseeable future. “What do we have going on?”

“We’re tackling shopping.” He smiles at my shocked face. I can’t contain my emotions. “I know, I know. You’ve made it very clear that it makes you nervous, but the sooner we get this out of the way, the quicker we can work toward other goals. I think it’ll make you feel happier to wear things you’re more comfortable in anyway, chosen by you, not by someone else.”

He hasn’t mentioned last night yet, which is good. I start to feel all the panic inside me swim to the side and subside a little bit as he doesn’t seem to want to talk about it, just like I’m not keen on mentioning it either. He also seems a little warmer toward me than he has been, which I prefer. As humiliating as it was, if last night can lead to something good, then I’m all for it.

“Right.” I gulp anxiously and nod. “Do you have a plan of where we will go? I don’t want to be exposed...”

“I’m not going to let you be exposed. You don’t need to worry about anything. I’ve been working on a plan with Max this morning, and I know exactly where we’re going to go. It’s all safe and under control.”

He hands me my breakfast, and I take a seat to start tucking in. Up until this point, I’ve hated putting my life in the hands of other people and feeling like I don’t have control over my own destiny, but now I don’t know how I’ll cope alone. It’s been such a long time since I’ve been forced to make decisions for myself, and with this much risk hanging over my head, it’s a concept that I can’t even begin to imagine. It makes me a little dizzy even considering it. At least it’ll be a while before I need to.

“Okay, sounds good.” I try to get my breathing a little steadier. “I suppose shopping

is the start of the new me.”

I slide my eyes closed for just a moment and lean back on all the fantasies that I’ve had about becoming someone else. I’ve spent years dreaming about throwing the person I always was away to become who I want to be, and this is my chance.

I don’t quite know what she’s going to look like yet. She’s always been a different person inside my mind every time I’ve drifted off, but now I get to create her for real. It’ll be a bit like playing dress up, and I’m sure as hell going to start with some decent night wear and an oversized tee shirt. Being covered up is going to be such a thrill for me.

“Are you going to be there to tell me what looks good?” This starts off as an innocent enough question to Jordan, but as soon as I snap my eyes open and I see his expression, I see how it sounds. Like yet another seduction. Damn it, why the hell can’t I get myself out of that mindset? “I mean, just because I want to know what will help me look... American.”

“Erm, sure.” He coughs awkwardly, that all too familiar pinkness staining his cheeks once more. “I’ll do what I can. I’ve been overseas for a long time, though, so I might not be the best person for you to come to with that.”

I shrug one shoulder. “Well, right now, you are all I have. You must have, or have had, a girlfriend...” I furrow my eyebrows together. Honestly, I’m starting to get annoyed with myself now. “To, err, know what women wear. Not that it’s my business if you have a girlfriend. I’m sure if you do, she doesn’t want you talking about her with me in this weird situation. She might not even know about it, because it’s a bit strange to act like you’re married to someone else, even if it is fake, and living together...”

Shit, I can’t shut myself up. I’ve opened my mouth and word vomit is flying out of

me. This is a nightmare. I think the only way I'll be able to end it is by jumping up and heading toward the bathroom. I need an escape before this gets weirder...

"I don't have a girlfriend," he calls after me as I attempt to run away. "I don't think I would be able to do this kind of work if I did. Not just the fake married thing, but the danger. I wouldn't want my partner to be putting their life on the line all the time, so I think it's only fair that I don't do the same in return. I've never really had anyone because of that reason, because I've always worked in war zones and things. But I'll do my best to help you. Whatever you need, I'm here."

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I nod and continue to run into the bathroom, needing my shower now more than ever. I should still be worried about shopping. All my fears about it are still there, but all I can think about is how single my fake husband, Jordan Miller, is.

7

JORDAN

Michelle is stiff, nervous, struggling so much I actually feel bad for her. My God, can she really be putting all of this on? Last night and today, I feel like she really is revealing herself to be a good person trapped in a horrible situation.

“You know, it is going to be fine,” I tell her with a warm, genuine smile. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

She nods but doesn’t stop darting her eyes everywhere. She’s actually making herself look far more suspicious than she needs to. This is just one of the habits that I’ll have to help her get out of to help her move forward. That’s something I feel very positive about now, much more than I’ve done up until this point. I want to make this happen for her.

“I promise you, everything is going to be alright.” I reach across and take her hand, which actually feels as natural an action as breathing. “I’m on the lookout, so you just focus on walking. This is my job, don’t you forget about that.”

“Yeah, I know.” She squeezes my fingers and smiles. Her whole face lights up when she looks at me like that, which makes my heart flutter a couple of times. The

turquoise in her eyes sparkles and draws me in toward her. “I know you are. I’m sorry, I just haven’t had someone watching my back for me before. It’s a little weird. I’ve always been on my own.”

“Have you felt lonely?” Holy shit, I don’t know where that came from. The question, which I think might be highly inappropriate, just fell out of my mouth. That isn’t the sort of thing I should ever ask anyone, especially not the woman holding my hand.

“I think everyone gets lonely at times, don’t they?” she answers diplomatically. “Yes, it definitely gets lonely.”

I pull her a little closer to me, trying to silently let her know that she doesn’t need to feel that way anymore. “I’ve had long periods of loneliness too. Especially with being in the military. It’s a very lonely career.”

“So, why did you choose it?” She tilts her head to stare at me. I almost feel his gaze burning through me. “Out of curiosity.”

“To help. To protect,” I answer instantly. That’s a question I don’t even need to think about to answer. “To make a difference in the world. I knew it was the best way for me to be able to achieve that. Now, I feel like my life has been worthwhile.”

She’s soaking in every single word like I’m speaking gospel, which is thankfully distracting her from the fear that she was suffering hard from a little while ago. If this helps her, then I can tell her all about me. I don’t usually like opening up for anyone, but if I know it’s going to take Michelle out of her head, then maybe I can make an exception.

“Oh, look, is this the place?” Before I begin to start opening myself up, Michelle spots the store. “This is the store, right?”

“Yeah, you’re right. This is where Max recommended, so let’s head inside, shall we? See what we can find.”

It’s time for us to start acting like a married couple once more, although I don’t know what we need to change because we’re pretty much working that anyway. We’re close and holding on to one another, which kinda happened naturally as we walked, so we can simply head inside and see what’s hanging on the shelves for Michelle to start recreating herself.

“Oh, wow.” Michelle is instantly blown away by all the clothing inside, but I’m not sure it’s in a good way. She seems overwhelmed and practically curls into me. I’m definitely going to be needed to help her out. “This is... a lot.”

“It’s okay, we will take it step by step,” I whisper to her. “I’m here for you. We can figure this out together.”

I take her hand, and we walk with purpose through the aisles. I start off by picking out a few things for her to try on, things that she might like and will suit with the person she wants to be. I don’t really know what her taste will be, but she can spend all day here trying things on if she wants. I’m basically her accessory, along for the ride. I can sit around and watch her forever.

Thankfully, Michelle soon gets into the mood too and grabs all sorts of things off the racks. Confidence surges through her, and she even ends up smiling and laughing, even making jokes as we go. I love to see her like this, calming down, relaxing, and shaking off the weight of the world resting on her shoulders. I seriously want to always see her like this.

“I don’t think I can hold anymore.” She giggles. “I think it might be better for me to go and try some of this on.”

“Okay, sure. Do you want to head into the dressing room? I can wait out here if you want me to.”

“No, I need you to come and see,” she gushes. “I need you to tell me if things look good. I can’t do this alone.”

Uh-oh, something about this feels troublesome, but I nod and agree regardless. I feel like I might be walking to my doom as I follow her, but I remind myself quickly that I’m the accessory. I don’t need to have any other energy than that. I take my seat in the corner of the dressing room and wait for Michelle as she slides behind the curtain. Knowing that she’ll be taking her clothing off very near to me is a lot, but I push all of that away and sing inside my head, add up sums, work things out... anything other than thinking about her. That Russian beauty has already taken up far too much of my head space...

She comes out in outfit after outfit, each and every one of them looking more stunning than the last. I probably should turn some of them down so she doesn’t end up spending a freaking fortune, but I can’t find fault with anything. Michelle has the sort of curvaceous body that works with anything. She could pull absolutely anything off. She’s beautiful.

“Are you sure about this one?” She runs her hands over her hips and ass, drawing my eyes toward that area. A thick lump of desire forms in my throat, and it takes every bit of self-control I have not to take her in my arms. “You think it looks okay?”

“It looks amazing,” I half-whisper back. “It looks really nice on you. I definitely think you should get it. It’ll look awesome no matter what sort of job you end up wanting to do. Speaking of which, have you had any thoughts on that yet?”

“On what I want to do?” She giggles girlishly. “Not really. Is that bad? Should I have some idea? I just want to work...”

Maybe that should shock me, but I guess it doesn't. If she's been coerced into the spy career path, maybe she hasn't got any other focus. That's okay, it's something we can work on together.

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“Actually, it’s better because we aren’t narrowed down. It means we can take a look at everything on offer to see what you’ll like. It gives you more options.”

“Yeah, I think I’m going to like that. It means I can reinvent myself in every single way. I can be whoever.”

She heads back behind that curtain, leaving me wondering what I would do if I were going to reinvent myself. Who would I become? I don’t know if I need to, really, because I’ve never really worked on who I am right now. Not enough to need to change myself at all. I guess I would just like more fulfillment, more people surrounding me. A love, a family, so much more.

Hmm, I never expected Michelle to make me think so much about my own life. I didn’t think that working for Max, working with Michelle, would make me look so inward. That’s probably a good thing, though, because it’s got to be done. I find myself smiling in anticipation as I wait for her to come back out. I can’t wait to lay my eyes on her once more.

“Oh, wow...” Michelle appears in a dress which clings so tightly to her curves, I can’t breathe. “That’s nice...”

Oh, my God, she looks like she’s up for going out on a date, and I ache to be the person taking her out. Even after everything I’ve told myself about not falling for her, I’m doing so, anyway. I’m sucked in by her beauty, helpless, yearning to hold her. I don’t even realize that I’m on my feet until I’m practically walking toward her as if I’m going to take her in my arms.

“You like it?” She wiggles her hips playfully, her eyes twinkling naughtily as she does. “I don’t know what I would wear it for, but I kinda like it. It fits nice and covers me up a hell of a lot more than anything that I have at the moment. I love it.”

“I think you’ll find an excuse to wear it,” I declare while trying to keep myself away. “It looks gorgeous on you.”

“Yeah, you never know, I might get invited out to some fancy dinner or something. It’s possible, who knows?”

Our eyes lock, and I feel a tightness in my chest. It’s almost like I don’t know what I’m going to do next. I’ve lost all control over myself and I can’t claw it back, however hard I try. I almost lean in toward her, but a loud noise stops me. Thank God. A magic surrounded the pair of us for a moment, and I nearly allowed myself to get dragged in, which could have been a real issue.

“Oh, that was my phone.” I let out a weird little chuckle. “I’d better get it. It’ll probably be Max. He’s going to check in.”

Michelle’s eyes pop wide and she steps backward. It seems like she was caught up in the moment there too. It’s not a phone call, though, it’s a message, so I need to refocus my eyes on the screen to see what Max wants from me.

“Michelle, Max has sent me a list of some hairdressers too,” I call out to where she’s hidden herself once more. “He wants us to sort this out today. I’ll show you all of them when you come out, and you can pick a preference.”

She whips the curtain open and gasps loudly. “I don’t know if I can do that. I don’t think I can go to the hairdresser. I would rather do it at home. Do you think we could do that instead? Would you help me with that?”

“Erm... I’ll admit hair dye isn’t exactly my strongest suit...” Her face falls, which makes me wish I could shove my words back into my mouth. “But I’ll give it a go. I’m sure I can do it. Together, we can figure it out, right? It’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, I’m sure we can make it happen.” She purses her lips thoughtfully. “I just need to decide which color I want to go.”

Oh, God, I have no idea what I’m letting myself in for here. I don’t know anything about this. Working with Michelle is really opening my mind to all kinds of new experiences. Hopefully, I don’t totally mess it up. I get the feeling that Michelle’s hair is really important to her, and I don’t want to upset this woman now. Less so now, after seeing her in that dress. Wow!

8

MICHELLE

I laugh as we head back toward the apartment. “Wow, I have so many bags.” I glance at the endless ones in my arms and the ones that Jordan is carrying for me too, wondering where I’m going to store it all. “I think I went overboard.”

“Nah, you can never get too much,” Jordan responds easily, not judging me at all. “There wasn’t anything you could leave behind. It all looked so freaking good on you. Plus, it takes a lot of clothing to fill a wardrobe. You can toss everything else out.”

“Ooh, yeah, I like the idea of that!” I declare excitedly. “I can have a little party while I get rid of all that horrible stuff.”

Oh, my God, the idea of shredding all that shit and tossing away everything that links me to my past is a godsend. I can’t wait. I really think it’ll help me get over the fear

that's threatening to crush me with every step I take. I need to get over that.

My mood is light. It's been getting bouncier all day long. I feel like I could be flying. I could skip along the road if it wouldn't make me look so incredibly stupid. I do keep darting my eyes toward Jordan, though, and grinning at him like I'm a schoolgirl with a crush. Things have shifted between us today. There's a new mood in the air, and it makes me warm and happy.

Actually, it's more than just everything shifting into something positive. There was something in the way that he ran his eyes all over my body as I showed him each outfit that made me feel alive. I sparkled and glittered. There was something sizzling there. By covering up my body more, I feel a whole lot sexier than in any of those skimpy things Alexander wanted me to wear.

There could be something serious and intense between us. I can't quite tell, but as long as we don't act on it, it'll be fine.

"Are you going to do my hair tonight, then?" I ask Jordan with a slight tremor to my tone. "Max wants me to become a brunette sooner rather than later, right? I'm nervous about it, but I'm more than happy to give it a try... I think."

Jordan chuckles and nods. "Yeah, and I really think it'll be fine. I think you'll suit raven-colored hair."

"They do say blondes have more fun, though, right? I guess I'm about to find out. I hope the clothes still look good."

As Jordan catches my gaze, I can feel a hunger coming from him, desire. I know he's thinking about me in my outfits once more and that he likes what he saw. Is this tension going to lie between us every day if I dress up like this? Oh, God, why do I kinda want that? I guess because when he looks at me with those eyes, I can't help

but feel intensely beautiful.

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“Home, sweet home.” Jordan unlocks the door for us because he has more freedom with his fingers. “Time to unpack.”

“I might go and get all of this hung up first,” I declare as I swing the bags toward the bedroom. “I’m keen to take a look through it all again. And to get rid of everything that’s already hanging up in there. I’m done with that already.”

“Cool, well, I’ll get dinner sorted. I’m starving, so I know you must be too. I’ll see what we have.”

I got so used to eating alone before in the safehouse, but now I know that it’ll already be strange to eat without Jordan. We’ve slipped into this married couple role even better than I thought we might, and it isn’t even just for show. As I lock myself in the bedroom to sort everything out, I find myself wondering what it would be like to actively pursue Jordan if I were allowed to do so. And not in the way I’ve been taught to seduce, but because I really want to. It would be thrilling, exciting, a brand-new experience. As much as it would terrify me, I think it would empower me too. Not that I can...

Not with Jordan, but maybe with another guy one day. I haven’t made any secret of my desire to find myself someone to date and fall for in America. That’s going to be a big part of my brand-new life. Not the bit I want to rush, of course, but a bit of it nonetheless. Of course I’m going to think about it as I’m progressing and opening my existence up. It’s natural, right?

I yank everything out of the wardrobe and toss it on the floor, grinning gleefully to myself as I do so. I hate all this shit. Everything I’ll hang up will be a hundred times

better, a million times more me. Reinventing myself is so much fun.

“Jordan liked this best of all.” I pull out the dress and run my fingers over it. “I could wear it tonight to lure him in...”

My God, if he didn't have his suspicions about me—even if they might have died down a bit now, I'm sure they're still deep in there somewhere—then maybe I would have. But I've already made tons of mistakes to make it seem like I'm seducing him when that isn't my intention. I don't want that to happen again. Instead, I'll wear one of my much more casual outfits that can't be misconstrued in any way. And if I end up feeling sexier because I'm more covered up, then so be it. That can't be helped.

I'm cheeky, I know it, but I don't mind that. It's a side of me that Jordan has brought out of me, and I'm enjoying it. Today has brought me along in leaps and bounds. I'm excited to see what the rest of the night will bring with it...

“Are you sure we haven't had too much wine for this?” Jordan laughs as he holds the hair dye box in his hands. “We've had a whole bottle between us. I mean, I'm not drunk or anything, but I don't know what I'm doing.”

“You'll be fine.” I'll admit I feel a little giddy myself, but at the really happy point where I'm good to go along with whatever. Especially with Jordan. We've grown even closer tonight, even easier with one another than we have been all day long. It's awesome. “You'll be fine, you know. I'm putting my life—well, my hair, which is practically the same thing—in your hands.”

I've been internally resisting the hair dye up until this point, but with some wine in my system, I know this isn't the thing that will take me away from the memories of my mother. I don't need her hair. I can hold on to her in my heart. It'll be fine. As long as I keep her in my heart and mind, I won't be losing her. It's silly to assume that one single feature is what I need.

I squeeze my eyes closed and laugh. “Come on, just get on with it already. Let’s see what this does to me.”

“Fine, okay. I’m gonna mix it up now and see what I can do. Hopefully, this all goes well. Maybe I’ll get you another drink.”

I listen to him mixing up the dye before he opens yet another bottle of wine to pour us another drink. I know that I’ll be grateful for the drink because there’s going to be something very intense about this, however giddy I am.

“Right, here we go.” Jordan’s fingers work their way into my hair with the dye covering them, immediately letting me see the mistake I’ve made. I thought that this might be a little easier to work with once I’d had a couple of drinks, but now I think it’s making it worse. He’s touching me in such a sweet, soft way that it sends a shudder down my spine. I accidentally lean back into his fingers because it feels so good and I want more. I haven’t felt anything like this. “Does it feel like I’m doing it right?”

I grab my wine glass and glug back more than I intend to. “Oh, yeah, I think you are. As long as all the hair is covered.”

Shit, this is an intense head massage. It’s sensual, sexy, hot as hell. The butterflies in the pit of my stomach transform to the size of birds. I’m pretty sure that Jordan must be able to hear the powerful hammering of my heart. It’s going wild. Every part of me is on fire. I feel like flames are licking all over me, consuming me, swallowing me up whole. I want Jordan to stop this because I know I’m about to lose myself, but if he does, I’ll kill him. This is the best sensation I’ve ever had.

I’m breathless, wild, crazy. My fingers curl around the edge of my seat to keep me in place before I go nuts.

“Okay, there. I think I have all your hair covered.” Jordan pulls back and runs his eyes all over me. He might be examining my hair, but I feel like he’s drinking in my face too. He’s looking at me in such a way that I can hardly handle it. This is even more powerful than the dressing room because we’re alone here. Things could happen if we wanted them to. “Yep, looks good.”

He has a strange expression on his face, and it hasn’t escaped my attention that he’s glugging down his wine like there’s no tomorrow. It wasn’t just me affected by that exchange just then. It’s had such a powerful impact on me that I can still feel his fingers touching me right now. It’s hard to meet his eyes when he’s making me feel this way.

“So, er, how long do I leave this in for?” I need to shatter the tension of the moment. It’s getting to be too much. “Does it say?”

“Twenty minutes. So, we have a little while to... chat or whatever you want to do.” He smiles stiffly. “Want to watch TV?”

I figure this will be easier for us because it gives us something else to focus on, but as soon as we sit on the couch together and his knee bangs against mine, the electricity levels up once more. It zings between us so powerfully, I don’t know how we’re going to manage a whole twenty minutes like this. I won’t be able to keep myself away from him. Every so often, I dart my eyes toward him. I sense him looking at me too, trying to figure out where my head is at.

Then our eyes lock, and there’s no turning back. The intense magnetic pull drags us in. I feel myself being taken in whether I want to or not. My head edges toward him, and he leans in to me too. It’s happening, I can sense it. Any minute now, we will finally cave to the intense temptation, and I can’t freaking wait. I’ve wanted this moment for as long as I’ve known him.

Oh, wow. And then it happens. Our lips connect, and my whole body erupts into fireworks. Holy hell, it's something else, on another level. I already knew that kissing Jordan would be powerful and exciting, but I had no idea how much. I didn't know it was going to make me feel this insane. Oh, my God, I slide closer to him, needing more, demanding more of his body.

I want this, I want him, I need him. Jordan is bringing out a dragon of desire inside me that I can't get enough of.

9

JORDAN

"No, no, we shouldn't." Just as the kiss deepens, just as it seems like it might be about to lead somewhere, Michelle yanks away and stares at me with wide, shocked eyes. "We shouldn't do this, not... not right now. I need to do my hair."

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I think this is just an excuse. It seems to me that Michelle is just freaking out, but of course I nod and point toward the bathroom like this is a perfectly reasonable reason to break apart the most passionate kiss I've ever had in my life. My God, she was incredible. Our connection is something else. We really are on fire. If things had carried on, it would have been phenomenal. It has me all thrilled just imagining what it could be like if we'd ended up naked and rolling around. Wow, we would have been flames, and it's a shame that we didn't head down that route. Even if it's also probably for the best.

She slams the bathroom door behind her, and I instantly hear the shower running as if she can't get in it fast enough. Once I know that she definitely isn't coming back, I let out a breath and lean back against the couch. With my head rested behind me, my body begins to cool down just a little, allowing rationality to creep back in. We really shouldn't have kissed. Even if it felt amazing, that wasn't what we should have done. It's good that nothing went further or we would really be in trouble.

"She's your client," I hiss to myself, suddenly wondering what came over me. "Max would kill you."

I feel sick to my stomach. I clutch my belly to stop it from bursting free. The thought of Max knowing what I've done on my first ever job is horrible. I can't even begin to imagine what he would do to me. I'd be fired for sure, and I don't know where that would leave me. I don't know what other job I would do at the moment. This is so freaking important to me. I don't want to be taken off the case with Michelle because I don't know if I could trust anyone else to look after her like I could. It has to be me. I need to be the one protecting her as long as I can stop myself from kissing her again. I have to keep away.

I rise from my seat and tidy around as much as I can, making sure that the dishes are all cleaned. Anything to stop Michelle from having to do it, and also because I want to be busy when she comes back out of the bathroom. I don't want it to be awkward, so if she doesn't want to talk to me much, then she doesn't need to. She can just head to bed...

Oh, God, but what if she wants me in bed with her again? That's going to be more charged tonight. It'll be harder to keep away from one another. I hope Michelle has considered that before she asks me, if she asks me...

I want to play it cool and nonchalant as Michelle comes out of the bathroom, but my eyes snap around to see her regardless. I can't stop it, the magnetic force drags me in without my consent. She just happens to look absolutely stunning while she's soaking wet, which doesn't make this any easier for me. I want to touch her skin, to brush against her and to feel what she's like right now, but I can't. I curl my fists by my sides to keep me in place while I look at her. Her red cheeks make me cringe.

"Are you okay?" I ask her awkwardly. "Your hair is looking really good right now. You suit being a brunette."

"I do?" She automatically touches her hair bashfully. "I don't know. I haven't really seen it yet. I guess I'll know when it dries."

There's a thickness in the air between us. I don't think either of us knows what to do about it, so we just stare for a little while until Michelle begins to edge toward her bedroom. I want to stop her from going because I still feel like there's a whole world of things we need to say to one another, but I don't want any more awkwardness there, either. Maybe tomorrow...

"Goodnight." She halfheartedly waves to me. "I guess I'll see you in the morning. Hopefully, no screaming tonight."

I'm crushed that she doesn't want me to sleep with her. I know it's irrational and could lose me my job, but I don't want her to be the one to push me away. I want her, even if I shouldn't, and I'm scared that she doesn't want me back.

"Yeah. Goodnight." I sound monotone and strangled. "I'll see you tomorrow. We'll see what the plan is then. I'll be in touch with Max and find out what he has for us. You know how he is. He's bound to have something."

She vanishes from sight, leaving me all alone in the living room with my thoughts for company. My head is all over the place, spinning in a direction I can't contain. The only thing I can try and do now is sleep this shit off. I can't think about Michelle and how powerful it felt dyeing her hair, how intense it was kissing her, how much I want to strip her down and have her. My God, last night, I couldn't stop thinking about how much I distrust her, and tonight I can't stop thinking about that body of hers.

This isn't good, is it? I'm in trouble and I just freaking know it. So, why can't I stop it? What the hell is wrong with me? Urgh, I need to sleep before I get really pissed off and do something crazy. I need to keep my head on...

"Michelle?" All of a sudden, she's standing over me wearing nothing at all. The curves of her body are just as delicious as I knew they would be, making my heart pound and my whole body tremble. "Michelle, what are you doing here?"

I prop up onto my elbows to really drink her in because I don't know if this is going to be a one-time thing, if I'm ever going to get a chance to see her gorgeous body again. She's so freaking mind-blowing that I need to commit her to memory forever.

"I want you. You know I want you. I've wanted you all day long. Why didn't you just take me before?"

She tosses her hair seductively over her shoulder and straddles me. I can already feel

the wet heat emanating from her, and I ache badly to explore that. My cock is hard as a rock and aching to be inside her. Fuck all the reasons we shouldn't do this. I want her badly, and she's desperate for me too. I'm a hot-blooded male. I can't resist her.

"Fuck, Michelle, you look so good." I grab on to the round curve of her ass and bring her closer to me. "I'm sorry. I thought you didn't want me. But fuck, I wanted to take you before. It was seriously hard for me not to just take you."

"Well, now..." She runs her fingers through my hair. "I need you to do whatever you want. Fuck me, take me hard."

Instantly, I spin her around and scoop her up in my arms. Slamming her up against the wall, I kiss her harder and more passionately than before. The clothing seems to melt away from my body, leaving my cock naked and ready for her. She has her legs wrapped tightly around me so I can plunge deep within her in a heartbeat. Oh, my God, fucking her is even more intense than I thought it would be, and the delightful moans flying out of her lips are a bit too much. I don't know if I can hack it...

Then she's on her knees. I don't even remember pulling out of her, but she's on the floor and she has me deep in her mouth, down to the back of her throat, sucking and licking me like there's no tomorrow. I run my fingers through her stunning hair as she does so, guiding her movements harder and faster until I'm basically fucking her mouth. My hips buck as my thighs tense up. I already know that I'm a little too close to the edge and that I might not be able to hold it inside any longer.

I want to contain myself. I need Michelle to lose her freaking mind too, but I don't know if I can manage it. She's too much for me. I might not be able to keep the volcano from erupting when she's doing this to me.

"Taste me," she screams, leaning back away from me. "I want you to fuck me from behind. I want every angle."

I can't keep myself in check. I don't know what's going on any longer. One minute, my tongue is buried within her, and the next, she's riding me and her nipple is between my lips, then her ass is slamming against me as she's on her hands and knees in front of me. The sex is so intense, so dirty, and while a part of me knows that it's a dream, just my brain exploring my options and fantasies because I definitely can't do it in real life, it doesn't make it any less powerful. Every sensation is real and overwhelming. I don't want to let Michelle go, but that isn't just because being inside her is so intense.

"Fuck, Michelle." She sits on my lap with her back leaning against me so I can grab onto her breasts. "You feel so good."

"Fucking you feels so good too," she cries back. "I don't ever want you to stop fucking me like this."

I could do this forever. I can't see any reason not to keep fucking her forever, but of course, the nature gets in the way and there's nothing I can do. Michelle orgasms wildly, loudly, passionately, and her walls are clamping tightly around me, coaxing the orgasm out of me. I can't stop myself however hard I try. Her body is too much for me. I fucking lose my mind...

But it doesn't end there. Sex isn't the only thing that my dream consists of. Once the post-orgasmic bliss slides over my body, the waves subsiding, we lie together in one another's arms, holding on to each other like we're the only people left in the world. She nestles into me, adoring me with her actions, and I'm obsessed with that. I can't get enough.

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“This is what I like,” I tell her with absolutely no shame. “This is what I want from you. You know that, right?”

She pulls up to stare at me. “So, my body isn’t the only thing you’re after?” She winks playfully at me. “I can’t believe it.”

“That’s not to say that I’m not in complete admiration of your body, of course...” I run my hands all over her, so grateful that I can just touch her whenever I want to. “You are officially the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. If you let me, I could fall for you, I think. Not that I would ever be able to say that when I’m awake, of course.”

I sigh to myself, knowing that this will only stay as a dream, however much I would like it to be anything else. The kiss was bad enough, and it made Michelle freak the hell out. Anything else would simply send her over the edge, which is a real shame.

10

MICHELLE

Oh, my God, Oh, my God...I stare up at the ceiling in my bedroom, wishing that my eyes would just close already to block all of this out. It’s a lot, and lying back thinking about it isn’t getting me anywhere. That kiss... wow, that kiss, it was mind-blowing. I don’t really know why I stopped it when it was the last thing I wanted to do. Really, I wanted more, but a small voice in the back of my brain screamed at me that I needed to yank away, and I simply went with it. I thought it’d be the best thing to do...

“Jordan is here to protect me,” I remind myself quietly so he won’t hear me. “He’s the man saving my life. I can’t cross boundaries with him. Just because I want a man in my life, it doesn’t mean that he has to be the man. I can pick any guy. There are tons of men in America. I can find one who really suits me, one I can actually have. Not just one who’s right here.”

Just because I want him, doesn’t mean I can have him. As amazing as that kiss was, I’m going to have to forget about it completely. I can’t have it in my mind when I look at him or I’ll lose myself once more. I can’t keep on with that.

I turn over onto my side and force my eyes closed. I need sleep. I really need to rest. If I lie awake thinking about Jordan all night long, then tomorrow will be horrible, and I’m sure Max already has a lot planned for me. He always does.

But his beautiful face floods my mind. I’m stuck on him no matter what. I’ve been thinking about him all day long, and that’s only going to get worse now that I know our chemistry is intense. I suspected it before, which was one thing, but knowing is worse. It definitely isn’t ‘getting it out of my system’. It’s only made me ache for him even more. There’s a deep throbbing at my core, begging me to get out of this bedroom and to jump on him already. But I’m the one who ran away. I can’t go back now. I’m sure Jordan has had second thoughts anyway and he isn’t interested. It might have just been in the heat of the moment, anyway.

“Stop it.” I’m getting annoyed with myself now. I squeeze a pillow over my head to try and block out the sound, as if it isn’t coming from inside my brain. “Will you stop it already? We just need to forget all about everything.”

But I know for sure that I won’t be able to forget the kiss. It’s going to be etched in my memory forever. That’s going to stick with me forevermore. Every time I look at him, it’s all I’ll see. His lips, his smile, the way his body felt next to mine.

Urgh, I feel like shit. I don't think I got any sleep at all. I might have drifted in and out of dreams a couple of times, but I haven't had enough sleep to make me feel good at all. But as shattered as I am, I'm not getting any more sleep, so I might as well give it up and haul my ass out of bed. As I stagger across the room, I'm shocked out of my hazy state when I glimpse myself in the mirror. I forgot about my hair and the new color until this very moment. It's really brown. The blonde is definitely gone, and it's a shocking sight. It snaps my eyes so wide that I don't know whether I'll ever be able to shut them again. Is that really me?

"Oh, my God." I run my fingers through it, feeling the softness of it and admiring it. "It's not too bad, actually. I'm impressed."

I shake it a while and admire it from different angles, seeing a softness to my features now that I haven't seen before. I kinda like how I look. This is a new version of me. It's like the America Michelle, and I'm okay with it. Now I need to find some clothing to go with this new look. Clothing that will be like armor when I face Jordan once more. This morning will be the worst.

Luckily, I have a million new outfits I can try on, clothing that I'll actually like and look good in too.

It takes me a while, but eventually, I settle on something that I like with my hair. I'm dressed to impress and ready to finally see what Jordan is like. With a bit of luck, he'll take the same idea as before and will find a way to avoid the topic completely. Like I did before, I press my ear up against the door, but this time, I hear nothing. I don't smell anything either, so there isn't any breakfast on the way. There's a definite difference to the atmosphere this morning, but what is it? What's happening here?

"Hello?" I push open the door delicately and peek around it, my pulse racing the whole time. "Jordan? Is anyone here?"

There's nothing, no one here. I don't know if I should feel glad about that. It's weird for sure, but I suppose I can at least walk around the place without worrying about whom I might walk into. Jordan's bag is still in the living room, so he hasn't left me completely, but I do need to get used to the idea that one day, he won't be here, and I'll have to exist in this place alone. Right now, that's a bit of a gut punch because I don't know how I'll survive without someone watching over me. I can't picture it.

"I can't have someone babysitting me forever," I whisper to myself. "I'll have to be a grown-up one day. I'll have to be alone."

I act like I am for a while, just to see if I can do it, but it really is just me playing a character. I won't know what that's going to be like until it really happens. I'm just going to have to wait and cross that bridge when I come to it. I can't deal with 'what ifs'. I just have no idea what's going to happen in the next few days, never mind months. I need to focus on the here and now.

"Oh!" I jump as I hear a key in the lock. I stiffen up as I wait for the moment when Jordan walks inside. "Oh, hi."

"Er, hello." He has coffees and pastries in his hands. "I was on the phone to Max so I thought I'd take a walk as I talked."

I nod, not quite sure how to answer this because his tone is so brisk and sharp with me. I feel like he's trying to create a distance between us, and I suppose that's for the best, isn't it? We need that so nothing happens again. I mean, the kiss was a mistake. We're both painfully aware of that, so moving past it like this is for the best. It's all we can do.

"Max wants us to go to the office this morning. He's got all sorts of stuff sorted out for you. Paperwork and things. He didn't go into specifics, but I imagine it'll be everything to help you get a job, move in the right direction."

“Right!” This surprises me. “Wow, Max really does work fast, doesn’t he? That’s incredible. He really is awesome.”

“Yeah, he’s very impressive like that.” Jordan nods slowly. He places the food and drinks down before circling the table. I can tell that he can’t relax around me again, which makes me sad. I liked it so much better when we could just hang out and it was simple and straightforward. “And you know how he wants to move things along quickly, so we don’t have long.”

“Well, I’m dressed.” I giggle awkwardly. “So it won’t take me long before I’m ready to get out of here. I just need to eat...”

I grab one of the pastries off the table and stuff it into my mouth. I’m trying to make sure I don’t have to talk anymore. This is awkward as fuck, and I feel like everything I say makes it so much worse. Jordan isn’t even looking at me now. It’s like he’s afraid to really see me after the kiss. I would much rather pretend nothing happened and that we’re all fine. It’s easier that way.

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Jordan doesn't eat anything, he simply sits and sips his coffee like the caffeine is the only thing to keep him alive. He's on edge, feeling awkward in my presence, and I don't know how to pull him out of that mood. It's driving me insane.

"Let me know what you want from me," I tell him awkwardly, needing to break the silence. "Like, what time you want to go? I'm ready now, if that's what you need. I don't have anything else planned, obviously, so just let me know."

"Yeah, sure, we can go." He nods rapidly and finally meets my eyes. But only for a second. His tone remains stiff and uncomfortable too, the kiss still playing heavily between us in the worst way possible. "I'm ready now. I'll eat on the way."

I take my coffee too, so thankfully, I'll have something to keep me distracted as we drive. I don't think we'll have much to say to one another as we go if this is the mood of the day, if this awkwardness is going to stay with us. I can't see us finding a way to get over this anytime soon. I don't know if it's the fact that we overstepped the boundary or if he's hurt by my running away. How do I let him know that it definitely wasn't rejection but just me panicking and running away?

No, I can't tell him anything like that, especially not when we're on the way to see Max. He's unlikely to want to talk about anything like that on the way to seeing his boss, and for that I definitely can't blame him. I don't think he's going to want to go into that meeting with the kiss weighing any heavier on him than it already is. I can see it on him right now.

Maybe later. We will probably have a lot of time together to discuss whatever we want to. If he wants to, that is. Something will have to happen unless we want to exist

in this weird limbo forever. Not my favorite plan, but it isn't just me in this.

Jordan sparks the car up to life, and we drive in awkward silence. A couple of times, I open my mouth as I try and think of something to say, but nothing immediately comes to mind. Every conversation topic that I can think of starts to feel stupid before it comes out, so I fall back into silence once more. I just can't make anything happen. It's frustrating, actually.

Damn it, that kiss...thatdamnkiss... it was so good, so life-changing, that I wouldn't change it for anything, except maybe my running away. But it's hard not to wonder whether it was worth it when we're stuck in this position. We should have forced ourselves to keep away, to avoid temptation... perhaps I should have just sucked it up and gone to the hairdresser. It was his getting that intimately close to me to dye my hair that did it. It made it impossible to keep the hell away from one another.

11

JORDAN

We both pointedly stare at Max as we wait for him to reveal what we're really here for. It's as if we can't bear to look at one another, but really, I'm too frightened to see her. After the kiss and the intense dream that followed, I don't know what to expect next. I don't know if I'll be able to keep myself away from her if our eyes catch again because she's so intoxicating and she draws me in so strongly, the magnetic pull is too much, and I'm totally unable to resist it.

I also don't want Max to spot what's going on between us. That freaks me the hell out too. He seems pretty good at reading between the lines with people, and I'm frightened that he might sense the tension between us. If he thinks that we aren't getting along, that will be bad for the pair of us, but if he senses that something physical happened between us, then I'm in for it.

I don't know how Michelle feels about it, either. Maybe I should have tried to talk to her about it instead of avoiding the topic because now, it's a little weird. I mean, what the hell do I intend to do if she erupts and tells Max everything? She might not know that keeping our little kiss to ourselves is the best way. She might not think about it at all. Then I'll lose this job which I want so badly. I can definitely tell that she's on edge, which is putting me in a crazy position myself.

"So..." Max's eyes dart between the pair of us with ease. If he senses anything, then he doesn't let it show. "I have all the paperwork that I promised you, Michelle. If you want me to just go through it all with you, I can do so now."

She nods eagerly, so he begins. While they discuss it, I do what I can to gather myself up so when I'm required to be a part of the conversation, I can do so with ease. I don't want Max to spot any weakness within me. I haven't forgotten that this is also my chance to prove myself to him. Benji let me know a while ago that the more respect Max has for you, the more work will come your way. I'd love to be in a position where I'm the first one he thinks of... which means no more kissing clients.

"I don't really know what industry I want to work in," Michelle admits shyly to Max. "I know that isn't great, I've been trying to think things through just to see if I can come up with anything I might excel at, and I don't know for sure. Jordan has said that he'll help me work it all out, though. He has been really great about that. I hope this won't be too much of an issue..."

"Hey, you guys work things out however you want to." Max holds up his hands in a surrendering gesture. "I'm all good. I know you two know more about the situation than me. I have a lot of faith in Jordan to make this work."

Urgh, that just makes me feel a million times worse. Knowing that he really has genuine faith in me causes guilt to wash over me. I can hardly look him in the eyes as I nod along, agreeing with him. He must be able to see that something is going on

with me. Goddamn it, I'm going to have to explain myself at some point, but what will I even say? There's no excuse for my attitude.

"Right, well, I don't think there's anything else to say," Max finally tells us. "You guys can get job hunting if you want. I'm sure you want to get a move on in that department to keep on with the amazing progress you've made so far."

Both Michelle and I hesitate before we stand up and get ourselves ready to leave. The prospect of being alone again is a little much for the pair of us, but I suppose we don't have any choice. We say our goodbyes to Max and leave in silence.

"What should I do now?" Michelle asks as we head toward the car, the awkwardness crushing us. "Job-wise? Should we walk about and see if anywhere has signs in the window to say that they're looking for anyone? Cafés and stuff like that? I mean, that should be easy enough, right? I could probably do something like that. Do I want to, though? I don't know..."

I feel like she's only suggesting this because she doesn't want to be back at the apartment because no one really does that anymore. "Maybe we should get some of the local newspapers instead. Then we can check the Internet? We'll get more there."

"Sure, yeah, that might be better, actually. We might have more luck." There's no denying she sounds disappointed. "Hopefully, there will be a lot on offer because I'm still a little bewildered at the moment about what I want to do."

"Well, let's go and see what we can sort out." I smile warily at her. "We'll soon find out what there is, then you can think."

I know that we're in for yet another awkward car ride, and that's exactly what we get. We have a little bit of a chat every now and again about the paperwork Max has given her, but nothing really goes anywhere and it feels incredibly forced. I want to

get past that. I don't want us to remain in this place. Maybe I should bring the kiss up so we can talk around it. I part my lips a couple of times, trying to find an easy way to just get it out in the open already, but it doesn't happen. I'm a mess.

With arms full of newspapers, we finally get back to the apartment and pile them up on the table. I can already see Michelle's eyes fill with fear about heading through all of this information to see what she wants to go along with. This is where I'm going to have to pull my head out of my ass to help her. There can't be any more worrying about awkwardness now. And since we're not going to discuss the kiss... I think we've gone beyond that now, so we need to find a way to make things work.

"Right, I'll make us some coffee," I declare as I head toward the kettle. "Then we can make a start on this. I'll get my laptop out too so we can see what's online. There will be a lot, but just think about how much choice that gives you."

She sort of laughs, but the sound is much too strangled a sound to come across as believable. It'll be fine, though. I'm sure once we have something else to focus on, it'll be just fine. Things might even get a little easier between us.

"This is a lot," Michelle calls to me from the other room. "I really don't know what I'm going to be any good at or what sort of place will want me. I don't know who will want me, either. I mean, I'm hardly going to be desired, am I? I can't really explain where I've been over the last few years, which isn't going to look great, is it? What if no one wants to hire me?"

"It'll be fine," I tell her seriously as I bring the drinks over to her. "We will find something. And you can explain the gaps away by saying that you've been traveling or you can invent something foreign. No one will look too far into it. It's a good coverup."

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“You mean... be dishonest?” she gasps. “But that feels all kinds of wrong. I don’t know if I should do that...”

“Everyone does.” I roll my eyes and laugh. “Maybe I’ve never, not much, but everyone embellishes just a little bit.”

“There’s a difference between embellishing and lying... but I suppose I don’t have a choice, do I? Telling the truth won’t work out well for me either... and it’ll lead Alexander and the other Russians right to me, so... yeah, I’ll do whatever you say.”

I sit beside her, and we start looking through the papers together. Having a topic to talk about together, something that isn’t about us, helps the barriers to come down just a little bit. It allows us to calm down around one another and to find a happy medium where it’s easy once more. Thank God. I much prefer it like that. I can actually smile once more, which is awesome.

“What about admin?” she asks me doubtfully with those lips pouted out. “I don’t know if I’ll be good in an office...”

“Send off an application anyway,” I reassure her. “Let’s just see what comes back from it. You never know...”

“Yeah, you’re right. I do need to keep my options open as much as possible, don’t I? Pass me the laptop and I’ll send off my details. And I might as well see if this restaurant wants any more waitresses too, although I wouldn’t be too keen on anything customer facing because it potentially puts me in the firing line. Wherever people can see me... but I have to try everything just incase no office job wants me. I

need to cast a wide net as Michelle Miller to see what I get back.”

Michelle Miller.Uh-oh. Something about the way she said that makes me feel all tingling inside. It’s a reminder that for the moment, she’s my ‘wife’. I sidle a little closer to Michelle without even realizing what I’m doing. It isn’t until I inhale her delicious feminine scent which sends a shudder down my spine that I realize that I might have made a mistake. I’m losing control once more.

“Oh, what about this one?” I don’t even know what I’m pointing at. I’m just trying to make conversation to attempt to disguise the dizziness spinning through my brain. It’s kinda overwhelming right now. “You should apply for this.”

“The supermarket one or the ‘dancer’ job, which I presume is code for stripper? Is that the one you mean?”

“Oh!” Thankfully, Michelle bursts out laughing, which makes it okay for me to do the same. “Oops, sorry.”

She leans across to pat me on the arm, to reassure me that I haven’t offended her, but as she does, electricity shoots between us both and the atmosphere instantly changes. The thickness to the air is hard to breathe in. It wraps around us and cinches us together, making it almost impossible for us to remain apart any longer. I hook my hand around the back of her neck even with every rational voice inside me screaming at me, reminding me that I shouldn’t do this, and I kiss her.

Instantly, tight desire grips me. It grabs hold of me and pulls me in closer to her. I can’t get enough of her. She’s incredible. Michelle, too. She wraps herself around me and clings just as hard to me as I am her. The walls have come down too far, and there’s no building them back up again. We’ve crossed the line, and this time, I don’t think either of us can resist temptation. We want one another. It’s aching, yearning, desperate. My hands are all over her, and she’s exploring me too, but it

isn't enough. I need more of Michelle, and this time, I can tell she wants me too. There will be no running off for either of us.

Shit, we're in trouble. So much trouble.

12

MICHELLE

Oh, my God. Jordan is shucking my clothing and I'm allowing it to happen. I want it to happen. I need him to see me naked and to make me feel incredible, which I just know he will. This chemistry between us is something else, and I know it'll be phenomenal. I don't know how the hell I managed to run away last time. This pull is powerful, it's mind-blowing.

My head lolls to one side as the desire grips me hard, and Jordan immediately takes advantage of the exposed skin of my throat and collarbone. He sucks and licks the hypersensitive, tingly skin, tasting parts of me that I didn't even know would send me insane. I gasp and pant with desire, waiting for those gorgeous lips of his to travel downward, all over me...

"Wow, you're beautiful," he murmurs as he finally manages to whip my top off to see what I have underneath. This comfy bra I'm wearing might be nothing like the sexy, skimpy stuff I came into the country with, but the effect it has on Jordan might as well be the same. He has his eyes on my breasts like they're the hottest things on the planet. "Michelle, you're stunning."

I shoot him a cheeky wink as I reach behind my back to unhook my bra. His gaze becomes hooded with desire as the material falls away and flutters to the floor. He looks like he's in absolute heaven, which only intensifies the butterflies in the pit of my stomach. I like having this much of an impact on him. It makes me feel sexy as all

hell. Like a goddess.

“You like what you see?” I shimmy to draw his attention to my nipples. “You want to have a taste of me?”

My God, where did this sex kitten come from? Jordan has pulled it out of me and I love it. This is so natural, so much fun, I want to go along with that further. So, I grab the back of his head and pull him toward me until that hot mouth of his explores my breasts. He tugs and teases my beaded rock-hard nipples until I can hardly stand it any longer. My head is spinning with a dizzy desire that threatens to unravel me and tear me apart. If he’s already got me this fired up, then what the hell will it be like when he’s inside me? Deep inside me, making me feel phenomenal? Because my God, I just know it’s going to be off the scale. Since I’ve never had a man make me feel as good as I can myself, I don’t know how it’ll be when that changes.

I get so focused in on what Jordan’s doing to my breasts that I barely notice his fingers slipping down my body until he’s at the waistband of my panties. As he drags his finger along the top of it, never quite dipping in, he drives me insane.

“Are you teasing me?” I growl while nibbling sexily on his bottom lip. “I don’t know if I can stand that. I want you.”

“Ooh, you’re bold, aren’t you?” he rasps, clearly loving every second of it. “I like that. Tell me what you want.”

“You.” I grab his head and push him downward. This definitely isn’t how I would normally behave, but it’s fun. I like being this powerful goddess, this demanding diva. It’s awesome. “I want you, Jordan Miller. You are my husband, after all. Sort of.”

Those words are a reminder of what we’re really doing here and why this is oh, so

wrong, but neither of us cares. We're together now, in this incredible place where it feels phenomenally right, so who the hell cares what brought us together? My life has been all upside-down, anyway. Nothing has been right, so why not just go with the flow and see where this could lead?

Not that I could stop this now, even if I thought it a bad idea. I want him far too badly for that.

He falls to his knees in front of the chair I'm sitting on and starts tugging my trousers down. I raise my ass up just a little, just to give him the room to take them and my panties off too, before I crash back down onto the ice-cold chair.

"Ooh," I squeal with excitement. I almost leap back up again, but Jordan doesn't give me the chance. He gabs onto my ass and pulls me to the edge of the seat where he can really breathe me in. A small nudge is all that it takes to have my thighs spread wide for him, giving him everything that he needs from me. "Oh, my goodness, Jordan, what are you doing to me?"

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His eyes lock on mine, and I get struck with that powerful magnetic sensation once more. I couldn't drag my gaze away from his sparkling blues even if I wanted to, which luckily, I definitely don't. I could watch him forever, especially when his eyes glaze over with serious passion right at the moment he plunges his eager fingers deep within me. This time, the scream that comes from me has nothing to do with the temperature of the furniture or the room and everything to do with him.

“Fuck,” I gasp as the dizziness makes it challenging for me to see anything. “Oh, fuck, that feels so good, Jordan.”

His hot breath tickles along my soaking wet slit, making everything tighten up inside me. I try to grab onto Jordan to give me something to connect to, but I can't quite reach him so I curl my fingers around the edge of the chair instead. The pleasure is so much, it's so intense that my knuckles turn white. He's edging his head ever so slowly closer to where I'm pulsing and crying out for him, and I can't wait. His tongue is stretching, brushing lightly against my clit, giving me a taste of what's to come.

“Oh, shit.” The tiny flicker of his tongue really is just a teaser. The next time he connects with my clit, he's like a madman on a mission. The patterns he traces over me are absolutely insane. Any control that I have over my body simply melts away. Jordan has all of me right now. His fingers focus on spearing me and massaging my insides while his mouth takes my clit on a wild ride. Jordan Miller is doing everything that he can to coax the orgasm from me, and I'm powerless to resist. “Jordan, Oh, wow.”

I don't want him to stop. For a little while, I hold his head tightly to keep him in

place, but all of a sudden, as my body tenses up and the hot bliss fizzes in my veins, I yank him back. It hits me hard that I need him, all of him, and if I lose myself already, then it might be too intense for him to be inside me too. I want him to fuck me, to fill me up, and I need that now.

“Come here,” I whisper breathlessly as I tug him from the ground and his lips collide with mine. I can taste myself on his mouth, which only makes it even sexier. I can’t get enough. “I need you, Jordan. I want you now. Give me everything.”

He pulls back just enough to grab a condom. I snatch it from him and tear the packet open with my teeth, wanting to be flirty. Jordan rips his own clothing off as I do so. He wants to be naked, and fucking hell, I need him nude too. I haven’t seen him without clothing before, and I seriously need to. Jordan Miller is something special in clothing, but I bet that body he has underneath is on another level. I suck in a tense breath and wait to see every inch of him.

Oh, my God. I’m speechless. I really don’t know what to say. Jordan doesn’t just look like a military man, but more the sort that should be in a freaking calendar or something. I can’t believe he’s standing here in front of me. He’s a fucking dream.

Before he disappears into thin air, because I’m a little bit afraid that he might just be a figment of my imagination or a dream, I yank him toward me and take his cock in my hands. Holy hell. He’s rock-hard and absolutely massive. I don’t know how I’m going to handle him, but as I stroke my fingers up and down his length, I’m fucking excited to find out.

Eventually, I roll the condom over him, the anticipation clinging to me tightly. My pulse pounds, my stomach flip-flops, I’m trembling with need, and I just know that if I don’t have him inside me in a moment, I’ll die.

“I need you,” I remind him in a hoarse whisper, which is kinda sexy. “I want you,

Jordan. Please, give me everything.”

“Are you sure?” He angles his newly sheathed cock at my entrance, teasing me some more. I don’t know how much more I can take. I get it, but we’ve been holding this off for far too long. I need this right now. “You want me, Michelle?”

“Just fuck me, Jordan.” I toss my head back in desire. I actually loved the way my name rolled off his lips just then. It was seductive as hell, a bit like a prayer, and I want more of it. But right now, I want him. All of him. I need him. “Take me.”

He lifts me from the chair and slams me back against the wall before plunging into me and making me scream with delight. Each and every thrust sends me spinning over the edge. He ignites the parts of me he had on fire only moments before, and it’s not long before I can feel the pressure of pleasure building up within me, stiffening me, shattering through my organs.

“Oh, Jordan,” I scream out as the waves keep rolling endlessly over me. “Jordan, oh, my God.”

I’ve never felt anything like this. The orgasm is wild, it’s intense, it’s overwhelming. Every part of my body flames because of him. The hot bliss circles through every inch of me, curling my toes and vibrating in my chest. Holy shit, this just had to happen, didn’t it? There was no way that we could resist one another forever. Not when it’s this good to connect.

Neither of us knows where this is going to lead, where this could go, but when it feels this good, who cares? The future doesn’t matter at the moment. I’m more than happy to live in the present and to enjoy it for what it is.

“Come to bed with me,” I gasp out as we swim in the post-orgasmic bliss together. “Sleep with me again.”

“You want me in your bed?” Jordan waggles his eyebrows playfully at me. “You don’t want me on the couch?”

I lean in and kiss him some more. “If you’re sleeping on the couch, then I’ll be there with you.”

But this time, I don’t need Jordan lying next to me to keep the nightmares away. I want him in my arms because I like him. I like the energy that he gives me and the way he makes me feel. And since the future isn’t guaranteed, I want to make the most of what we have right now. I want to kiss him and hold him all night long, without worrying about what will come next.

“Okay, I’ll come to bed with you.” He chuckles. “That sounds nice, Michelle.”

13

JORDAN

“Oh, no,” I mutter to myself as I slide out of the bed. “Oh, no, what the hell did we do? We went too far, didn’t we?”

I know we shouldn’t have slept together. We both know it. But at the same time, I don’t know how we’re supposed to keep fighting it. Clearly, we can’t fight it, not when it’s as chemical and intense as that. I mean, that was overwhelming. Sleeping together was even more powerful than just kissing, and I can promise it’ll happen again. The closer we get, the more time we have to spend together, the more it’ll happen. We’re screwed. I think I might need a moment.

I head into the living room to grab my workout gear so I can go for a run. I don’t totally love the gym, but I do like exercise to clear my mind. It’s the only way I can make the most important decisions of my life, such as this one. A jog will help.

I click the front door closed quietly behind me so I don't wake Michelle up before I have my run, and I start. The heat makes it a little tough at first, but I soon get into the zone and start to feel good. The pressure rolls off me a little bit. I stretch wider and roll my shoulders back, holding my head higher as I go. An unexpected happiness overcomes me as I run.

I mean, last night was good. No, not just good, it was incredible. It was the best sex I've ever had in my life, and I want so much more. I would love things to keep going with us. It's dangerous, it's crazy, it makes me breathless, and I can't get enough. I'm not usually like this. I never feel so much for a person. She's driving me insane. I want to cling to her forever. I might even want a relationship with her, I don't know. I definitely shouldn't want that, but I do. It's almost worse because I know I can't have her. She's out of reach, taboo, someone who should make me run for the hills, so of course, I'm driven closer. I need her more.

Why not, though? My naughty brain asks me. Why not just continue on and keep things a secret? That could be fun, right?

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It's a terrible plan which will probably erupt in my face, but at the same time, I want it, I kinda need it, and I have a feeling that Michelle wants that too. Sometimes, the right thing to do could mean saying goodbye to someone really important, and I definitely can't see myself doing that. Michelle is special, so special that I can't stop myself from wanting every part of her. I didn't trust her at first, but now I've seen the intense vulnerability inside her and I can see the truth of her. She's perfect.

As soon as I make the decision not to push Michelle away anymore, it's obvious to me. My brain is cleared. Dating Michelle in secret might not be the wisest thing I've ever done, but what if it ends up being something special? I want to see her now. I need to let her know that neither of us should run anymore. Not until we're forced to.

There's a smile on my face as I head back up the stairs two at a time and into the apartment. I'm bursting with the new clarity surging through my brain, and I can't wait to discuss it with her. I'm also thrilled to give her the breakfast I picked up on the way back in... but it instantly becomes obvious that I'm not going to get a chance to talk right away because Michelle is on the phone and she's leaping around the room in excitement. I don't know what this news is, but I hope it's good. She could use it.

Eventually, she hangs up and races over to me squealing and jumps into my arms. "Oh, my God, Jordan, you'll never guess what just happened. One of the jobs I applied for has just called me, and they want me to come in for an interview today! It's one of the admin office jobs too, one of the ones that I want so I can be hidden away from the world."

"Oh, really?" I'm delighted for her. "That's amazing. They must have loved your

application to call you that quickly.”

“You think I’ll get it?” She jumps down and kisses me quickly. It’s just a sweet little chaste kiss, but it’s so natural and romantic that my heart skips a damn beat. I guess we don’t need to talk about things. It seems like we’re continuing on anyway, which is freaking awesome. “What am I going to wear? Oh, my God, this is so exciting. I feel so good about things right now.”

She tries to pull away, but I tug her back to me. She spins around into my arms, and I duck down and kiss her some more. Mmm, the taste of her lips is really something else. She’s fruity and delightful. I want some more.

“Don’t distract me.” She giggles and taps me playfully on the nose. “Don’t make me drag you to bed or I’ll end up missing my interview. I don’t think that will be the best way to make a first impression to the working world, do you?”

“I suppose I’d better not be the one to make things harder for you.” I pout as I let her go, but I’m only joking. “Try on some outfits, though, and I’ll help you decide what looks best for the interview. But you’ll blow them away whatever you wear.”

She shoots me a playful wink as she heads into the bedroom to get herself dressed professionally. I try to focus on the positives of today instead of the idea that her life is moving quickly and she might not need me soon. We’re definitely not worrying about the future here, just enjoying the moment for everything that it is. Worries can come much later on.

“Are you sure I look okay?” Michelle asks me anxiously for what feels like the hundredth time. “I don’t know if I’m smart enough. I don’t know what these people are going to be expecting when I arrive. What if I’m not enough?”

I lean across the car and rest my hand reassuringly on her thigh. Judging by the way

she shudders, she can feel the bolts and sparks of electricity too, which makes the pair of us grin. This little taboo secret between us is so damn thrilling. I don't even care if this can implode massively when it feels so good right now. I just want to be close to Michelle all the time.

“You'll be enough for them, you never have to worry about that,” I tell her fiercely. “You are going to blow them away. Remember, they must have seen something really good in you to contact you so quickly. You need to have confidence.”

By the time we arrive at the office building, Michelle does appear to be a whole lot calmer. She's breathing much steadier at any rate, which I take as a good sign. I know confidence goes along way in job interviews, even if it isn't exactly real. I hope she can hold her head high and show them what she can do for the company. Even though it doesn't necessarily matter if she doesn't get the first job she's been given an interview for and we have plenty of time, I think it'll knock her confidence too much.

“Go get 'em,” I say teasingly as she steps out of the car. “And don't worry, you'll be amazing.”

“I hope so,” Michelle whispers. I think sheer terror is blocking her airways. “Are you sure you don't mind waiting?”

“It's my job, remember?” I chuckle. “I don't mind one bit. I'll go and get myself a coffee from the café across the street.”

She nods and backs away but keeps her eyes on me for a few seconds as she goes. I wish I could go into the interview with her, to hold her hand and help her, but she doesn't need that. She has to do this alone. I need to check out the security of the building, anyway. I'm going to be watching this place for a while, I assume, so I need to make sure I have all the information.

Plus, I really might go and get a coffee from that cafe. I could use a caffeine boost before I keep going...

“Hi.” I barely set foot into the café before someone demands my attention. My first assumption is that it’s some kind of greeter at the door or one of those weird places where they pretty much demand your order as soon as you set foot in the place. I’m not quite ready for that. I blink a few times, wanting to at least see a menu first. “Sorry, do I know you from somewhere?”

Oh! Thank God I didn’t try and order with her. That would have been very embarrassing. I run my eyes over this woman’s face, trying to place her. I desperately want to work it out because I hate being at a disadvantage, but I really don’t recognize her.

“Er, I don’t know,” I admit with a helpless shrug of my shoulders. “Not that I can think of. What’s your name?”

“Kate.” She moves a little closer to me and practically inhales me. She definitely doesn’t seem too familiar with normal social boundaries, which makes me incredibly uncomfortable. I want to step back, but I don’t want a scene. “And you are?”

“Jordy.” No one ever calls me that, but it’s close enough to the truth if she does know me just in case this is all innocent, without revealing who I really am. I have my guard up high. I certainly don’t need to be in the middle of this.

“Right, Jordy, well, if I don’t know who you are already, then I would like to. Shall I buy you a drink?”

I’ve had women approach me before, even as boldly as this, but there’s something about Kate which makes me oddly uncomfortable. This feels like more than flirting, and I don’t want to get stuck in the middle of whatever it is.

“I’m actually just about to leave.” I point behind me, desperate to get away now. No amount of caffeine is worth this. “I was just coming in to use the bathroom, but there’s a queue so I’m out of here. I guess I’ll see you around, Kate.”

She grabs onto my arm, refusing to allow me to make my escape that easily. “Let me have your number first. I think that you and I should see one another again sometime, don’t you? There’s a connection there between us for sure.”

Oh, my God, this is insane. I’m going to have to shut her down in the best way I can. “I don’t think so. I don’t think that’s a good idea. I actually have someone in my life at the moment. I’m dating someone, so I can’t give my number out.”

Instead of letting this disappoint her, her lips curl up into a nasty-looking smirk. “I see. So you have a girlfriend.”

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“Something like that, yes.” My teeth grit together. This whole thing is making me uncomfortable. “So I have to go.”

I’ll think twice about heading into a café again! That was definitely the strangest thing to happen to me in a very long time. I don’t even know if I should tell Michelle about it because it was so odd. It might cause her paranoia to peak. I need to concentrate on checking in on the building. Maybe I should have focused on that, anyway...

14

MICHELLE

“Every answer you have given me is very impressive,” Sally declares as we wrap up what has been a very successful, at least in my mind, interview. I did everything that Jordan told me to and faked confidence until I made it, which seems to have worked really well. “I probably should take some time to think about it, but since this is my office and I can do whatever I want, I’m going to tell you right now. I want you to come and start working for us. I’ve been interviewing for a while now, and you’re the best person to walk through this door. I’ll need to get the paperwork all sorted out with Human Resources, but will you be able to start on Monday morning? I’ll be here then and able to train you properly with our computer system and processes.”

I nod eagerly, so excited. “Oh, yes, definitely. Thank you so much. I’ll work hard for you. I won’t let you down.”

“Great. Well, thank you, Michelle.” She reaches across and shakes my hand, sealing

the deal. “I look forward to Monday, then.”

Sally walks me through the office, which might be a strange place right now but will soon become my second home if I make as much of a success of this as I hope to. I take a glance at all the faces as we go. I don't want to get caught staring at anyone in particular, but I want to check that all the people I'll be working alongside are going to be friendly. To say they seem nicer than the Russian spy people I've been dealing with up until this point would be an understatement. They seem amazing. I even get some smiles thrown my way, which helps to make me feel awesome. I'm going to like it here for sure.

“Well, thank you for everything.” I feel warm and fuzzy as I say goodbye to Sally. “I'll see you very soon, on Monday.”

I could skip back to the car as I walk away from the office building because right now, life feels incredible. Things haven't always been easy for me. I've been through some dark times in my life, but ever since I contacted Max and Jordan was brought into my life, everything has been on the upward curve. And now I'm making some awesome progress on my own behalf. Soon, Jordan won't have to babysit me quite so much. Well, not when it comes to sorting my life out, anyway.

I don't know how long I'll need him to keep Alexander away from me, but I'm definitely not ready to try life without him just yet. I wouldn't want to, anyway. I'm enjoying having him around, especially with this little ill-advised thing between us. Even thinking about it now sends an excited shudder down my spine. I might have to drag him to bed again for more fun tonight...

“Jordan.” He kinda jumps as I rest my hand on his shoulder to get his attention. “Oh, sorry, you're on the phone.”

He holds up his finger, indicating that he needs one more minute. I can tell by his

expression that whoever he's talking to is serious. In an attempt to give him a bit of privacy, I step away, but I can still hear more than I should.

"I know, Max," Jordan says through gritted teeth. "But it was weird. I'm telling you, she was strange. The name of the café?" He glances over to the coffee shop over the road. "Rosie. Yep, just Rosie. I don't know, I don't have any reason for thinking it. It was just a gut feeling. No, I didn't get any pictures of her or anything... yep, okay. Sure. Speak to you soon."

Hmm, that was weird. Something happened while I was in my job interview. Of course, I immediately need to know more. My curiosity gets the better of me, so much so that I forget I was just offered a freaking dream job just now.

"Is everything okay?" I ask him softly. "Did something happen in the café? Should we be worried?"

"Oh, no, it was nothing." He does his best to reassure me by being dismissive. He even swipes his hand to shut me up. "Sorry, I was just talking to Max about your job interview. He's very happy with the way that things are going."

"So, there was nothing about a woman then?" I demand impatiently. I know what I heard and I don't appreciate being left in the dark. "Because I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I could have sworn that you were talking about a woman."

"I don't know what you think you heard, but you didn't." His snapping tone does shoot me down. I snap my lips closed all of a sudden, not wanting to push this any further however intrigued I am. "You didn't hear anything. I wasn't discussing anything to do with this situation at that moment. You misunderstood, that's all. Now, let's get out of here."

I want to demand which one it is—he was talking about my having a job interview or

he wasn't talking about us—but I get the impression that Jordan is a pressure cooker who could explode at any given moment. I don't want to get in the middle of that, so I climb into the car beside him with my mind spinning the whole time. What if this is about a woman not linked to me? What if it's a woman in his life? Just because we are hooking up, it doesn't mean I'm the only one...

I squeeze my fists together angrily, trying to remind myself that I don't have any ownership over Jordan at all. There is nothing solid there between us, so I shouldn't care if he has another romantic situation bothering him... but it does upset me. I can't help it. It really gets to me knowing that he means more to me than I do him. It's killer.

"How did it go?" Jordan suddenly asks as if he remembers what we actually came here for. "The interview, was it okay?"

A little part of me doesn't want to tell him just because he's keeping me out of the loop, but I decide not to be that person. After all, I know I could be getting the wrong end of the stick and I don't want to make drama where there doesn't need to be. "It went well. Really well, actually. Sally offered me the position and wants me to start on Monday."

"Really? Jordan spins to look at me fast before remembering that he's on the road and needs to focus forward. "Oh, my goodness, that sounds amazing. She must have really liked you to give you the job like that. I'm impressed."

"Well, I'm happy about it too." I allow myself to remember how good it felt to hear those words. "I'm looking forward to it."

"We should go out to celebrate." Jordan seems to sense the fear from my silence. "No, I know you don't want to go out, but what if we do something in a private place? Like, somewhere not many people go? This is a big celebration, isn't it? We

should make a big night out of it. And I've been wanting to take you on a date for ages. Let me, come on. It'll be awesome."

I hesitate for a while, trying to work this out in my mind. I mean, if Jordan really does want to take me on a date, then maybe there is no other woman in the picture. Perhaps I really did jump to conclusions then. A date means he really does like me. As much as the idea of heading out in public makes me cold and full of terror, I suppose I need to push myself. I have to keep trying, and since things have been going so well for me, then perhaps this is the next step for me.

"A date?" I cock an eyebrow toward Jordan, trying to play it cool and casual. "Yeah, I don't see why not. It could be fun."

"Really? You really want to go on a date?" Jordan sounds so excited, it makes me giggle. "I would love that. I won't let you down. I'll make sure we have a date that makes you feel comfortable and safe. I can promise you that much."

A warmth floods me as I reach across to take Jordan's hand in mine. He really has been great to me, and I should remember to trust him. I hardly care about the phone call anymore. It obviously doesn't matter or he would have told me. Everything he has done for me has been perfect, so I need to just have a lot of faith in him and hope that this night turns out okay...

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“Oh, my God, is this nice?” I ask my confused reflection in the mirror. “I don’t know if it looks as good as it did before.”

I’m wearing the dress, the dress that Jordan liked so much in the shop because what the hell else would I wear? But I’m not quite as confident as I was before when I was in it. I don’t know what it is, but I feel a little weird now. I don’t know if it’s the dress or if it’s the nerves, half about being outside and half about being on a date with Jordan. My God, a date is on another level. It amps things up between us, which is freaking crazy. It’s nerve-racking but a lot of fun too.

It’s going to be fun too, I just know it. Every moment I spend with him is awesome, but this is going to be... new.

“Come on, it’s time to go.” I glance toward the bedroom door with my heart pounding in my throat. “Let’s do this.”

I step anxiously toward the door, already knowing that Jordan will be waiting for me behind it. He is, of course, but he doesn’t look exactly like the Jordan I’ve been spending my days with. He’s really dressed up for me, and it makes me all squishy inside. I go all coy and hot. I know I probably look silly, but Jordan looks at me as if I’m stunning.

“Oh, wow, that dress.” He smiles and shakes his head happily. “It always looks amazing. It looks lovely with the hair, too.”

“You think so?” I run my fingers through my locks. “I’m glad. I don’t know if it looks so great now.”

He takes a couple of giant strides, closing the gap between us. “You look incredible, Michelle, don’t you doubt it.”

He practically scoops me up in his arms and dips me down into a kiss. His lips connect deeply with mine, and I’m immediately transported to heaven with him. I don’t know why I was nervous before because we know one another. We’re so in touch with one another that getting anxious is silly. Jordan feels like... home. Like we belong to one another.

“Are you ready to go?” Jordan asks me with a small smile as he pulls back. “I have a private place where we can go, where no one will be able to see us. I’m sure it’s going to be the perfect night out. So, are you still excited to go?”

I nod eagerly, feeling like I’m on top of the world. Dating and eating out in public is something that I haven’t considered in a very long time because I assumed that it was going to be scary, but now it feels like the obvious next step for me and Jordan. A date will take things further and solidify what’s going on between us. Whatever that might be...

15

JORDAN

“This place is amazing,” Michelle gasps as we take a seat in our little personal booth which I booked especially for us. “I love it. And there aren’t really any other people here, which is awesome. I can actually relax and enjoy myself. Oh, I need that.”

I love seeing her shoulders roll back and her chin jut out. I can see her confidence shining out once more. It makes me yearn for the day when she can be like this full-time, when the danger has passed for good. I really hope that happens because although it might cause a separation for the two of us, she deserves to feel like she

can live as everyone else does.

Since I haven't had any sign of Russian danger, no matter how hard I've been looking for it, it feels like things really are going to be good for Michelle, for which I'm so happy. Of course, I'll be terribly sad if things don't work out for us, but instead of wallowing in that, I want to enjoy the moments we do have together. We need to create the best memories ever.

"I'm glad." I reach across the table and hold her hand. "I want you to enjoy our date, and this place is perfect, right?"

"Sure." She nods, but I do spot her eyes darting around everywhere. She can't let herself fully let go just in case. "Definitely."

A candle flickers between us, making her look even more beautiful than normal. I don't know if she can have self-doubt at all. She's utterly perfect to me, especially in that dress, but she feels it, anyway. I can see it rolling off her in waves.

"So the job..." I decide to talk about her positive day, to remind her of what brought us here. Particularly since we didn't talk about it enough beforehand. I was far too preoccupied with the weird woman then. "Tell me more about it. What's the office like? What are the other people like? I want to hear all about it. You must be so excited to get started on Monday."

"Everyone seems amazing," she begins, glowing with happiness. "Obviously, I didn't get to speak to anyone in particular, but people were really friendly to me, so I think I'm going to do really well there. I might even make friends." I give her a look, which she interprets immediately. "Don't worry, I already know not to tell them too much. I get it. I'll always have to keep a bit of a barrier up so no one knows where I've come from and what I've done. But friends... I want friends."

I can see her desperate for those connections, for that life, and it has me wondering how I ever doubted her at all. I can clearly see now what Max saw in Michelle. I'll definitely trust him more in the future, that's for sure. He knows what he's doing.

“Well, I believe that you'll get the life you wanted. The life that you talked about when we first met. The American Dream. The apartment, which you already have, the job, which you're starting on Monday, friends, dating...” My words trail off as I land on that one. Thinking about Michelle dating around and exploring that side of her life is too much for me.

“Which I'm doing right now,” she jumps in, sensing my discomfort at the idea of her hanging out with lots of other guys, not that I have any right to tell her not to. “And I'm very happy with it. You've helped me to overcome my fear of being out. I mean, I don't think it's something I'll do all the time. I wouldn't be able to do that without you. But I'm still grateful.”

I allow myself to smile once more, and we continue to hold hands across the table. We lock ourselves in a delightful little bubble where I'm pretty sure we'll stay all night long. Just me and her, loving one another's company. Even when the waiter comes over to our table, he isn't quite as close to us as we are one another. He's on the outside looking in.

We order food. I barely even know what I ask for. It doesn't matter. I'm not here for the food, but for the company. I also ask for a bottle of champagne since we're celebrating and I want to spoil Michelle, which makes her gasp with delight.

“You don't need to do that for me,” she gushes with her hands clapped to her lips. “It isn't that exciting news.”

“Don't treat it as just a job,” I insist seriously, knowing she needs to hear this. “This is a huge deal. It's a step into your new life. Think back to a while ago when it

seemed like this wasn't possible. Always remember how awesome your progress is. This is also our first proper date, so I think we both deserve a treat, don't you? Champagne is a treat for the pair of us."

She nods eagerly, accepting this now, which is awesome. I don't want her to question anything about tonight. I just want the both of us to enjoy it for everything that it is. I need this night to be magical, the best memory ever, just in case...

"To us!" I declare once we both have a drink in our hands. We clink our glasses together and beam happily over the candlelight. "To everything we have been through and everything we will keep on achieving."

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Michelle tosses her head back and gleefully laughs. “Oh, you really do sound like my husband when you say that.”

A tight ball forms in my chest. Imagine if I were. But the thought is a weirdly good thing. I never would have liked the idea of commitment before. I didn't think it would ever be for me, but now... well, with Michelle, everything is different. That's frightening. I'm not sure how the hell I'm going to get out of this without becoming a broken man.

“Tonight has been incredible,” Michelle whispers as she leans into me. “Dinner was awesome, and this is even better.”

It might only be walking along the riverside in the moonlight, but after the night we've had, it really does feel incredibly romantic. My feelings for Michelle are only growing with every passing second, and I don't think there's any chance of me shoving them away now, even if Max does find out and kick my ass. She's just so perfect for me in every single way.

Don't forget that you might lose her, I try to remind myself. This might only be temporary. Don't fall too deeply.

But protecting my heart doesn't feel easy when I look into her eyes. I don't think I can do it. So instead of continuing, I simply spin her around where she stands and pull her toward me for yet another intense, mind-blowing kiss. My God, I could spend the rest of my life kissing her. The taste of her takes me somewhere new, somewhere exciting that I adore.

“This has been the best night of my life,” I let her know as we pull apart ever so slightly. “I never want it to end.”

“Well, just because we’re going back to the apartment, it doesn’t mean the night has to end now, does it?”

She shoots me a seductive wink, letting me know exactly what she means, which has me on fire with desire instantly. I can’t wait to get ahold of Michelle in that dress and to do all the things I wanted to do to her in the middle of that store. I don’t know how I resisted her in the changing rooms, but now I don’t need to worry about it. Now, I can live out every fantasy.

“Then what are we still doing here outside?” I laugh. “Let’s get back to the apartment right away and have dessert.”

“Ooh, I don’t know,” she teases playfully. “I might be full after all of that ice cream. They really did give me loads...”

But as I tug on her arm, she comes willingly, and we both end up giddily racing through the streets like teenagers in the throes of first love and lust. I honestly do feel like as much as Michelle is getting the life that she wants and is blooming into the flower she truly is, she’s bringing me out of my shell too. I’m becoming the person I always wanted to be. I’m softer than I thought I was, with a more open heart, which I don’t think is a bad thing at all. I’m also capable of lots I didn’t think I could be. I would love to continue on with this journey with her for as long as I can, until she’s had enough of me. I kinda need this too.

“Well, here we are.” Michelle unlocks the door and crashes inside the apartment. “Home, sweet home. What are you going to do about it, huh? You finally have me alone at last, and it’s date night, so what happens next?”

“Oh, Michelle,” I growl back. “You are about to find out. I’ve been wanting to get my hands on you all night long.”

I grab her hard and kiss her immediately. I press her up against the wall with my fingers knotted up in her hair, the desire flowing hard and fast through my body. Moans fly out of Michelle’s lips and vibrate in my mouth, sending lightning bolts of pleasure crashing all the way through me. I hook my eager fingers under the hemline of her dress and trace my fingers all over her soft, supple thighs. She presses her foot up against the wall and parts her legs for me, needing me to take her.

My fingers graze over her panties first. I stroke the material, never getting close enough to her core to give her any satisfaction, but enough to tease her and drive her insane. Michelle screams and cries out for more. I can tell that she’s wanted me all evening, too, which only intensifies the pleasure between us. We’re both on fire, and I love it.

“Not here,” I groan as I whip her from her feet and wrap her around me. “This has been date night. I’m going to treat you like the princess you really are. I’ll carry you to bed and make sweet, passionate love to you there.”

At first, I panic about the use of the L word. I didn’t mean it like that, but thankfully, Michelle doesn’t seem to notice. Her eyes are twinkling and sparkling too much with desire to get lost in any fear about misspoken words.

“You will?” She giggles and squeals with delight. “Oh, I like the sound of that. I feel like a real lady.”

I’m going to spend the whole night, or until we crash out to sleep, anyway, making her feel phenomenal. I want Michelle to absolutely lose her shit over me. I want to corrupt her, to crush her with bliss, to see her gorgeous face contorted in pleasure as the orgasm rockets through her body. I don’t even care if I experience heaven myself,

although I know with Michelle, that's a guarantee, but tonight is all about her and making her feel everything. Mmm, I just can't wait.

But I can't fall for her any more than I already have. As long as I don't get carried away and really fall inlovewith her, then I'll hopefully be okay when everything falls apart and my life crashes down around me. I want to be able to pick myself up to at leasttryto find happiness again... even if I can't ever imagine it being as good with anyone else like it is with Michelle.

16

MICHELLE

“Ooh, I'm nervous now.” I've been excited all weekend about starting my new job, but now that the moment of truth is here, I'm anxious all over again. “What if I'm wrong and I don't end up making any friends or anything like that?”

“You will.” I don't know how Jordan isn't sick of reassuring me. It feels like he's been doing it forever. Honestly, he's more of an emotional support than anything else right now. “You're going to have a really good time. The first day is always the most overwhelming at any new job, anyway. After that, it gets a whole lot easier. Trust me, you're going to be just fine.”

I nod hard and fast, but I don't think the words are fully sinking in just yet. Until I walk through those doors and into the office to get my new job up and running, I won't be able to feel anything other than sheer panic. “Yes, I guess so.”

“You'd better get going.” Jordan looks disappointed as he says this. I have a funny feeling that he's going to miss me today, which is super sweet. I'm sure as hell going to miss him too. I'm getting used to his being around. It's starting to get weird tothink that maybe one day, he won't be around me at all times. I don't know how I'll cope.

“You don’t want to be late.”

I almost edge over to lean up and kiss him, but I think better of it at the last moment. It’s all well and good, us hooking up in private, but we really need to be careful about how we act in public. Especially since he’s here as my bodyguard.

“Well, I’ll see you later, then.” I try to convey all of this with the meaningful look that I give him. Whether he understands it or not, I don’t quite know. “I’ll see you at the end of the day. Will you be here to pick me up afterward?”

“Sure, I’ll be here. Now, you go and kick some ass, Michelle. Remind them why they hired you in the first place.”

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I take those words with me as I stalk toward the office. I hold onto the feeling they gave me as I swing the door open and make my way inside. Faking confidence until I really felt it worked in my job interview, so it should do so again.

“Ah, Michelle.” Thank God, Sally is waiting for me. I instantly feel much better with her around. “Let’s get you to Human Resources. Once we have all the paperwork completed, I can show you to your desk and get you started.”

All the tension that I’ve been feeling simply melts away into nothingness. Of course I can do this. Of course I can show Sally and everyone else that I’m worthwhile. Of course I can make some friends while I’m here. Since everything else has been looking up for me, I should hold onto the belief that this is going to work out well too. This is going to be awesome...

The morning passes much faster than I’m expecting, but in a good way. I like the team in the HR department. They went out of their way to make me feel welcome, and I also adjusted to working with the computer system well. I thought that I might struggle to grasp certain things, but it turns out I’m smarter than I give myself credit for. I catch on fast.

Then there are the girls seated around me, Alice, Daphne, and Celine. They are amazing. They have gone above and beyond to help me and are fast becoming the sort of friends I hoped I could get at this job. I just know now that Sally fosters a positive working environment, and it results in a much more productive work force. I’m going to like it here for sure.

“Michelle, are you going to come out to lunch with us?” Alice touches my arm

gently. “Most of the people here go to Rosieto eat, but we aren’t keen on that place...” Her words flood me with relief. I still don’t know what happened the other day, but it isn’t my favorite place either. “So, if you want us to show you an awesome sandwich bar, we’re about to go now.”

I leap up enthusiastically. “That sounds amazing. Thank you. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until you said that.”

I rub my stomach to highlight the joke, and the girls laugh appreciatively at me. The only slightly almost awkward moment I’ve had with them is when Celine picked up on the slight accent that slips through occasionally, but I passed it off as a Polish accent. I’ve spent so much effort squashing the accent that it isn’t strong enough to tell the difference. Aside from that, which was very quickly skated over, it’s been amazing. I’m so excited to see Jordan at the end of the day to tell him.

We all chat excitedly on the way to the sandwich bar, with me opening up a little bit to the others. Obviously, I can’t tell them much about my true self, but it means I can invent a brand-new me. I can be the person I’ve always wanted to be. I damn near lose myself in this fantasy until a strange sensation creeps up the back of my neck, an icy-cold feeling which puts me on edge...

Someone is watching me. I don’t know how I come to that conclusion, but it hits me hard. It strikes me down like lightning bolts and all of a sudden makes it seriously hard to breathe. It’s like something has lodged in my throat and is blocking my airways. I twist my head around slowly, trying my hardest to be discrete, which isn’t easy when my heart is pounding so furiously I fear it might want to explode from my chest at any given moment. But I don’t want my new friends to become aware of anything.

Oh! As soon as I spot Jordan, everything clears. The fear subsides, and I almost laugh at myself for being so ridiculous. Just because he said that he would pick me up at the

end of the day, it doesn't mean he'll let me go the whole time without being watched. Why would I even assume as much? He wants to make sure that I'm not in danger at all times.

"Are you okay?" Daphne asks me curiously. "Did you forget what you were talking about just then?"

I snap back around, making the rapid decision not to wave at Jordan, which has to be the right one because surely, he's supposed to be discrete? I force a smile on my face. I need to pass this off casually. "Sorry, I thought that guy who just walked past was my horrible ex-boyfriend. I really don't ever want to lay my eyes on that man."

Thankfully, this spirals into a conversation about awful ex-boyfriends, which allows me to take a step back from the limelight of conversation. I'm going to have to stop being so paranoid if I really want to create a life for myself. One day, I'm going to have to exist in a world where I'm not plagued by fears, and I need to get used to that. Alexander hasn't made a move since I've been with Jordan. I haven't had any threats or anything. There's nothing for me to worry about. Maybe I was always too small-fry for them to really give a shit about me at all. There could be plenty of other women like me who simply vanish from the spy game, and as long as they don't speak out, no one cares. Now wouldn't that be a wonderful outcome for me?

"Michelle?" It isn't until we set foot back in the office that someone directly needs me. Only this time, it's Sally and she has the weirdest expression on her face. "Can I have a word with you, please? In my office, if you don't mind."

"Erm, sure." This could be normal. There's absolutely no reason for me to get myself all tied up in knots, but of course, I do. I want to blame it on the paranoia that gripped me outside before, but I think it's Sally's coolness toward me. She has been so friendly to me up until this point, so the sudden change is hard for me to wrap my head around. "You want me now?"

“Yes, please. That would be for the best.” She spins on her heel and indicates for me to follow her. “This won’t take long.”

I look at the girls desperately for clarification of what’s going on here, but all they can give me are hopeless shrugs back. I guess this isn’t normal, then. I should be a little bit freaked out about what’s going on here.

“Right, Michelle,” Sally declares in a brisk, professional tone as she takes her seat. I do the same on the other side of her desk, wondering why she isn’t as sweet-natured as she has been every other time that we have spoken. “I’m sorry to say that you can’t work here anymore. I know that probably isn’t what you want to hear, but you must leave this building immediately.”

I snap back as if I’ve been slapped in the face, which is exactly how I feel. “W–What? Why not? Have I done something wrong? I thought that... that I was doing okay here. I thought I picked it all up. I can work harder or change if you need me to...”

Sally avoids eye contact with me, but I can see a darkness behind her gaze. I have a horrible feeling that something has happened and it has nothing to do with my work ethic. Perhaps she’s found out exactly who I really am somehow. I don’t know how in-depth these background searches go. She might have discovered me lying to her, and I can’t even explain why.

“We don’t need a scene here, Michelle,” she half-whispers. “I’m sorry about this, but you need to go. Your paperwork will be disposed of properly. You don’t need to worry about us holding onto any of your data here. It’ll be like you never came...”

“But... but why?” I can’t just walk away from this. I can’t force myself to just go. Everything has been going so well for me, so this downward spiral makes me feel a million times worse. I can’t handle it, I can’t breathe. “What did I do?”

“Don’t do this, Michelle,” Sally begs. “Please, just get out of here. I need you to leave right away.”

I shove my chair back and let out a strange wail-like sound because I feel so traumatized by all of this. I don’t get it. It doesn’t make any sense at all. It’s making me feel ill. Thank God Jordan is around somewhere, looking out for me. I need to find him, and now, he’s the only person who can make this shitty situation feel better. He’ll help me to breathe again.

I race out of the building as fast as I can with tears blurring my vision. I try to spot Jordan, but it isn’t easy when I’m so messy, so I simply make my way over to Rosie’s because that’s where he was before, so it might be a good place to start.

But something stops me. Someone grabs onto my top and yanks me backward, nearly tripping me over in the process. At first, I think Jordan might have found me until my ass hits the inside of the back of a van. That’s when I see him and know that my safety is over. A blackness overcomes my heart at the same time it does my eyes. This is the end.

17

JORDAN

“Well, hello there, Jordy.” I jump as someone touches my shoulder, dragging my eyes away from my constant surveillance of Michelle. She’s just gone back into the office, so at least I know she’s somewhere safe, but this approach isn’t welcome, anyway. “Good to see you again. What brings you to this part of the world, yet again? It’s starting to become a regular occurrence.”

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“Oh, right... Kate.” It takes me a couple of seconds to remember her name. “Er, yeah, I’m just... here again.”

“Watching Michelle Lebedev. I know what you’re doing.” Her words make my blood run cold. I knew that there was something off about this woman. I just didn’t know she was going to come back to haunt me. “But I don’t think you are quite so aware of everything. I’m sure you believe you’ve been given all the information about this, but I can assure you, you haven’t.”

“Who... who are you?” She’s thrown me off-kilter and it’s obvious. “What are you talking about here?”

“You need to take the time to hear me out,” she half-whispers in an almost panicked tone of voice. “I have information for you that no one else will be able to give you. Not even Max.” Oh, my God, she knows so much. “You need to hear me out.”

I debate this for only a moment before I nod and agree with this stranger. If Kate knows more about what’s happening with the Russians, then this will give me a leg up on everything that’s happening, allowing me to keep Michelle even safer, and if she doesn’t... well, I’m not dumb enough to fall for any traps she might want to set for me, so I don’t give a damn.

“Sure. We can go somewhere to talk,” I tell her seriously. “But we’re going to Rosie’s. I don’t want to be far away.”

Kate’s lips slide into a thin line for a second, letting me know this doesn’t make her happy, but she can clearly see that I won’t be shaken easily, so she nods. “Sure, but

some of the stuff I need to show you is classified, so we'll have to be careful."

My heart races as we head back into the café where we first had that odd encounter not so long ago. I wonder if I should tell Kate that her weird flirting definitely didn't work for me, but I decide against it at the last moment. There's no point in making this any more awkward than it already is. We might as well just get through this meeting first and foremost, wherever it will lead.

Unfortunately, all the tables by the window within viewing distance of the office building are taken, so I can't pick the best seat to spot Michelle if she comes out at any point, not that she'll do so for a few hours yet, but I'll be aware. It's going to be fine.

"Sit over there," Kate commands, pointing to one of the tables near the back of the room. "We can talk there."

I do as she asks, hoping that all of this is going to be worth it as Kate orders us some drinks. Whether they will be touched or not, I don't know, but I suppose if we're going to fly under the radar to look like this is just a normal business meeting or whatever, then we'll need some beverages to fool anyone who may or may not be interested in us.

"So..." Kate takes a seat and pulls a giant folder out of her bag. It looks professional, whatever it is. "What I'm going to show you will change a lot of your perceptions. But please, remember that we're both in a public place and don't want to catch the eyes of anyone. So, you'll need to keep any reactions that you have under control. Can you do that?"

"Yes, of course." I can't hide my offense. "I know what I'm doing, you know. So, show me what you have."

Photos come first, along with documents. They are all in Russian but with translations beside them. Kate sorts through it all like she's trying to figure out which part to show me in what order. I struggle not to become impatient.

“Right, this is where I want to begin.” Finally, she gives me something. “This is Viktor Lebedev. Michelle's father. Now, he is a very important man in the Russian government, which is why Michelle is working as a spy.”

Oh! Now she didn't tell me that much, and I don't think Max knows, either. That does silence me, I have to admit it. I can't even disagree with it because there are family documents in front of me and photographs, too. In some, there is another boy who I can only assume is Michelle's sibling, and her mother. Although only in a few of them.

“Her father is basically in charge of the espionage operations, so yes, she was brought into it that way. The story that she has been given, to add a little twist to things, is that it was forced upon her and she never wanted it.”

How could Kate know that if it wasn't the truth? This is scary. I don't like it one bit. She's putting me on edge.

“And something else which I don't think anyone has been informed of is Michelle's marriage.” Holy shit, I'm going to be sick. “Here, you can see her with her husband on her wedding day. She has a very comfortable life waiting for her back in Russia. She isn't the helpless woman she makes herself out to be. I mean, how do you think she has the money that she needs to run the life she does here? Immigrants don't come seeking asylum with tons of cash, do they?”

I can't say a word, and Kate knows that she has me stuck because how can I disagree with what she's telling me? It all adds up in a way that I really don't like. The jigsaw pieces slot in together far too nicely for my liking.

“She’s married?” How much else does Kate know? She seems to be aware of far too much. What if she’s aware of the secret relationship between us and she’s about to use it against me? I don’t know what Kate’s angle is here.

“Oh, she sure is. She’s been married for ages.” I can almost see pleasure in Kate’s eyes as she witnesses how little I knew about Michelle. She’s been proven right. She is letting me in on information I wasn’t party to before. She’s achieving what she set out to do. “And this is an important man in Russia too. I don’t need to go into details about it. It’s all a little complicated and doesn’t make any difference, anyway. The point is that Michelle Lebedev has a whole other side to her. She’s living a double life here in America. I presume that you know she was sent as a spy to seduce all kinds of powerful men?”

I gulp back a thick ball of emotion and nod. “Yes, I was aware of that part of her life. But she doesn’t want to do that...”

“Doesn’t she?” Kate cocks an eyebrow at me as if I’m not getting something totally obvious. “Because it seems to me that’s what she’s been doing the whole time. I don’t know how much you know about your company? I presume you aren’t clued in with every single job that other agents have been involved in during their careers.” I don’t even need to answer that. It seems like she already knows. She’s probably aware that I’ve only just started in the company since she seems to know everything else. “Right, well you should probably know that Max has halted Russian operations before. Many a time. He’s obviously a very powerful man. So, I guess Michelle is a part of the big revenge plan and you’re caught up in that. I don’t know what’s happened between you two, but I would be very careful around her. She’s manipulative and seductive and you need to watch your back.”

“Oh... right.” I don’t know what to say about that one. Kate is making me rethink everything. She has my head spinning because I’ve fallen into bed with Michelle on more than one occasion, which might not be exactly what I thought it was going to

be. “Well, that’s, erm, it’s a lot for me to process at the moment. I’m not quite sure what to say...”

“I don’t expect you to say anything,” Kate replies with a brand-new softness to her voice. “I just want to give you all the information because I don’t like the idea of your being roped into something you don’t fully understand. Once you have all the details, you can make the right choices for yourself. You seem like you’re just trying to do what’s right...”

“Why are you helping me?” I don’t mean to sound quite as sharp as I do. I’m just on edge now. “What’s in it for you?”

“I’m working for the US Espionage Department. I can’t give you any more details than that for obvious reasons, but the people Michelle works for are the ones we’re working against. I don’t want you to end up getting mixed up in things you don’t understand. This is a very dangerous world, and you should extract yourself as quickly as you can. It might be better for you to leave right now. You know where Michelle is at the moment, don’t you? She’s in the office, which means you can get away.”

“Get away?” I know that makes sense, but at the same time, I don’t know if I can just walk away from Michelle. “Like, leave?”

“The longer that you stick around, the more you put yourself at risk. I would just to be safe. Like I said to you before, this is a very dangerous situation that you are in right now, and you can’t make it worse. You need to be careful.”

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Kate checks her phone and gathers everything back up once more. I can see that she's leaving me, which has me really freaked out. If she goes right now, then I'm left with nothing. Nothing but thoughts swirling around my head and a panic about what the hell I'm supposed to do next. What do I do with this information? I certainly can't discount it when Kate had so much evidence to show me. She definitely has a powerful father, and a husband too, which means... well, everything else is a lie.

"Thank you for telling me all of this," I say to Kate just before she leaves. "I appreciate everything that you've done for me."

"You're welcome. I just hope that you take what I've told you and do the right thing with it."

"I will." I nod rapidly, knowing that I'll at the very least discuss this with Max afterward. "Thank you."

She leaves, and I slump back in my chair defeated. I don't know where I go from here, what I'm supposed to do with the shattered heart sitting in my chest. At least one thing is for certain. I do know where Michelle is. She's at work, in that office, none the wiser about everything I've just discovered. Oh, my God, everything has fallen apart in the worst possible way. There's a little part of me that wants to cry, which isn't like me at all. I can't fucking fall apart like this.

I'm going to have to call Max. I need to make him aware of everything that Kate just told me, too. If Michelle really is trying to take us all down, then he is in danger too. My gut was right. I should have listened to it.

MICHELLE

“Where is this?” I gasp as I stumble back out of the van, with Alexander pulling my arm the whole time. “Where are we?”

“This is my house, Michelle. Have you never seen my American home? Don’t worry, you’re going to love it. Let’s just get inside, and I can give you a giant tour of the place. You’re going to love it. I mean, it’s nearly as big as my Russian mansion.”

I’ve never seen Alexander’s home, but I’ve heard about it. Many important people want to keep him on their good side, which is why he’s so freaking wealthy and powerful. It doesn’t shock me that he’s got a giant base here too. He wants to show himself off. He’s all about status and about being feared. Well, right now, I’m scared shitless.

“Oh, I’m so excited to show you everything.” Alexander claps his hands together like a little fucking child, which makes me know how much he’s acting. This big, scary dude is an asshole with the coldest heart ever. This is to put me on edge and scare me. “You are going to see just what being compliant in our organization will get you. Because you know you fucked up, right?”

As Alexander gives me a side-eyed, slightly evil look, I know what I need to say. “Yes, of course I know that. I just... I got scared, that’s all. I thought that I would be able to do all this spy stuff when I came here, but it’s too much for me.”

I don’t know what my thought process is because he isn’t going to feel sorry for me. A man like him doesn’t have any empathy. He isn’t going to like me for my weaknesses. He’ll hate me for not being what he needs of me.

“Oh, I know, but I’ve covered for you. You don’t need to worry about any of the big guys finding out about your running.”

Uh-oh. This doesn’t feel good. It doesn’t matter whether he’s covered my ass or not. It’s going to cost me, no matter what. I shrink in on myself, wishing that I wasn’t inside this man’s house now. I wish I hadn’t let myself be pulled inside Alexander’s van. This is torture. I kinda wish he would just fucking kill me already because this is overwhelming. It’s just too much. I already know that I’m going to end up dead. It’s just being dragged out in a horribly painful way. Alexander wants me to be punished in the worst possible way. He’s going to make me really see what I did wrong, as if I don’t already know.

“Er, right. Are you, erm, sending me back to Russia, then?” I say, just to say something. “For more training?”

“Oh, no, you aren’t going anywhere.” Alexander’s smile twists up angrily. “You’re staying here to work for me.”

“But I don’t know if I can do it,” I remind him quickly. “That’s what made me panic in the first place. That’s why I freaked out.”

“You want to live?” he growls, anger rolling off his tongue. “Or you want to dig your own grave right now? Because I’m trying to be nice about it. I brought you to my mansion and I offered to give a tour of the place. I gave you a lifeline. Even though you fucked me over and caused me all kinds of issues, I’m giving you another try. But I’ll only do that once.”

“I... I...” Fucking hell, sickness swirls in my stomach. I don’t want to do this, but I can’t really see any other outcome.

“I need you to speak to this guy.” Alexander slaps a photo down in front of me of an

old guy. “He’s very close to the American president and he has a lot of information that we need. You’re going to get the right documents from him...”

“I don’t know, Alexander, this feels like a very important job, and I don’t know if I’m strong enough.”

“You are.” He thumps the table in front of me so hard he almost cracks it. “You’re doing this, Lebedev, whether you like it or not. You’ll get this information for me, no matter what you think about it right now. You’ll find a way. I don’t care what you have to do. I don’t even give a shit if you have to take a knife to this guy’s throat and slash it. You’re going to do it. It’s the only way I’ll keep you alive. And I would like you to remember that you aren’t the only person with your life here, are you?”

I fall into silence with this one. This is an outright threat and it was one that I would take seriously. If he wasn’t just talking about me ending up dead, then I needed to be more careful. I couldn’t risk others. “Okay, okay. I understand.”

“You want your father and brother to go the same way as your mother?” I snap my eyes up to meet Alexander’s. Is he confirming what I already suspect? That my mother didn’t just die but that she was killed by these assholes? But not to punish her, to punish my father for not doing what was asked of him by corrupt people. My poor father who didn’t want any of that, as far as I was aware, anyway, but who got roped into it a bit like me. “No, you don’t, do you? You don’t want them dead.”

“I don’t want anyone to die because of me,” I whisper back. “Please, don’t hurt my family. I’ll do anything.”

“I wasn’t going to do the dirty work myself.” He tosses his head back and laughs nastily. “You know I don’t do the dirty work with my own hands, but I have plenty of people who can do that for me. You know that as well as I do.”

I gulp back my terror and nod. Of course I know the extent to which Alexander's reach stretches. I'm no idiot. So, this really leaves me with no choice. If it were only me who could end up dead, then that would be one thing, but I can't let anyone else die because of me. I can't let my dad and brother suffer any more than they already have because I'm too scared.

"Okay," I eventually whisper. "I'll do whatever you need me to. Please, don't hurt anyone. I'll do what you need."

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“I’m glad to hear you back on board,” Alexander replies with a stern tone of voice. “But how can I know that you’re going to do a good job? You really don’t have any room to fuck up again, Michelle. There can be no more messing around. I need these documents from you. Youhaveto make this happen. I need you to understand what this means.”

“I get it, I get it,” I whisper. “I have too much on the line. I’ll do whatever I can to make it work.”

“Good, you’d better make me proud. This will take the real seductress in you.” He comes closer to me, his breath brushing over my face making me feel a little bit sick, to be honest. “I know you’ve been practicing it with that idiot living with you. So, it isn’t like you’re not going to be able to do this, is it? My little sex kitten. You’re going to be just fine.”

I shudder painfully, half from the patronizing, disgusting name that he just called me, and half from the fact that he somehow knows about me and Jordan. He’s been watching me for a very long time, and much too closely for my liking. All the times that I’ve tricked myself into believing that I’m safe, too many times, when Alexander has had his beady little eyes upon me.

“Tell me that you’re going to be fine.” Alexander stands behind me and sneaks his hands onto my shoulders. They might not be quite wrapped around my throat, but the threat is there and it’s very real. He would happily kill me right now. “I need to hear it.”

“I... I’ll be just fine,” I hiss back. “If my family is on the line, then I’ll find a way to

make it happen, Alexander.”

“Good.” His hands move a little closer. He isn’t quite letting me go just yet. I can see him really driving the point home. “That’s what I want to hear. I need a little more from you, Michelle. You have to make up for all the fuck-ups you’ve done.”

“Right, okay, I get it.” He tightens his grip. He’s only just blocking my airways, but because I’m in a terrible state of panic, it’s a million times worse. I claw desperately at his hands, needing him to let the hell go of me already. “I get it, Alexander.”

Finally, he releases me, and I lean forward, gasping for air like there’s no tomorrow. He chuckles gruffly to himself, glad that I’m getting it now, glad that I’m scared enough to do whatever the hell he wants me to do. Whatever it might be.

“Good. Well, Michelle, I really am going to show you around the house now because you’re going to be staying here for the night. For the foreseeable future, actually. I need you where I can keep an eye on you. I don’t want any more shenanigans. Of course, there are tons of cameras and the locks are incredible, so there’s no point in trying to escape.”

“I wouldn’t,” I snap back, knowing that’s exactly what he wants for me. “I wouldn’t do that. Not now.”

“Right, good. Then we can go over the exact details for what I want you to do later on tonight with this case...”

“Tonight?” Yes, the sooner the better, I suppose, but at the same time, I’m nowhere near ready for this.

“Yes. And don’t you worry about only having this drab clothing to wear. I have some items for you.” Of course he does. I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “We need this

information sooner rather than later. We also need to keep a step up on your man. Although it won't matter soon. Jordan and Max will end up dead soon enough. They know too much."

I clutch onto my stomach hard. I don't want either of the men who have helped me to die. I don't want Jordan to be killed because of me. I like him so much, in so many different ways, and I can't stand the idea of his being dead. But I can't argue it with Alexander. That will only make him even more determined to take Jordan down. I just have to remind myself that Jordan was a Navy SEAL, that he and Max both know what they're doing, so they will probably be fine. Maybe. I don't know. I don't put anything past Alexander. He is one cold sonofabitch. But maybe tonight, I can somehow change things.

I don't know what my plan is yet. I haven't formed anything in my mind other than to act like I'm willing to submit to everything that Alexander wants from me. When I get a chance and when I can guarantee that my family will be okay, then I'll do what I can to get myself away. I would love a chance to see Jordan once more to explain what happened, because he'll likely blame himself for my getting away, but I don't know if that's going to be possible.

If Jordan is being watched, then I'll be putting him in danger by going to him. Both of us, to be honest. I might have to find a way to vanish completely somehow, get away from everyone forever.

19

JORDAN

"I don't get why you just fell for this woman's speech," Max yells as he flings his hands in the air in frustration. "I don't know any woman named 'Kate' who looks like you have described. I don't understand anything that you're telling me."

“Max, I know that this isn’t great...” I think he’s struggling to accept that he might have been wrong about Michelle. I get it, but his refusing to digest that the world might not be quite what he thought isn’t helping us out right now. “But Kate showed me evidence. Michelle’s father has some important government job, I can’t remember what, exactly, which is what brought her into espionage, and she’s married too. She has lied to us about so much. We can’t trust her. You need to accept this.”

“I can’t.” He shakes his head hard. “I can’t accept it. I’m sorry. I’ve been working with Michelle for a lot longer than you. I know her better. You have always had a distrust of her, haven’t you? Which I think may have clouded your judgment here.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “Max, believe me, I’ve been open-minded with Michelle. I liked her a lot.”

He cocks an eyebrow which silences me. Maybe I let a little too much of my passion out there, which I really didn’t mean to do. As much as I want Max to understand me, I don’t need him to know that I was foolish enough to be seduced by Michelle. I can’t let him see how deeply I got sucked into the mess that she’s created here. But I think he gets it anyway.

“Listen...” I need to find a way to overcome that. “Max, I know it seems nuts, but everything that Kate told me is true?—”

“Aside from the notion that I’ve halted Russian operations in the past,” he interjects. “Because I might have worked on millions of cases with my men, but none of them have involved anyone from Russia up until now.”

“Well, it could have happened and you didn’t realize it. I don’t know.” I shrug my shoulders helplessly. “I don’t have all the details. If I’d thought about it then, I would have asked Kate for more information, but I didn’t. I didn’t think because it had me all messed up. I don’t like the idea of protecting the enemy. It makes me feel really

sick. I can't stand it. I didn't fight in the military to protect Americans just to come back and work against my own country. It doesn't feel right."

Max's eyes darken. I can practically see the cogs ticking in his head. He's trying to digest this and accept it, but it's hard for him. He can't take it. He doesn't like being wrong. I'm beyond the point of caring about his ego now. He needs to understand.

"I'll look into what you're saying," he finally replies with a serious nod. "I'll see what I can find out."

"Good, thank you." Relief floods me. This is what I've been wanting from him. Just the belief that I might be right.

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“Butwhile I’m doing that, I need you to do your job. Do you understand what I’m saying here? I need you to be back with Michelle, watching her.” He checks his watch. “I don’t think she’ll be at the office anymore. You might have missed her there. Hopefully, she’ll think that you’ve just forgotten, which is why she hasn’t been in touch...” He shoots me a warning look, trying to make me feel bad about things that I definitely won’t feel bad about. Michelle is the one in the wrong here. “So, you need to get back to the apartment and make up some excuse for where you’ve been. You need toactlike nothing is wrong while I do my research. If Michelle is who you say she is, then we can’t let her be suspicious for the time being.”

I hate that idea. I really don’t want to be around the woman who tricked me and made me fall for her any longer. Plus, Kate warned me not to. But I suppose Kate isn’t my boss and Max is. I have to listen to him and follow his rules.

“So, I’m just supposed to act like everything is fine? What if she already suspects and freaks out?”

“Jordan, you are on this job because you are level-headed and smart,” he warns me. “Because you have good instincts and I believe in you. Iknowthat you’ll make this work one way or another. You can do this. I need you to buy me time.”

“Yeah, okay,” I relent. I know that I don’t have any choice but to just go along with it, so that’s what I do. “I’ll go and play nice with Michelle now, pretend that the encounter with Kate didn’t happen and just... wait for you. It’ll be fine.”

But in reality, how am I going to act like everything is fine? What if she wants to kiss me? I won’t be able to fall for her shtick now, knowing that she’s married to some

other man. Some powerful Russian man who could have me killed in a heartbeat, probably. I mean, if he wanted me dead, that is. I don't know what's going on with Michelle's marriage. I suppose if she's a seductive spy, then he knows she must be hooking up with other people. It can't be that much of an issue...

Oh, God. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to imagine her in the middle of her marriage with another man. It's overwhelming and makes me feel ill. It's already going to be challenging enough for me to act okay in front of Michelle.

"I'm going now." I grab my car keys and nod toward Max. "I'll make you proud, Max. I'm sorry for acting out on my own accord. I just... well, Kate rattled me, that's all. But I'm going to be smarter from here on out."

Max gives me a warning look, but a grateful one too, and he sends me on my way, leaving me with very little choice but to make my way over to Michelle's apartment. I do take a detour over to the office building first, just to be certain that no one is there, and just as I suspected, the building is dark and very empty. Somehow, Michelle got herself home. I wonder why she hasn't called me. That's pretty weird. She must be wondering why I didn't turn up. Although she did seem to be making friends today, so maybe she got a ride home with one of them, or perhaps she went for some after work drinks.

"Damn it," I mutter angrily to myself. I slam my hand hard on the steering wheel until it hurts. I feel like I've fucked up massively, in every single way. I've messed up for everyone. I've disappointed Max, and Michelle too. I shouldn't care about Michelle anymore since she's betrayed me badly. Since she's done nothing but lie to me. But I can't contain my emotions. I can't seem to stop myself from losing my mind about her anyway. "Fucking hell, Jordan, you are going to end up in trouble here."

I eventually gather myself up to drive all the way to Michelle's apartment. I suppose I

do need to come here anyway to gather up my things. If I'm eventually going to leave this job, then I need to have everything with me. All the stuff that I've half left in my case and scattered over the floor too will have to be taken back home and far away from that place. I won't ever be able to return once this is done. I suppose I'll be sent off on some other protection job soon enough, and I'll have to forget it all.

But will I ever really be able to forget Michelle? Right now, it feels like definitely not. It feels like she'll consume me like this forever. My brain will ache, my heart will hurt, and I'll be in this pain for the rest of my existence.

"Here we are," I whisper in an attempt to gear myself up as I park my car in the spot which I've been comfortable in for a while now but today makes me feel incredibly uncomfortable, like I don't belong. "Time to face everything."

I force myself inside the building, and as I take the stairs two at a time, I try to think of ways to question Michelle, to find out if Kate's accusations are the truth without making her suspicious. I can't let Max down any more than I already have. I need to give him this time to do his own investigations without things erupting into panic and chaos. It's up to me to keep things calm.

"Michelle?" I push the door open with my heart in my mouth. I don't know what to expect, but it isn't darkness. "Michelle, are you here? Sorry, I know I wasn't there when you finished work like I promised. I came up against some work stuff..."

I've no excuse, really, and I can't think of one, but I'll have to try and make it work somehow. But as I pad quietly through the house, not wanting to disturb too much, and I get only silence back, I realize that nothing matters because no one is here.

"Michelle?" I don't want to accept that she isn't here just yet. I want to check first. "Michelle, are you here?"

Each room is emptier than the last, which makes everything inside me sink. I wasn't necessarily looking forward to seeing her because I have no idea how to deal with things, but it's worse knowing she isn't here. I don't know where she is. I've lost all control of the situation, and I don't know how to claw it back. I don't really stand a chance.

What was that? Even deep in thought, my instincts go on high alert as soon as I hear the slightest, smallest sound. My heart stops beating and I cling to my next breath. I need to hear with every inch of myself to work out what it is. Footsteps.

I don't know exactly which way the sound is coming from, so I strain more to listen in, but I get nothing. At least, I get nothing until I see a shadowy figure appearing in the door frame. A figure which I immediately want to identify.

"Michelle, is that you?" I ask, trying to blow over the shakiness in my voice. "Let's turn the light on."

I take one step closer, tentatively in case everything is about to explode, but I don't get far. A cocking sound gets me. It makes me feel sick to my stomach. I recognize the sound, but I don't understand why it's happening. Why would Michelle do this?

"Michelle? Just calm down. This doesn't need to happen." I hold up my hands in a surrendering gesture. "Let's talk."

Bang!

The sound strikes me hard. It ricochets off every wall, making my eardrums shatter. But that isn't the worst pain that I feel. That was a gunshot and it hit me. I know that for sure, which is why my body is sliding downward, giving up. It's why a blackness is coming for me. I try to fight it off, I attempt to battle it because as soon as the blackness takes it, that will be it for me. That will be the end. I know how this shit

works.

“Michelle,” I whisper as the world pinholes. She might be the person who killed me, but she’s also the last person in my mind. “Michelle...”

20

MICHELLE

I hate this. I hate this. These fucking items of clothing are too disgusting for words. I might as well have nothing on at all. But Alexander has insisted, and there isn’t a damn thing that I can do to stop this. It’s gotten out of hand already. I’m in a fucking lacy bra, which shows far too much nipple for my liking, and a miniskirt and heels so high I can barely walk in them, but Alexander has insisted upon them to keep me looking ‘my best’. Asshole, he just wants to torture me, to make this worse than it already needs to be.

“Here we are.” Alexander stops his flashy car outside a very posh-looking bar, the sort of place where only the wealthy who want to show off their riches will frequent. “Time for you to get this show on the road. Are you ready?”

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I offer him a one-shouldered shrug. “I know the plan, if that’s what you mean. I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“Well, you’re going to do this to protect your father, aren’t you?” Alexander obviously doesn’t give a shit, so that’s the end of that. “So, get that ass of yours inside that bar and seduce that guy until you can get your hands on his paperwork.” He hands me a clutch bag as if it’s my own. “And there is a knife in there if you need to use that too.”

I shoot him a look. I might be willing to do anything to help my family, but I’m not killing anyone for any reason. Some poor guy who might be an asshole who is doing something shady in relation to the government, but I don’t know that, doesn’t need to die because of me. No one needs to die because of me. I don’t have any kind of killer inside me, anyway. I can’t do it.

“Just get the paperwork,” Alexander warns me. “Just sort this shit out, will you? No more fucking around.”

He practically pushes me out of the car, and I stagger to my feet. Even teetering over to the door is difficult. I probably look like a real idiot who has no idea what she’s doing, which is pretty much the truth. I bet I look like a prostitute, too. I don’t know what escorts wear when they are around these men, but I bet it’s nicer than this. Fucking Alexander.

Breathlessly, I head inside. Immediately, I feel all eyes upon me. In reality, barely anyone looks. I guess they are all so lost in their own worlds and affairs that they don’t give a shit about anyone coming in, least of all a girl looking like me, but I feel

a prickle of embarrassment rushing through my system regardless. I need to sit down and try to blend in as quickly as possible.

Ah! I spot the man Alexander has driven into my brain sitting at the bar alone, which is good news. It means I can approach him rapidly and quickly to get this whole debacle out of the way. The sooner, the better.

“Hey,” I rasp in what I hope is a sexy manner as I take my seat next to the man. “What’s good to drink in here?”

“Don’t know.” He doesn’t even look up from his drink to see me as he answers. “I’m just drinking beer.”

“And you don’t have any recommendations for a girl who normally has her drinks bought for her by men like you?”

I force myself to rest my hand on his arm, to attempt to get some of his focus, but it doesn’t happen again. “Wine.”

I sigh and order myself a glass of white wine, which I need to keep my place here. I can’t be kicked out, and I also need something to steady my nerves. Thankfully, Alexander sent me in with some money of my own so I can afford this.

“So, what’s a nice looking guy like you doing in a place like this?” I lean in closer while sipping my drink, trying my hardest to boost my own confidence. “And why do you look so sad? Is there anything that I can do to cheer you up?”

He shakes his head and drinks some more. Shit, this sucks. He really isn’t interested in me at all. I can’t come across as desperate, but I really need him to just be attracted to me already. There are too many lives on the line for me to fuck this up. Whatever the paperwork is that Alexander needs will probably put other people’s lives at risk

too, but that's a bridge I'll cross when I come to it. I'll sort that out when I need to. I can only focus on one problem at a time.

"Are you sure?" I lean in and let him inhale the perfume that I've been doused in. I want that to help. "I'm good at listening. I'm also good at other things too. You just need to give me a chance to see what I can be good at."

"I don't pay for the company of women," he snaps, confirming my worst fears. I do look like I get paid for sex. The heat of humiliation burns my cheeks, but I can't allow that to stop me. "So, please, get that idea out of your head right away."

"That isn't what I'm talking about," I reply calmly. "I'm not asking you to pay me for anything. I'm just a girl out for a good night. When I see a guy alone looking as sad as you do, I want to cheer him up. Sorry for trying to make us both have a good night."

I pull back, trying to let him come to me, but he's still ignoring me. Whatever is on this guy's mind is bothering him too much. I might not be able to break through the shock barrier tonight, however much Alexander demands it of me.

But if I don't do it, then there will be death, so I'm going to have to find a way. I need a moment to gather myself up.

"Look, I need to use the bathroom," I tell my neighbor in the friendliest tone that I can manage. "Can you please watch my drink and my seat for me while I'm gone? I would still love to have a talk with you when I return."

Thankfully, he nods and agrees, which is our first positive conversation this whole night. Hopefully, by the time I return, he'll allow himself to open up to me a little bit. I just want to talk to him, to see if there is anything that we can work out here. My God, we don't even need to have sex, and I certainly don't need to kill him. I just

need the papers to let my family live.

I breathe out a breath of relief as I make my way into the bathroom because I can finally be alone to get myself together. Or so I think. Within about two seconds, an unwelcome hand rests on my shoulder and spins me around to face eyes I don't want to see. My blood runs cold when I realize that I'm not even allowed to be in this bar alone.

“Katya,” I hiss fearfully. Instantly, I shrink backward and fall into myself. “What are you doing here?”

In a perfect fake American accent, even better than the one I've managed to develop, she replies, “It's Kate while I'm here. Kate who is an American spy. Kate who is undermining your chance to slide under the radar.”

“What have you done?” I ask fearfully. “Alexander has me now. There's no need for anything else to happen.”

“What do you think I've done?” She laughs nastily. “I've been following you every single day since you dumped your cellphone in that trashcan, thinking that you're so clever. I've been in your apartment, I had a nice chat with Sally about your job, which I suppose unfortunately for you means you got fired... oopsie.” It's all starting to make sense. She, or maybe Alexander, threatened Sally, which is why I got fired at the perfect time. “And I also had a nice talk with Jordan. Your boyfriend.”

“What did you do?” I growl. “What the hell did you say to Jordan? Is he okay?”

“Well, I mean, he's dead.” This little statement is said with such mirth, such delight that I almost throw up. I know Katya well and just how evil that bitch is. She thinks nothing of killing, which means this could be true. It could all be very true. “But that had to happen, didn't it? Alexander warned you about that. The other guy is next, the

boss you spoke to. All those people will die because of you. Not nice, is it?" She giggles in a weirdly girlish way. "Now, save your family and seduce that man."

"Did you not see me up there?" I demand in a frustrated manner. "I'm trying my hardest but he's giving me nothing."

"Fucking hell, Michelle, do you really think that you're so beautiful that he's going to just fall at your feet? Fucking hell, just look at yourself. You need to work for his attention, for his focus. You need to seduce him. Just because you're fucking some other guy, some dead guy now, doesn't mean you can't make some other guy want you. You need to. You do understand that Alexander will kill you and everyone in your life if you don't? He's serious. You really pissed him off."

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“I know.” I hang my head low, shame washing over me in painful waves. “I just can’t do this.”

An ice-cold, hard object presses against my stomach which I quickly realize is a gun. Probably the same gun that she shot Jordan with. Holy shit, as I think about him dead, it makes me want to fall apart. I hate the idea of losing someone who very quickly became so important to me. The only thing holding me together is the idea that I need to save other lives.

“Okay. I’ll get out there.” I step backward from Katya with my hands in the air, letting her know that I’m surrendering. “I’ll do whatever is needed of me. I don’t want there to be any more death. I just want all of this to be over.”

“Then get the fuck out there and stop this depressing shit.” Katya rolls her eyes without even a scrap of sympathy. “Get out there and do wild things to that man until he’ll give you everything you want. That’s why you were brought to America. You have a duty, and you know why you need to keep on with this. So don’t fuck around anymore. Get shit sorted.”

She pushes me out of the bathroom, leaving me very little choice but to get on with the mission. The man at the bar still has his head down. He still looks like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders. I don’t know exactly how I’m going to pull him out of this mood when I don’t know what’s bothering him, but I’ll have to find a way to make all of this work.

Then I can sort out the rest of my life and the mess that it’s become.

“Don’t think of the mess that your life is,” I remind myself. “Don’t worry about any of it. Just do this one step at a time.”

My next step is toward the bar. I don’t even need to plan what I’m going to say when I sit down. I just need to keep on going. Katya is in here somewhere with a gun pointed at me, even if it isn’t obvious. Alexander wants me dead too.

This is a nightmare.

21

JORDAN

What happened? My head aches as I attempt to part my eyes and let the world in. It’s almost so agonizing that I can’t do it. I kinda want to remain in the blackness where everything feels a lot less intense. But what the hell happened? How am I here?

I try and think back over everything that I can remember, but there’s nothing. Just a big, black hole. I can see glimpses of little things such as Michelle’s gorgeous smiling face and a strong sense of discomfort. I can also recall arguing, but I don’t know who with or what became of everything. My brain doesn’t want me to remember for some reason, which is very frustrating.

Open your eyes, I tell myself firmly. Wake up and everything will immediately become clearer. Just see what’s going on...

But I can’t do it. I don’t know why, I can’t exactly explain it away, but I’m afraid to let reality in. I’m scared to know what’s going on. My instincts deep down are yelling at me that I won’t like it, any of it, that life has taken a really bad turn.

“Michelle.” I barely recognize my own voice. It’s like a weird croaking sound.

“Michelle, where are you? Are you alright?”

Something happened to Michelle, I can feel it deep in my gut. Something that’s my fault. I did something wrong...

“Michelle isn’t here anymore, buddy. You don’t need to worry.” The soft-spoken voice stuns me to the core. It’s a distinctly male voice, so not Michelle, clearly, but one which I know well. One I can always rely on. “It’s only me. You’re safe.”

Even though my head continues to pound and my eyes ache painfully, I just about manage to get them to see. It’s Max, staring over me surrounded by a terrifying white glow which drags a new terror out of the pit of my stomach. The brightness, the whiteness, it’s all too wrong. I know I’m in a place where I don’t belong, a place I want to escape from.

“What... what’s going on?” I attempt to push myself up, but it seems like I’m trapped. “Where am I?”

“You can’t get up at the moment, Jordan. You need to stay where you are so the doctors can take care of you.” Max rests a hand to push me back down. He might be trying to help me, but it feels like he’s on the wrong side right now. “You’re in the hospital. You aren’t in the worst state in the world right now, but if you try to fight this, you’ll end up injured.”

“In the hospital? But why?” Max’s eyes pop in surprise. “I don’t remember anything, and it’s weird...”

“You...” He sucks in a deep breath before he really dives into things. “You had an interaction with someone who identified herself as Kate. An American spy, or so she told you. She discussed some things with you about Michelle earlier today.”

“What things?” I should be able to recall this. It isn’t fair that my brain is giving me nothing. “I don’t remember this.”

“She told you that Michelle is married and that her father is in the Russian government. She warned you that Michelle is working against you to try and take my company down. Apparently, I’ve been involved in Russian operations before, which as I expressed earlier definitely isn’t the truth, so this is some sort of revenge plot with you at the center.”

“Michelle... but she doesn’t seem like she’s against me. Me and her... we... get along really well.”

“And I believe Michelle too, but Kate got under your skin,” Max reminds me, not that it jogs any memories. “And you left your post. I don’t blame you, so you don’t need to panic. As it turns out, Michelle wasn’t exactly honest with us about every little detail. But she’s missing now. We’re struggling to locate her, and you have been shot. You’re lucky you didn’t die.”

An ice-cold wave washes over me. “Someone shot me? Who was it? Oh, God, was it Michelle? Is she the one who did this?”

I don’t want to immediately blame her, but if I was suspicious about her and she wasn’t honest with me, and now she’s gone missing... well, it could all fit together a little bit too well, couldn’t it? Michelle could be something a whole lot different to the person I have in my mind. I know I must have been really suspicious to walk away like I did. I’ve been trained never to leave my post, so it has to be incredibly bad. Oh, my God, I’ve been dreaming about the woman who tried to kill me. Now that I can remember. While I’ve been in this hospital bed sleeping, she’s been floating through my mind the entire time, making me fall a whole lot deeper into love with her. A love that isn’t real and that I definitely shouldn’t be consumed with.

“We aren’t sure of that yet,” Max admits. “It’s something that I’m working on right now. But we also need to keep you under protection at all times. I do believe that whoever shot you wanted you dead, and when they find out that you survived, they could come back to finish the job. It was actually a miracle that nothing major was hit by the bullet. You got lucky.”

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“So, it could have been Michelle. It could have been one of the Russian spies. Someone wanted me dead.” I huff sadly. My head is still spinning a bit too much to take this in easily, but I’m doing my best. “What did Michelle lie about?”

Max instantly looks uncomfortable. It seems he was fooled by her more than he wanted to let on. “Well, her father is a man in government. That’s information this so-called Kate gave to you. Although not as powerful as he once was...”

Ooh, do I remember that? I don’t remember this American spy woman, but it does feel more familiar than it should.

“As for the idea that Michelle is married, I can’t get any solid information about that either way. The guys back at the office are working day and night to see what they can discover, but it isn’t straightforward. It’s hard to crack Russian information, even with everything that we have available to us. We will do it, though. You don’t need to worry about that.”

I nod slowly, trying to accept all of this, but it isn’t sinking in. It all feels all kinds of wrong. Even if I’m the one who clearly had suspicions about Michelle at first, I don’t feel the same way now. That part of my brain has been knocked out, and all I can recall are the good times we shared. I was falling for her, I was really falling hard and fast. I could have been in love with her, given half the chance, and now, I’m lying in a hospital bed with her God knows where, wondering whether she shot me.

“So, where do we go from here?” I ask Max a little helplessly. “What happens next? This is all... a lot.”

“Your main priority is to get yourself better,” he tells me firmly. “I don’t want you worrying about any of this. You need to leave it all to me. I’ll find out where Michelle is and what the Russians plan to do next.”

“I don’t think I can just lie here and do nothing, Max.” Even the concept of that idea feels overwhelming to me. “Can’t you tell them to let me out of here already? I’m frustrated as it is. Plus, aren’t I basically just waiting to be killed here?”

“Not with people watching you, no. And I can’t get you out of here, Jordan. You need to heal. It would also be very useful to us if you could try and remember everything while you’re in here. I know it’s a lot for me to ask you to try and recall who shot you, but that would make our lives a lot easier if we could know. It’ll help us move in the right direction.”

I dive into my mind once more but get nothing. “I’ll see what I can do, Max. But what if I remember nothing?”

“Then we will figure it out,” he replies with sheer determination in his voice. “One way or another, we will make this work. Now, I need to get back to the office in a moment, but I have someone else coming in to watch over you. Do you want them in here with you to make you feel more comfortable, or would you be happier with them outside the room by the door?”

I instantly know that I don’t have the emotional energy to talk to anyone else right now, especially since it might be someone I don’t know. “I think it might be better if I’m alone to try and get my thoughts together. Is that alright?”

Max pats my arm and agrees. “Of course. I’m sure you need your rest too. It isn’t easy being shot.”

As he exits my room, I fall under a deep, dark cloud. Leaving the Navy SEALs and

moving into security was supposed to put me in a line of work that wasn't so dangerous. I knew that I would face hardships. I wasn't stacking shelves or some other line of work without enemies, but I've personally been hurt more doing this on my very first job than I ever was in the military. That never left me in the hospital with no chance of escape and murderous criminals after me. I don't like the idea that this might not be the best line of work for me, but what if it isn't? What if I keep making mistakes because I'm a fuck-up?

"Kate," I whisper to myself, trying to drag her face out of my muddy memories. "Kate, who the fuck are you? Michelle, who the fuck are you too? Was anything that we shared real? Did you just seduce me as part of your end game?"

Urgh, if I think about her giving me those looks, making me feel so incredible, causing me to fall for her through the lens of someone who didn't really give a shit, it makes me sick to my stomach. She couldn't really do that to me, could she? Although if she lied about who she is, then maybe she's the best damn actress in the world. She should have an Oscar.

And if she's married... well, that changes everything, doesn't it? That turns the world on its ass in every possible way. That could be even more painful than the agony shooting through my body right now, although I suppose I'm probably on tons of pain relief for the physical issues. There isn't any morphine for my heart, unfortunately.

"You are an idiot," I scold myself angrily. "Thinking you're ready for something serious at last. Clearly, not."

I said to Michelle that I would give up the dangerous career if I ever found someone to love. Well, life clearly wants me in the firing line of bullets rather than with a woman I love in my arms. I guess I'll have to accept that I had it right in the first place. Jobs can only cause physical pain. I can only lose my life. What Michelle has

taught me is that love can cause me to lose so much more. Love can tear me apart from the inside out and leave me bleeding and exposed for everyone to see what a fool I am. Max must be able to see that, and I'm sure others will too. I'm about to be the fool who fell for the first woman he worked with and made a total wreck of his life in the process. Fucking wonderful.

22

MICHELLE

“So, yeah, this is my room for the... the night,” the man drunkenly hiccups as he lets me inside. I've worked so fucking hard for this invitation, it's nearly destroyed me and this poor guy, who has now told me he only likes to be referred to as 'Buck', but we're here. Buck might be drunk off his ass and still pretty unpleasant, but Katya can put her gun away. “It's shitty, isn't it?”

“I don't know, it seems pretty nice to me.” I half-carry him in, still keeping the pretense up that I want to flirt with him. “I've never been somewhere so fancy before. You must be a very important man, Buck. That's so exciting.”

“I'm ah... only here for a meeting.” He slumps back on the bed and belches loudly. It takes every bit of self-control I have not to screw up my face in utter disgust. What a pig. “My house is so much fucking better. Now that, you would love. But I got to go where I'm told to because these meetings all have to be very serious and, er, what's the word? Private. No one can know.”

“Ooh, so you are important, then?” I perch on the bed beside him and rest my hand on his arm. I know that physical contact is key when establishing a connection with my target, but this is about all I can manage. “I love a powerful man.”

He has a briefcase over in the corner of the room. I spotted that the moment I came

in. It's hanging open, too, which means Buck wasn't expecting guests tonight. He's made my job just a little bit easier. Now, I just need to get through the whole seducing him part so Alexander doesn't kill me for being so close and fucking things up for him. Much as I don't want to be in the middle of this dangerous mess and I don't want to get any paperwork for anyone, I also don't want anyone to die.

Well, anyone else, that is, since it seems that I've already lost one of the most important people to me.

Don't think about him, I scold myself. Think about getting this over and done with. Think about getting away.

I don't just want to be free from this job. I want to be separated from my Russian ties completely. I almost had that. Max made it so I was as close to being an American citizen as I can be, and that's what I need again. I don't think that Alexander will ever make that so, but it might be something that I can achieve alone when the time is right.

"You love a powerful man, huh?" He tries to reach over to me. I think he wants to pull me on top of him, but he's too drunk to do so. I'm ashamed to admit that for the briefest of seconds, I think about the blade in my bag before I push that thought away. No one needs to die here, not even this disgusting, gross man. "Come over here and I'll show you a powerful man."

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With sheer disgust surging through my system, I sidle over to him. I know that he wants me to straddle him, but I'm not in that place yet. There isn't enough wine in the world. Honestly, I don't know how I'll get through any of this. For now, I lie beside him and let him clumsily kiss me. Although not on the mouth, it's more my cheek and neck. I don't think this guy even knows that he's missing my lips completely. He's such a mess that he's just connecting with whatever he can get ahold of.

My eyes squeeze closed and I try to take myself to another place entirely, away from this man and his clumsy grip. Instead, I try to think of Jordan and how amazing he always made me feel when he touched me. He put me on cloud nine every single time. His fingers were velvety, his tongue phenomenal. Oh, my God, he was the best person I'd ever been with.

“You're a sexy slut,” Buck cries out way too loudly and directly into my ear, snapping me out of my daydream. “Fuck, are you sure you don't get paid for this shit because I can just tell that you'll be wild in the sack. A real fucking... fucking freak.”

“I already told you I'm not a prostitute.” It's hard not to bite back through gritted teeth. “I'm just a normal girl.”

“A normal fucking slut who I'm about to split in half. Do you want to see the size of my cock?”

Before I can even begin to beg him to keep it to himself, thank you very much, he shoves me off him and yanks his trousers down. I squeal, in horror, of course, but Buck takes it upon himself to take it as delight.

“I know, right? It’s huge and you are the lucky slut who gets to ride it tonight. Have you ever been with anyone so big? Oh, and hey, are you one of those kiss and tell girls? Like, because I’m well-known, will you go to the press about me? Because if you do, I want you to mention that I’m a fucking stallion, hung like a horse. I want the world to know that I’m a good fuck.”

Oh, God. I’m in way over my head. I already knew that, but it’s starkly obvious right now. He wants to put that thing inside me, and that’s exactly what Alexander wants to happen too. Both men need to act like I want it, like it’s working for me so I can do what I came here for. But upon sight of him, my thighs automatically squeeze together. I want to run away.

“You want to taste it?” Buck shakes his cock around as if that will make it any more appealing for me. “It’s tasty, everyone tells me as much, and it’s been around the block, if you know what I mean. Plenty of people—women—have had a taste.”

He’s about one second away from grabbing the back of my head and forcing me down there. I know I should go with it because of all the lives on the line, but I can’t help what happens next. I don’t have any control over the tears that explode out of my eyes and start pouring down my cheeks at the speed of light. Shit, I’m a goddamn fucking mess.

“Come on, get back in the mood,” Buck growls. “I’ve decided that I want you now, so get over here already.”

“I love... I love someone else,” I wail without meaning to. I seem to have lost all control of myself and it’s humiliating. “I’m sorry, I can’t do this because I love another man and... and he’s dead. They killed him. He’s dead.”

“Oh...” Buck doesn’t cover himself up, but he does have the decency to look surprised. “That’s really awful.”

“I just want to be able to be and live the life that I want, but they won’t let that happen. I don’t want any more of this.”

A thick silence floods the room which is only broken up by the occasional sobs that I can’t keep inside. Buck wants me gone now, I’m sure of it, and I want to leave too, but Katya is out there with a gun and I just know that Alex has his bare hands ready to tightly wrap around my neck, to choke the life out of me. I would rather be here in this mess than there.

“I know what you mean,” Buck finally tells me quietly. “I get it because people are stopping me from being myself too.” As I turn to look at him, to see what he’s talking about, I’m shocked to see tears on his face too. What the fuck is going on now? “See, none of this is me. I’m not the asshole I pretend to be, nor am I a womanizer. I’ve been told that because of my position, I can’t let the world know that I’m really a gay man. They would rather I sleep with kiss and tell girls who will leak stories about me than fucking allow me to just be myself. What sort of world is this where I can’t just be who I am?”

Wow, even in what is considered the ‘free world’, there are still restrictions, which is crazy. I didn’t think that would happen in a place like this. Buck is an asshole because he’s contained in a box where he doesn’t fit, just like I am. I don’t know if this gives us a bond or anything like that, but we certainly do understand one another. We’re coming from a similar place in life.

“I just want to sleep.” Buck rests his head back on the pillow and slides his eyes closed. Although I do notice that the tears are still making their escape. “I don’t want to deal with any of this shit anymore. I just want to sleep it off. I’ll have to get back into professional mode, ready for my meeting tomorrow, and I can’t have this baggage with me. Let’s just... forget all of this, can we? Don’t tell anyone about it and we can just act like it never happened. Just... please don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t,” I promise him, glad that I can at least give him that much. I’m about to betray him and make his life worse than it already is, but I won’t out him to the world. That isn’t my responsibility, nor would I want to do that to him. Although if he keeps getting drunk and spilling his secret to random women, then he won’t be able to keep it away from the world for long.

He snores almost instantly. What a freaking eventful few moments. One minute, he was waving his cock in my face, and the next, we were both weeping about people we can’t have, and now he’s crashed out. He honestly has my head spinning. I can’t keep up with him. But this is so much better than seducing him, so now I can just get what I want and get out of here.

I tiptoe over to the briefcase, not sure how deep a sleeper he is, and I rummage through the papers. I know exactly what I’m looking for, but it’s a challenge to focus when my pulse is throbbing and my emotions are everywhere. As much as I want this life in America, is it going to be the same without Jordan? Will I ever find anyone like him? I can’t imagine it. He was special, wonderful, caring in every single way. I can’t see there being another person like him on the planet.

On the other hand, he probably died to try and keep me alive, so I should at least attempt to give it a go, even if it’ll be empty without him... but there I go again, getting too carried away with the future. One step at a time is the only way I’m going to get through this, so once I have the paperwork, I need to get it back to Alexander. After that, I’ll worry when I get there.

“Ah!” Is this it? It certainly looks like it. And so do these other papers. Of course, I feel sick to my stomach and unbearably horrible as I take these items from Buck. He’s going to want me dead along with Alexander in the morning. But I hope that he doesn’t really remember me. Luckily, he didn’t spend a lot of time looking at my face because he didn’t really want me, so I might be safe in that department. Then again, I could be in even more danger. Who the fuck knows?

JORDAN

“I’m okay, I don’t need help.” The man looking after me today is a little too attentive for my liking. I appreciate his trying to assist me with this, but I can get myself into a damn car by myself. Just because I got shot yesterday, it doesn’t make me incapable. I must be fine for the doctors to let me out of the hospital this quickly, even if I did insist on it, so I can cope. “I’m fine.”

“Max told me I’ve got to really take care of you,” he shoots back, clearly uncomfortable with me. “I have to really look after you. I’m sorry if I’m getting on your nerves, but I’m trying my hardest to do the right thing here. I’m just doing what was asked.”

I huff and twist away from him in the passenger’s side of the car. This guy might be winding me up, but he isn’t a bad person. He isn’t doing anything wrong. I’m just irritated and still very confused about everything. My memories still haven’t come back to me, and I can’t seem to make them return no matter what I try. The big black hole of nothingness still remains.

“I’m going to take you to the office for a meeting with Max. That’s what he wants me to do. Then I think you can go home.”

“Right, sure.” I stare out the window, watching the world pass me by. I guess Max might want me on another job as soon as I’ve healed. I guess I’m going to have to get my head around moving past everything that happened with Michelle. It’ll be a challenge for me to run headfirst into another job, to work with another person, but I don’t have any choice. Not anymore.

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The office looks like a different building as we pull up in front of it. It doesn't look like the place I've been in a number of times before, but it's exactly the same. It's me who's different, who's changed. I'm the one who has been through enough to twist me up in knots, to transform the way that everything looks to me. I can hardly see anything because my head is scrambled.

“Right, time to go inside,” I declare with a deep breath. “Let's go and see what's to come next.”

But my new friend doesn't come to Max's office with me. He makes an escape as soon as he has the chance to do so, for which I can't blame him. I haven't exactly been a joy to be around. I wouldn't be keen to hang out with me either. I'm sure he's hoping that someone else will be given the duty of looking after me in the future. Urgh, I came into this job to offer protection to other people and I'm the one who's ended up being babysat. What a fucking joke. It's actually pretty embarrassing.

Max's office door is open. He's acting like he's in the middle of something, but I can tell that he's been waiting for me. The anticipation might as well be rolling off him in waves. I hope he isn't expecting me to remember everything.

“Oh, hi there, Jordan.” He cocks an eyebrow at me. “Good to see you up and about again. Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah, so good that they couldn't wait to throw me out of the hospital,” I joke, trying my hardest to lighten the air. “But unfortunately, my brain isn't working yet. I haven't got anything for you. I'll drop that bomb right away, just so you know.”

“It’s okay, we’re working on things from this end too. We can just wait and see what’s going to come out, but for now we need to focus on keeping you safe. I’ve been trying to plan the best way to do that, and I think having someone with you at all times is the best course of action. Landon will be the man for that. I know his work ethic, and he’ll be great.”

“Wait, so I’m going to be like one of the clients now with a bodyguard twenty-four, seven? I don’t need that. I’m out of the hospital now and can take care of myself. I don’t need to be babysat. I would rather get back to work.”

“Landon will be staying with you,” Max tells me firmly. “I don’t need any argument about that. I’m doing what I know is best to keep you safe. We can’t discount the fact that you have clearly become a target, so let’s keep you alive. It’s an investment on my behalf because if you’re killed, then you won’t be able to work for me again, will you? And with instincts like yours, I can’t afford to lose you. After all, you are the one who didn’t trust Michelle in the first place, even when I did. Turns out you were right. I never would have allowed you to go anywhere near her if I thought she was going to shoot you. It just makes me sick...”

“So, it was her?” I ask sadly. I don’t know from my own memories, but if Max has something, then maybe I’ll need to adjust.

“It seems like it. There isn’t any evidence of anyone else being in that apartment, so I have to think it was. Plus the fact that she’s gone missing right afterward. I mean, it doesn’t look good, does it? That’s the theory I’ll go with until I know otherwise.”

“So... you might be in trouble too,” I suddenly realize. “I’ve had dealings with Michelle and it ended up with my getting shot, but you have too. The Russians might believe that you know too much and come after you too.”

“I can’t be worried about me when I have all my men to worry about.” Max nods as if

this is an acceptable answer. “I’ll be fine. I’m well protected here at the office, anyway. You are the one we need to focus on right here. So, I’ll call in Landon.”

I feel helpless and frustrated, but I know no one will listen to me. I get that I must have said some stuff negatively about Michelle before, but now my gut is warning me that she’s in danger. I feel compelled to help her even if she is the person who shot me. But I’m not going to be able to make that happen with Max having me babysat like a goddamn child.

I need to be trusted right now, but I don’t know how I can make that happen. How can I get anyone to see the truth?

Michelle isn’t the enemy. She isn’t my enemy, at least. I was supposed to protect her and I failed. I want to make it right.

“Hey there, Jordan.” A man who I can only assume is Landon joins me in Max’s office with much too much pep in his step. He seems like an extremely happy guy, which puts me on edge in this current situation. “I’m Landon. Good to meet you.”

“Good to meet you too.” My voice is as monotone as my feelings. I’m flat and irritated. “Although you don’t need to do this.”

“I can’t not.” He shrugs one shoulder. “You know how it is. Max has given me the task, and I have to follow through with it. So, I’ll come back to your place with you and keep watch while you rest. Max wants you better and back to work.”

“I could work right now...” I trail off as Max comes in right behind Landon, already shaking his head no. “Okay, sure, whatever. Let’s go back to my house, then, and I can make myself well enough to start this nightmare all over again.”

I spot Landon and Max sharing a look, which I can only guess means he’s been

informed of the whole sorry ass tale. Well, good, then he won't need to ask me for all the sordid details, will he? Because I don't want to fill Landon in. Right now, I'm so drained with the whole mess that I don't want to think about any of it ever again. Nothing about this is going my way. I need to switch off completely. Perhaps a fucking rest is exactly what I need in this awful situation.

"Did you want to go now, then?" Landon asks me kindly. "I have my car outside whenever you're ready."

"I guess so. No point hanging around if there isn't anything else for me to do." I want to storm out in a huff, but there's something more important which I'm going to have to ask first of all. "Max, if anything happens with Michelle, anything at all, will you please let me know? Good or bad, I just want to be kept in the loop with all of it. Is that okay?"

"Sure, of course I will," he reassures me in a soothing tone. "I would do that anyway. I know how complicated this situation is. As soon as I get anything new, I'll be in touch. You'll be the first person I contact, okay?"

He doesn't need to say that he knows Michelle and I had something more in-depth going on between us. It's written all over his face, but I kinda sense that he forgives me too. I suppose being naive and on my first job with a high-class seductress who is clearly an expert at lying will give me a little bit of leeway. In his mind, anyway. I'm furious at myself.

A man who's worked in my position, who has been a Navy SEAL, is supposed to be more switched on than that. Everyone I've ever worked with wouldn't have nearly the same level of trust in me knowing that I can be tricked so quickly. Just a nice body and a fluttery pair of eyes and I lose my goddamn mind. Well, never again, of that I can be certain.

Once I'm in a position where I can openly talk about this without cracking, I'll make a promise to Max that it won't happen again. I won't allow myself to fall for anyone like that ever again. I'm going to lock my heart away for a very long time and never let myself feel for anyone else again. I can't ever imagine opening up to someone like I did Michelle. I just couldn't hack it.

"Okay, let's go," I say wearily to Landon. "Let's get out of here. I want to go home now."

Landon follows close behind me, making friendly small talk the whole time. He doesn't even seem to mind that I'm not giving him much back because I haven't got the energy. He's buzzing off something, and weirdly, it's nice to listen to him going on because it distracts me from the pain of my own thoughts. My brain wants to take me deep into depression, it wants to pick me apart and wonder what the hell is wrong with me to make me fall for such stupidity, to find myself in the middle of such a mess, and to have Michelle find it so simple to walk away from me. She should have felt something for me, the intense time that we shared together, but she potentially fired a gun at me and wanted me dead. That isn't love, is it?

Did I love her? I wonder aimlessly as we begin the drive. Do I still love her? I wouldn't even be thinking about this if everything wasn't so intense and confusing, but now it's going to consume me until I get answers, which will never happen. If I don't see Michelle again, which I don't suppose I will at this point, then I'll be left wondering forever.

24

MICHELLE

“You got it, you crazy bitch!” Katya laughs as soon as she sees me. “Wow, and you fuck quickly too. Well done.”

I decide not to bother telling her the crappy details of how I ended up with these papers and to just go forward with it. Of course, deep down, this leads me to worry about future jobs where this might be expected of me, but I’m not worrying on the future. I’m trying my damn hardest to keep myself focusing on moving forward, one step at a time.

“Come on, then. Alexander is getting impatient out there. Let’s go and give him the good news already. Keep those papers tight to your chest. We don’t want anyone catching hold of them before we get outside. We don’t know who else is down there.”

My heart begins hammering in my chest once more. The nerves grip onto me yet again. I’m really not cut out for this life at all. Why can’t everyone see that I shouldn’t have been dragged into this from the start? I’m not a seductress or a spy.

We just about make it through the bar without anyone stopping us, which is probably because of Katya and her terrifying demeanor. If I were another patron in the bar, I wouldn’t want to approach her either. Especially as she has a tight hold of me and she’s dragging me to the other side of the room without letting go. She’s clearly on a mission and won’t be halted.

“There he is.” Katya points to the van. “Come on, I can’t wait to show him that this is finally done.”

She drags me some more, pulling me hard toward the van. I would love to take this as my chance to run away before Alexander can get me again, but Katya is refusing to let that happen. She’s a smart cookie. She knows what she’s doing.

“Here, Alexander.” She slings me toward him and he pushes me into the van instantly. They aren’t taking any chances.

“Is it all done?” He wraps his arms tightly around Katya and gives her a tight, powerful kiss. Urgh, I’m instantly disgusted. I didn’t know that this was going on, which only leaves me in even more of a mess. I’m stuck with these assholes and I can’t get out. “Did you get this done, you crazy bitch? Ooh, I’m going to do some terrible things to you...”

They kiss some more in a horrible, inappropriate way. My God, it’s as if they don’t realize that they’re in public, or perhaps they don’t give a shit. They are far too involved with one another to care about the rest of the world. I turn away. I can’t see what’s happening, but that doesn’t mean I can’t hear them dry humping, almost stripping each other.

“Come on, then.” Alexander slaps Katya on the ass. “Let’s get back so we can continue. We still have lots to do.”

As soon as they strap themselves in the front of the car, Alexander twists himself around and snatches the documents from me. He’s practically giving me a paper cut with his violence. I let out a wail of pain, but this only makes Alexander laugh.

“Oh, fucking hell, Michelle, you really are useless, aren’t you?” I don’t need to see the eye roll to know that it’s there. “I don’t know how you managed to get this shit

done. That's why I sent Katya in there after you, to finish shit off. But while you've done this, I don't believe you've done enough. I don't think you've made it up to me at all. I might have to kill you anyway."

"But... but my father," I rasp back as a cold sensation settles in the pit of my stomach. "You promised..."

"Oh, your dad will be alright. I won't kill him. He'll want you dead, anyway. I mean, when he knows how much trouble you caused me by running away, he'll want you dead. He won't care about the loss of life. He has a lot to make up for, and if it involves your being bumped off to make things better for himself? Your dad has a good survival instinct."

I part my lips, about to argue back about this, but I force myself to stop at the very last second. There's no point in getting into a fight with Alexander when it comes to my family because he thinks that he knows everything and everyone better than me. I don't think my dad would want me dead, at least I hope he wouldn't, even to save himself, but sometimes, these things are out of our control. Instead, I lean back in my seat and try not to rise to the bait. Alexander probably wants me to freak out so he has an excuse to get physical with me. I can almost see the violence dancing behind his eyes, wanting to be set free.

"Everyone else will want you dead too," he continues to probe, much to Katya's delight. She laughs like this is the funniest shit that she has ever heard. Honestly, she and Alexander deserve one another. I can see it now. "Because you'll never be able to be trusted again. Ever. I can't always have my lovely lady watching you while you do stuff, can I? Sometimes, I need you out there getting information on your own. You can't get a babysitter every single time. But with you... I don't know..."

His words sting because it means I've hurt Buck for no real reason. It isn't even to help myself. If I'm going to be killed anyway, then what was the point of all of it? I

could have just died and been done with it. I kinda wish that I were the one the bullet hit and Jordan was still alive. He didn't deserve to die like that, just for helping me...

"Come on then, Michelle, let's get you inside." The van pulls up to Alexander's home once more as Katya turns to face me with an expression as smug as her voice. "Get you all locked away in a room so me and my man can have a nice night."

"Can't I just go back home? I don't need to stay here. I've done what's been asked of me and I'm not going anywhere."

"You don't want to go back there or you'll have to sleep in the room with your dead boyfriend. That's where I killed him."

I'm stunned into silence. Holy shit, Jordan was at the apartment, obviously looking for me, and that's where he was shot. I want to puke, I want to cry, I want to run the fuck away and go to see him. Not dead, though, I suppose. I wouldn't want to see that. I would like nothing more than to be back in his arms once more, for things to just be normal.

"You have to stay here," Alexander agrees. "I need to keep my eye on you at all times. You're going nowhere."

They unlock the van and take me inside the house. I expect them to take me to a bedroom to lock me in or something where I can just finally fucking sleep and put this to the back of my mind to never think of it again. But instead, they take me into the living room and Alexander tells me to sit on the couch. I basically have to just sit back and watch the pair of them drink while I'm in this goddamn uncomfortable outfit. I would love nothing more than to get out of it somewhere alone.

"What are we going to do with this one, then?" Katya finally asks as she manages to peel herself away from her boyfriend for just a second. "Because I don't really want

her sitting watching us like that while we hook up. It's creepy as fuck."

"You want me to slice her throat right now?" I snap my eyes over to Alexander to see if he's serious. "I'll do it."

"You think that will go down well?" Katya cocks an eyebrow. "Of course I want her dead, but I don't want you in trouble."

"Well, how about if we just say she ran off and we don't know what happened to her?" Katya runs her fingers through Alexander's hair as if it isn't completely gross and disgusting. "Would that go down better? So you won't get in the shit?"

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“No way. I can’t admit that she got out of my sight. We’ll have to figure it out later. For now, I want you.”

Urgh, they begin kissing once more. I snatch my eyes away and try to keep the sickness inside. They are so disgusting, I want them gone. I really think they might start having sex in front of me in a moment, and I can’t stand it.

“Come on, big boy.” Thankfully, Katya grabs Alexander’s hand and she pulls him from the room. “I need you right now.”

As they go, my heart leaps up into my throat. I lean forward a little bit to see if there is anyone around, but it really does look like they have gone up the stairs. This is a trick, surely. They’re fucking with me right now. This is some kind of trap to see if I’m going to run away once more. The problem is, I really want to. I really need to get the hell away once more. And this time, I need to go and never come back. I need to get away and not get caught because they’ll kill me a second time.

Mind you, if this is a trap, they will kill me as I try to leave. But if I don’t go, then I’ll regret it forever. I have to give it a try. I rise up to my feet, cringing at every noise I make. I feel sick to my stomach as I start to tiptoe ever so slightly toward the door. This is the most anxious that I’ve ever felt in my whole entire life, but it’s also the most pumped and determined I’ve ever felt in my life. I really need to get the hell away from this place. I have to get out of here before I end up dead.

Fuck, keep on going, I think desperately as I creep toward the door. Don’t stop. Think about Jordan.

Even though I don't stand a chance of seeing him again—alive, anyway—I keep him at the forefront of my mind while I creep toward the door. Katya and Alexander are now making so much noise that I don't think they'll be able to hear me, but I still remain quiet. As I edge toward the door handle with a shaking hand, I feel like this is it, the end of my life. Surely, as soon as I swing this open, a whole bunch of alarms will go off and everything will erupt and explode. But that still doesn't stop me. I continue to reach forward, and I open it. Much to my surprise, by some strange coincidence, nothing happens. The door opens and no noise erupts. That leaves me nothing to do other than to run. I take off at the speed of light. I move faster than I've ever gone before, even in this stupid ass outfit with my entire body aching from pain.

As I run, I'm still convinced that someone is going to come after me, that no one is going to let me go, but I keep on moving and no one comes. Maybe I'm dreaming. Perhaps I'm in the middle of some kind of induced nightmare, but I won't let that stop me. I'll keep on going until something changes, one way or another.

25

JORDAN

"I can't go home yet," I suddenly declare to Landon, shocking him nearly as much as I do myself. "I need to go back to the apartment first. Michelle's apartment, because I left some stuff there and it's really important. I have to go."

"What?" Landon stares at me in shock. "What are you talking about? We have to go to your house. That's what Max said."

"I know, but I need to go there. You don't understand, Landon. We have to go right now. I have stuff I need to get."

I need Landon on my side, even if he doesn't know what I'm doing, because the

compulsion to get to that apartment is overwhelming. I don't know what it is, but I have to get there. I don't think I left anything there. I feel like I took everything away already, but I need to get there, to be there. There might be a clue as to what happened to Michelle there, and I need answers. Even if she isn't the person I thought she was, I want to know what happened to her. I need to know. I can't help it.

"But Max said that we weren't to go there," Landon informs me. "He said to keep away because you got shot."

"No one is there now. No one will be there again. They won't make the same mistake twice. Plus, I'll have you with me."

I stare at Landon, keeping my eyes on him even if he's pointedly looking at the road and refusing to see me at all. He doesn't want to look at me because he knows that I'll win. I'll pull him along to my way of thinking, and he'll end up taking me. But that's exactly why I want him to see me because I goddamn well need him to do what I want.

"Landon, I'm going to that apartment at some point whether you come with me or not. I need to get there. I know that Max is worried about me, but I know exactly what I'm doing. I got shot before because I didn't know that anyone was after me, but now I'll be much more aware. You used to be a Navy SEAL too, right? So, you know our training. You know that I can do this."

"I just don't know what's the best thing to do," he admits. "Because I can see that you want this, that you need it, but Max has given me specific instructions... but then, he also praised your intuition, didn't he? So maybe we should do this."

"Please, let's just do this already," I beg. "You don't know how important this is to me. I'm not going to give you any reason to panic. I wouldn't do anything to put us in unnecessary danger. I'm not about that. I just need to get some stuff, that's all."

Believe me, I don't want anything to happen with the Russians either. I just want to have all of this over."

Thank goodness Landon finally gets the hint and asks me for directions to Michelle's apartment. Relief floods me as we take a new road and head the way that I want us to go. I can lean back and relax once more, knowing that everything will be sorted soon. I can be back at that house and finally see everything that I need to... whatever that might be.

"So, is this it?" Landon asks as we pull up outside the building. "This is the place? Michelle's apartment?"

"Yep, this is it." My stomach churns as I see it. I'm immediately put on edge. "I won't be long. Are you coming with me?"

Landon nods and follows me up the stairs without saying anything. I'm sure he's pretty put out by this, but he can't be thinking anything like me. I fear that I might find Michelle inside, with a gun at my head or dead. I don't want to see any of that, but this is my only chance to get to see what's inside. I'm going to have to witness whatever it is.

Finally, I'm at the door and I have to use my key to unlock it. I hear Landon behind me cocking his gun, but I don't turn to see him. I don't want to face him while we're taking on potential danger. If he needs to shoot... well, what can I do?

"Michelle?" I make an idiot of myself by calling out her name as soon as we get inside. I shine a spotlight on me so if she, or any other Russians who might be inside this building, want to kill me off, then they can do it now. "It's me, Jordan."

Nothing. I fucking get nothing back, but that doesn't stop me from continuing to walk in. I step carefully as I go room to room, trying not to disturb anything, not that there

is much to disturb. It's been cleaned up since I was shot, by the look of it, and most things were taken out. If I didn't have the intense memories of me and Michelle in every single inch of this place making the best memories ever, then I would be hard pressed to imagine our ever being here. It's too weird for words.

"Wait." Oh, my God, all of a sudden, at a certain spot in the middle of the kitchen, I stop dead as a memory creeps through me. The one that I've been desperately trying to get my hands on ever since this first happened. The shooting. "Oh, my God."

"What? What is it?" Landon demands. "What the fuck is happening, Jordan? Where is all of your shit?"

"It wasn't Michelle." I sink to the floor in relief. "Oh, my God, Landon, it wasn't Michelle who shot me. It was Kate. The woman who pretended to be an American spy. She tricked me and then she shot me. She wanted me dead."

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:03 am

“What are you talking about?” Landon sounds nervous now, like I might be losing my mind. “Who the hell is Kate?”

“She’s the one who told me all about Michelle’s family.” Oh, no, was that a lie too? Wait, no, didn’t Max find out that some of that was the truth? Holy hell, now I’m really confused. “But it might not have been the truth. I don’t know anymore. She might not have even been American, to be honest. Michelle was great at putting on the accent, and she might have been too.”

“Right... I see. So, we should get out of here now. If there is nothing else for you to do here...”

“No, Landon, we need to find Michelle,” I insist. “If she isn’t the one who shot me, then she’s in trouble somewhere. I have to find her. I need to find out where the Russians took her and what they have done to her. You need to help me.”

“No way.” Landon shakes his head hard. “I’m not going along with that. Max doesn’t trust her, so we can’t do that.”

“It doesn’t matter. Max doesn’t understand what’s going on here. What about my instincts? He trusted me before and would now do the same thing again. He would if he knew about this. I was trusted to take care of her. That was my job, and I can’t just let her die. Has anyone that you have ever been tasked to take care of died? No, and you would hate it.”

“But if I let you go, then you might die. Don’t forget I’m supposed to be in charge of you right now. You can’t do this.”

I won't listen to Landon. I really don't care right now. I know that I came here for a reason, and the reason was to realize that Michelle isn't the bad guy here, but instead, the person who needs saving. I might have been the one who was shot, but she's the one who needs me now. I have to run to her, even if I don't know where I'm going. I have to save her.

I'm in charge of her. Her life is in my hands, but it's also because I'm pretty sure that I'm in love with her. This has all heightened everything and made me realize that I might just love her more than I would normally admit. I love her and want her alive. I want her to survive even if I don't. She is so fucking important to me that I can't not help her.

"I'm not letting you go." Landon grabs onto me hard. "I can't allow you to do this. This is dangerous."

"I know, but sometimes, things are more complicated than that. I need to help Michelle."

"Oh, my God, you love her." Landon's grip loosens just a little bit. "I can see it in your eyes. You love her."

I can't deny this to Landon, not when it's clearly written all over me. He might go back to Max with this information and cause me to lose everything, but I'm over the edge now. I've lost my mind and there's no going back.

"Landon, I need to save Michelle. You don't understand. I have to save her wherever she is. I don't expect you to come with me if you don't want to. I know this is wild and dangerous, and I know Max will kill me, but I have to. I have to."

It takes a couple of moments, but Landon finally relents. Thankfully, he gets what I mean and that there's no turning back from this. He nods and lets me run off from

him. I don't know whether he's coming with me or not, but it doesn't matter.

“Jordan?”

Oh, my God. I really must be losing my fucking mind right now. There is no way that this is happening. I don't know what has caused this crazy vision, but I'm loving it. It's Michelle and she is running toward me.

“Jordan, oh, my God.”

I open my arms wide and wait for her to come racing into them. She slams against me, and I wrap my arms around her to hold her tight. I don't know what's real and what's invented in my head, but holding on to her feels good. So good. This isn't the version of Michelle that I remember so well. She's in the crazy, sexy things the Russians gave her, and she's messy and shaking, crying. This is a weird version of the happy reunion that I would like, but it feels nice.

“Holy shit, what the hell is happening here?” Landon snaps, breaking the magic of the moment. “Is that her?”

I pull back to stare at my brand-new friend, wondering what this means. If he can see Michelle too, then maybe this is really happening. That's insane. Somehow, fate has dragged us both away from danger and back together once more.

“This is Michelle.” I show her to Landon. “She's here. We don't need to go anywhere. She's here and safe.”

“Is anyone following you?” Landon glances behind her. “Should we be worried about this?”

“I don't know. I ran away. I don't think anyone is chasing me, though. But I don't

think we should stay here long because this is the first place they might come looking for me, if that's what they want."

"Then why the hell did you come here?" Landon snaps. "Why didn't you go anywhere else?"

"Because I needed to find Jordan. I needed to be back with him. I can't be without him."

We lock eyes, and I feel the love surging between us, the feelings that we share but haven't yet found a way to vocalize. But hopefully, at some point, we will. If we get out of this alive, that is...

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MICHELLE

I'm dead, I have to be, I try to remind myself as some guy takes us to Jordan's home and hopefully away from where anyone can find us. Although I suppose I might not be dead, that might well be a bit extreme. I could just be sleeping or knocked out. All I know for sure is that this can't be real because Katya shot Jordan. She killed him and is after Max next.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:03 am

“What’s happening here?” I murmur as I sidle in closer to Jordan. My God, he still smells as wonderful as he always did. My imagination is pretty wonderful when it comes to bringing up the only man I’ve ever truly cared about. “This is magic.”

“We’ll talk when we get back to my place.” Jordan’s voice is stiff, but his touch is soft and caring. Just as it was when he insisted on checking me over for tracking devices instead of Landon. “Then we can clear the air about everything.”

Even if I’m dead or just in my happy place to escape Alexander and Katya, at least I’m with Jordan. Everything feels absolutely wonderful because I’m with him. I honestly don’t feel like anything could harm me right now. I even feel comfortable enough to allow my eyes to slide closed and the weariness to overcome me for a little while. My brain is exhausted, my body even more so. I need to just shut down for a little while, even if I don’t really want to miss a moment with Jordan.

“I still don’t know about this,” the other man, I think Jordan called him Landon, declares I guess the moment he thinks I’ve crashed out. “I know your memory says differently, but everyone thinks Michelle shot you. Are you sure you can trust her?”

I stiffen because I know this answer means everything. Max’s not trusting me makes sense because even with our bond, the way that Alexander and Katya can manipulate things is ridiculous. But Jordan should know me on a different level. If he thinks that after everything we went through, I would pull a trigger and try to kill him, then everything will shift in a bad way.

“I trust her.” Jordan pulls me a little closer. “I know it was Kate who shot me. Michelle is a victim in this.”

Urgh, 'Kate' got to Jordan with her bullshit lies. I absolutely hate her and would love nothing more than to never see that bitch again. I don't want to see any of them for the rest of my life, and not just because I'll end up dead. I was swimming along, thinking that my life was amazing and everything was going to be just fine. I should have known that Alexander wouldn't allow that to happen. Just as he isn't going to like the way that I walked out on them so easily. My God, they will be fuming. And all because they couldn't keep their hands off one another for a few moments to make a plan...

"Michelle." I must have actually fallen asleep by accident because soon, Jordan is shaking me awake. "We're here."

I'm bleary-eyed and a little confused as I stagger out of the car, but Jordan holds my hand and leads me inside. Landon comes with us, but I feel now like he might be trying to blend into the background rather than intimidate me. Poor guy, he probably has no real idea what he's walked into here. It's a shit show and he should run now if he can...

"I'm going to make some coffees," Landon declares tactfully once we get inside. "So, I'm here if you need me, but I feel like you guys might be needing a private conversation on your own. There's clearly a lot to sort out here."

"Thank you." Jordan pats him on the shoulder. "We'll be fine in here. But I appreciate it." As soon as Landon is gone, he turns to me. "Landon is my protection at the moment. Max is really worried because I got shot. But I'm okay, as you can see."

"You survived the shooting. I'm so happy." Tears erupt from my eyes, but this time they are happy ones. "Katya told me that she killed you, and I really felt like it was the end of my life. I never wanted anything bad to happen to you."

“Katya is Kate?” I nod. “Right, I see. So, she was lying about everything that she told me... or some of it, anyway.”

He gives me a pointed look which makes me anxious. I haven't exactly spilled the beans about everything, even to Max. I didn't want to make this a more dangerous situation than it already was, but now my days of locking myself away seem to be over. I hang my head low and suck in a few deep breaths, trying to prepare myself for what comes next. To be truthful, finally.

“I don't know exactly what she told you, but I'll tell you everything now. I wasn't keeping things from you on purpose.”

“That doesn't matter.” His arms fold defensively across his chest. “You need to be honest with me now. It's hard enough to protect someone, but when you're trying to do it without all the information, it becomes impossible. A lot of what happened here could have been avoided if we knew everything. I wouldn't have been distracted so you couldn't have been taken.”

There's a kindness to his tone even if he is being a bit firm with me, and to be honest, I do understand. I'm to blame for a lot of what went down because I kept parts of my life away. But just because they are in Russia, it doesn't mean they can't get me here. If the last couple of days have taught me anything, it's that. I need to find a way to be honest at last.

“My father works for the Russian government. I don't know if you are aware of that yet?” He doesn't look shocked, so Katya has obviously worked that one in. I bet she made it sound really bad on my behalf, too. Fucking hell, this is why you don't let other people control your narrative. I get that now. “Well, he worked hard and eventually moved his way up through the ranks. Only, he wasn't happy. He discovered corruption in certain departments, which doesn't work with his morals at all. He has strong beliefs in the way that things should be done, and that involves

following the rules at all times.”

I can't look at Jordan. This is all dragging up so many painful memories, I can hardly breathe under the pressure of them. I take a few moments to gather myself, during which time Landon brings in coffees but makes his escape from the thick tension just as rapidly. I don't blame him. I wouldn't mind making an escape either if I could.

“So, my father tried to sort things out,” I eventually continue. “He attempted to get things on the right path but couldn't do it. No one would listen to him, so then he made the mistake of threatening to expose the corruption, which is when... which is when...” My God, I can hardly breathe. This is agonizing. “Which is when my mother died. They killed her, I'm sure of it.”

“Oh, no. I'm so sorry.” Jordan slides closer to me and rests his hand reassuringly on my back. “That's horrible. I can't even begin to imagine what that must have been like for you. For that to happen because your dad wanted to do the right thing...”

“Well, it wasn't enough,” I growl back. “It wasn't enough of a punishment, apparently. They didn't think that would make him step in line, so they turned their attention to me and my brother instead. They forced my brother into a dangerous military position, so we don't even know whether he's still alive or not. He's been out of contact for years, and they brought me into the spy business. My father tried to stop it because he knew that would be dangerous and would send me to America, but he had lost all his power by that point. Now, he's just a figurehead, basically, who has to do what is told of him.”

I break down because it's so much to take in, and Jordan envelopes me in his arms. At least I have this reminder that I'm not alone anymore. That's all my father asked for me when he knew that I was being sent away. He wanted me to escape and to find happiness because he hates the idea that he's ruined my life. I still want to do that for him. I want nothing more than to be able to make my dad proud and to see that he

didn't do the wrong thing, even if it'll always feel like it.

He might never get to see me living my new life, but I have a feeling that deep down, he'll sense it. He'll know. I'm the last one of us who has a chance, unless my brother somehow escapes the military, but I don't know if that's even possible, so I have to do it for everyone. I owe it to all of them to at least give life a try, don't I? Especially if Jordan wants me.

"Oh!" I suddenly remember another awful part of what happened in Russia. "There was also a weird wedding ceremony in Russia a little while before I came here. They staged a ceremony between me and a Russian noble who's well known for being abusive and a playboy. No paperwork was signed, so nothing could be legitimate. It was just to show Dad that they can do anything and he has no control over his family anymore. It was utter bullshit. I got away before anything could happen between me and that gross man. It was all just a sham that didn't matter anyway." I shudder. "But it was awful."

"That sounds awful," he concedes. "And messy too. But how did you manage to get away this time around?"

"I was sent to do a job, to seduce a man and steal some documents. Luckily, no seduction needed to take place and I didn't even take all the right documents." God, that was a risk, but a good one, I believe. "I took enough for Alexander to believe that I'd done it, but I left all the really sensitive information behind. Alexander and Katya... I think because they kept threatening to have my father killed, they thought that I wouldn't try anything. They got sloppy, and I ran. But they might come after me and my dad... he really could be in danger, too." Everything tightens inside me. I haven't really considered what might have happened to my father until now, but it hurts. He wants to protect me, and I want to protect him right back, but it's so challenging from other ends of the fucking world. "I don't know what's going to happen next, and I'm really scared, Jordan."

“We need to see Max,” he replies defiantly. “Max will know what to do. He’ll fix everything that he can. You know what he’s like, a freaking expert in all this stuff. I’ll call Landon now and I’ll get us to the office. We can figure things out from there.”

I’m nervous as all hell. But then I have a lot of reasons to be anxious right now, a lot of lives on the line. But I’m ready to take action to do whatever needs to be done. I didn’t risk everything just to fall at the first hurdle now. I need to pick myself up and keep on fighting until the very end... whatever that might be.

JORDAN

“Have you heard any news yet?” Michelle asks me as she slides closer to me on the couch. “Has Max been in touch?”

My cellphone is about the only thing connecting us to the outside world from the safehouse we’re existing in for the time being to keep us away from the dangers the rest of the world holds. I love this place. It’s honestly the loveliest, most remote place in the world, and I could live here forever with Michelle. I was nervous at first. I didn’t know what it would be like, but this is perfect. It’s made us so much closer and so much happier with one another. After everything we’ve suffered, we need this.

“Not yet, no. I’ll let you know as soon as I do. He and Landon are working day and night, though. The rest of them too.”

“It must be hard.” Michelle pouts out her bottom lip. “I feel bad, to be honest. Knowing that some of them are trying to help get my father out of his horrible situation, some are trying to locate my brother, and others are sorting out the mess Alexander and Katya are trying to create in this country. It’s a nightmare, I’m sure. I feel bad hiding out here away from it all.”

“That’s all we can do,” I remind her. “I don’t like it either. I’m much more used to being smack bang in the middle of the action, but we’ll be making it more dangerous if we don’t hide out. Plus, between us, we’ve paid Max enough for this work.”

“I didnotwant you to sell your house to help me out,” she argues, yet again as if this isn’t something we’ve covered a million times. “It makes me very uncomfortable that

you don't have anywhere to go back to. I don't like it.”

I can't stop a giant smile from spreading across my face. Selling my home for Michelle was the easiest decision I've ever had to make. I didn't even think twice. Max didn't need it to happen either. He wasn't pushing for it or anything, but I just knew that I wanted to play my part. I don't need a home in a city far away when I have Michelle. I prefer to keep her safe. Plus, I have plenty of cash in the bank from my Navy SEALs career, so I'll be able to start over again when the time comes.

“I want to try and make sure that your whole family is safe. This isn't just about us anymore. We have to try, don't you think?” I hold her tightly. “From what you've told me, your father has been through enough. He's lost everything just because he tried to do the right thing. A man like that doesn't deserve to be tortured anymore. This is the right thing to do.”

Michelle cups my cheeks and pulls me in for a sweet kiss. “You are a good man, Jordan Miller.”

I know that all this waiting is hard on her, though, not the remote location away from the rest of the world—she loves that part—but the not knowing when it comes to the people in her life. I can try and distract her as much as I like, but it isn't going to change that. I can't take the worry away from her. Until I get updates from Max, we're in limbo.

“Did you want to take a little walk?” I ask her while pointing to the endless fields behind our little home. “Get some fresh air?”

In the city, the idea of being outside used to scare the living shit out of her, but here, she loves it. There aren't any other people for absolutely miles, which means we can walk about freely and enjoy nature in a calm and collected way without the worry of anyone even saying hello to us. At this point, where we now know that we were

watched from afar and we didn't notice it, we're wary of anyone, so this is perfect. Michelle nods happily and agrees that a walk is what we both need.

“Yes, I could definitely use some fresh air. I think being stuck inside just waiting is starting to drive me crazy.”

There is such an ease between us as I take Michelle's hand and lead her outside. Being together these days is as natural as breathing. There isn't a scrap of uncertainty between us at all. We know one another better now, we understand each other, so the feelings continue to grow. The fiery passion also remains, intensifying every day, which only makes this a million times better. If I'd known that this was what a relationship could feel like, then I wouldn't have put it off for as long as I did.

Then again, maybe that all happened for a reason. I had to wait so that I could eventually find Michelle.

“I think I could live in the countryside, you know,” she murmurs happily as the sun washes all over her gorgeous skin. The honey tones are back in her hair now. She's sliding back into being a blonde, which is assisted by the sunshine, but it doesn't matter so much anymore. Hiding her appearance never changed things anyway, so it's better for her to be herself.

“Maybe that's something you should think about once all of this is over,” I reply idly. Right now, while we're here in this glorious moment surrounded by greenery and only the sound of the birds chirping, I could live this life too. “You can do whatever you want then, can't you? You can finally reinvent your life in whatever way you see fit. Whatever makes you happy.”

I know she hasn't had much chance to put her own happiness first before, which makes me want it for her even more. Michelle Lebedev deserves that sort of happiness more than anyone I've ever met in my life.

“That was your phone.” I was so distracted, looking into her eyes and considering her happiness, that I didn’t hear the one thing we’re waiting for, the thing it feels like we have been listening out for forever. “Oh, my God, that might be an update.”

All the color drains from her cheeks as I pull my phone out. I’m shaking too, wondering what this will be. Michelle needs some good news now, and I know I won’t get any wishy washy details from Max to confuse us. He’ll only let us know when things are finalized and sorted out one way or another. I can barely stand to look at what’s written in front of me.

“Oh, God.” Relief floods me. This is one part of things solved and it’s good news. “Alexander and Katya, plus two other accomplices which they have been working with, have been arrested. They are currently locked up in jail.”

Michelle’s face relaxes and she nods happily before everything tenses up again. I suppose that reaction makes sense. It’s good news for her, but it doesn’t give her any news on her family yet. I guess we’ll have to wait some more for that.

“Good, they deserve to be locked up. And is everything okay for Buck? I mean, with the documents they found on them.”

“They didn’t have anything useful, Max says, but they had enough to get arrested. Buck should be fine.”

Poor old disgusting Buck. Urgh, that story made me feel a bit sick as Michelle told it to me, but it soon died down into a sad tale of two people who were in situations they couldn’t control. I get why Michelle is worried about the poor guy.

“Oh, wait, something else is coming through...” It takes a couple of moments before the next message arrives. It’s about Michelle’s father and is a lot to scroll through. From the corner of my eye, I can see Michelle trembling the whole time. “Okay.” Oh,

God, this isn't going to be received quite so well.

“They have met with your father and tried to discuss plans with him, but he has resisted leaving. He doesn't want to create more drama than he already has, so he's content to stay where he is as long as he knows that you are safe and happy. It's been communicated with him that you are. Now, he only wants to stay in touch with anyone related to Max's company to hear about his son when they get news. He wants his children to be safe.”

“I see.” Michelle sags forward slightly. “You know, I kinda expected this outcome, to be honest. I didn't think it would be easy for him to walk away from his position, considering how under stress and surveillance he is all the time, but still...” She sighs loudly. “It's sad, but I do know that all he wants is for his kids to be happy. I guess that's all we can do.”

“Are... are you sure?” I stammer back. “Because I can get them to fight harder if that's what you want.”

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:03 am

“No, this is his decision and I have to respect that. I think it’s all he can do, anyway. I appreciate that.”

I hold her against my chest, anyway, understanding this must be a real challenge for her. It’s a shame for things not to work out as she wanted, but I guess we can’t always get what we want out of life. We have to just make the best of what we do get.

“Has there been any news about my brother yet?” She pulls back to look at me. “It’s okay if there isn’t...”

“Not yet, but I’m sure there will be soon.” I have to admit that makes me nervous. I would have thought he’d be the easiest one to track down of them all. “Let’s carry on walking for a moment, shall we? See what happens.”

“Wait.” Michelle pulls on my hand and keeps me in place. “I have something to say to you first.” Something about the seriousness of her tone halts me in place. “I’ve wanted to say it for a while and I don’t really know why I haven’t yet. But Jordan, I love you.” She lets out a little giggle as that flies free. “Wow, it feels good to finally say that aloud. I love you, Jordan Miller. You have been a wonderful person to me through all of this, and it’s made me fall head over heels for you.”

“You do?” Oh, my God, that makes me feel amazing. “Because I’ve been holding back from telling you that I love you too. I don’t know why I haven’t said it aside from not wanting to freak you out or add on more pressure. But I do. I love you.”

We lock eyes for a few moments and just stare at one another, just relishing in this brand-new love for one another. It’s freeing to hear the words, to know that we’re

both in the same boat.

There is nothing left to worry about now, nothing left holding us back. I mean, the situation is still around us, but for me and Michelle, we have found a place where we can finally be happy. Happy and in love at long last. That overshadows everything else for the moment. That's all we need in this moment. With one another, we can survive anything.

“Come here. I need to kiss you.” I laugh. “I love you so much, Michelle Lebedev.”

Her lips crash to mine, and we lose one another in the most intense kiss I think we've ever shared. The future has always been a little bit on edge for the pair of us. We've never quite known what will happen next, but with love, at least I can be sure that we will navigate it together.

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MICHELLE

The kiss deepens and my heart begins to pound. All of a sudden, the atmosphere amps up about ten levels as Jordan's hands hook around my waist, resting just above my ass, making me wish that his fingers would edge that little bit lower down. I know we're out in public, in the middle of a field, but it doesn't really feel that way. There's never anyone around. Being here is like living on my own little island, so why can't the passion grip onto us? Why can't we have fun and celebrate the good news that we've had today? Sure, not everything has worked out exactly as I would want it to, but it's positive. It's good.

“Mmm, you're being a bit cheeky now, aren't you?” he mutters as I nibble on his lower lip. “I like this side of you.”

“Well, I thought that you and I could have some fun.” I shoot him a wink. “Since we’re in our own little world here.”

He glances around, confirming what I already knew, that there isn’t anyone around. As soon as he spots this, a dirty twinkle glints in his eyes, and I know that he’s in. I hook my hand around the back of his neck and drag him back to me so we can kiss some more. This time, as his tongue snakes between my lips, fireworks explode because I know it’s headed somewhere. Somewhere electric. I tug him and pull him back with me until I hit a tree behind me, which is what I’m aiming for. Although I’m expecting this to happen, it still knocks the wind right out of me. I’m left breathless and gasping, needy for more.

“Are you okay?” Jordan asks me in between kisses, but what I love best about this is the fact that he can’t bear to be separated from me long enough to really check in on me. He’s on fire and I love it. “You’re not hurt?”

“I’m fine.” My head lolls to the side as desire grips me. Jordan’s mouth travels down my throat and over my collarbone. Electrical bolts of desire rocket all the way through me as he does. “Better than fine, actually. I’m incredible.”

His fingers edge the underneath of my skirt and slowly upward to where I’m throbbing for him, aching to be touched. I’m not messing around. I need him now, so I press my foot to the trunk of the tree and part my thighs for him. Jordan’s gorgeously velvety fingers massage me on the outside of my panties, brushing the lace over my already hypersensitive clit until it’s buzzing so ferociously I can’t take it anymore. I arch my back and roll my hips toward him while begging him for more.

“Oh, shit.” The lace is tugged to one side in a heartbeat. The fingers I ache for plunge inside me. Jordan explores me deeply until I have absolutely no control over the sounds rumbling in my throat. I’m a fucking mess already, and I need more.

“Fuck, Jordan.” I grab him and kiss him hard, allowing my deep passion to shine through as he brushes his thumb over my clit with every single thrust of his hand. The heat of the sunshine, combined with all the nature surrounding us, constantly reminds us that this is taboo and risky. Even if we have very little chance of really getting caught, it intensifies everything. The sensations currently careering through my body are as powerful as a storm cloud, dragging me deep into pleasure.

I can't stop it from coming. There's no way I can stop the orgasm from gripping on to me and driving me insane. It hits me hard and fast. It slams into me from every angle and leaves me screaming and breathless all at once. It's a tsunami of burning hot bliss which I want to keep rolling over me in waves forever. I'm seeing fucking stars, it feels so good...

“Jordan, oh, my God.” I grab onto him as the pleasure stops fizzing quite so powerfully. At the moment, I can grip onto my thoughts for long enough to take control. I delight in holding his thick, muscular shoulders in my hands and spinning him back to push him up against the tree. His eyes pop open in surprise, but he doesn't fight this. He knows he'll like what's next...

“Michelle, you really are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen,” he murmurs with his gaze half-lidded and his hands knotting themselves up in my hair. “I thought that from the very first time I laid eyes on you, that you are a goddess.”

“But you didn't like me then,” I remind him as I playfully nip the exposed skin on his throat. “Don't you remember?”

“I didn't have to like you or trust you to think that you were mind-blowingly sexy. The danger came when I realized that you were a nice person too. That's when I was hopeless for you and I began to fall in love with you.”

Love. A part of me can't believe that it's taken us this long to get our feelings out

there, but another bit of me is shocked that the moment is upon us. I love him and he loves me. What a crazy outcome from all of this.

With a playful smile on my lips and my eyes locked on his, I drop to my knees in front of him. Jordan gasps and mutters something, but I'm far too caught up in the moment to pick any of his words up. Not that it matters. I can get the gist of it. He wants me badly, nearly as much as I need him, and he can't wait to be inside me. I know Jordan well enough now to know exactly what he's thinking without his having to say a damn thing. Especially when it comes to our sex life.

I take my time unzipping his trousers, teasing him by running my fingers along his thick, throbbing cock. The moans of pleasure rocket from him. It seems like Jordan is on the edge already, which only thrills me even more. His eyes fix intently on me as I slide his trousers down ever so slightly and drag his erection from its material prison. He's no longer concerned whether anyone is out there looking in on us. He's centered in on me and what's going to happen next.

Slowly, delicately, I stroke his length, watching intently as his face contorts in pleasure. Every pump of my fist excites him, as does my breath tickling him the nearer I move my head. Any minute now, my lips will connect with him in the way that I just know he loves, and Jordan can barely stand it. There's a deep tremor racing through his body already. He's on fire.

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“Oh, Michelle,” he grunts as I finally grace him with a little kiss. Just a tiny one at his tip, but I make sure to dart my tongue out to set the flames blazing. “Fucking hell, Michelle, you have no idea what you’re doing to me right now.”

I kiss some more, up and down his length, every so often darting out my tongue to lick over him. As always, he tastes fuckingdelicious. Masculine, sweet, salty, like the man I want to spend the rest of my life with. As much as I continually want to tease him, I need to taste more. I yearn to have him deep within my lips, fucking my throat, so I part my lips and take him all the way in.

“Oh, fuck,” Jordan groans as his thighs stiffen with bliss. I’m pretty sure his toes are curling already. “Oh, my God, Michelle.”

I bob my head up and down, swirling my tongue around him as I do, delighting in every scrap of him that I can taste. He moans and grunts, and there are times when he calls out my name over and over again, which only causes more of a burning between my thighs. He might have already sated me, but it isn’t enough. It’s never enough with Jordan. He basically turns me into an animal. No matter what he gives me, I always need so much more, and that’s the same right here.

“I need you,” I gasp as I yank my mouth away from him. Jordan is bleary-eyed and clearly shocked, which makes me feel bad. He was probably close to the edge then, and I fucked things up, but I can’t help myself. I need him right now. “Fuck me, Jordan.”

Thankfully, he’s a well-trained man who doesn’t need to be asked twice. He positions me facing up against the tree so I can splay my palms over it and use it as something

to grip onto if I need to while he stands behind me and shoves my panties to one side once more so I can feel him teasing my entrance. He wants me, but he loves driving me insane first.

I slam back against him, taking him all the way inside, and straight away, I find myself yelling with pleasure all over again. Each thrust is more powerful and overwhelming than the last one, which has us both screaming out with bliss in moments. My knees knock together, and it's damn near impossible to keep myself up this time around, the orgasm is so intense, but somehow, I just about manage it and I'm quite convinced it might have something to do with that special L word floating around today.

He loves me, I tell myself excitedly as we crash to the grass in a heap, spent and exhausted but happy too. Jordan Miller loves me and I love him too. Once upon a time, he pretended to be my husband. One day, he might be for real...

"It really is pretty beautiful here, isn't it?" Jordan muses once he gets his breath back to talk. "I would love to live here."

I turn to face him, relishing in cuddling up beside him and knowing that he's mine. "What about your life in the city, though?"

"Well, I don't exactly have a home there anymore, do I?" he teases, even though he knows I hate that he went that far for me. It makes me nervous to know that he gave up so much. "And I already told you I wouldn't do the job if I had someone I loved..."

I pull my head up to stare at him because I really need to know what he means here. "So, what are you saying?"

He shrugs one shoulder. "I'm saying we can do whatever you want to from here. We

can go and be wherever you want after all of this is over. You probably don't want to be back there with all of those bad memories, anyway, so why don't we start again somewhere? Build a new life together where it can just be me and you, and no one will know where to look for us?"

I have to admit that the idea of hiding away somewhere in America is all too appealing for me. Even with Alexander and the others gone, I'll never know if it's really over until I'm somewhere I can feel safe. Jordan is so wonderful that he's willing to come with me. Of course he is since he's the best person I've ever met in my life.

"So, we're going to have an adventure?" I ask him excitedly. "Me and you against the world?"

"I love the sound of that, don't you? Who knows what will happen? But we can guarantee that it's going to be better than what we've been through before. Without anyone after us, we can live out whatever dream we want."

Well, now my brain is spinning with excitement and ideas are coming to me hard and fast. How perfect does that sound? It's even better than the American dream which I came here to chase. It's everything to me.

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JORDAN

Three Months Later...

Ring, ring... Ring, ring... Ring, ring...

It's been such a long time since my old work cellphone rang that I almost don't

recognize it when it blasts through my brand-new home. I've been keeping the battery charged for obvious reasons, because not all the loose ends are tied up yet, but I wasn't expecting to hear from anyone today. It makes me a little anxious, actually, because I don't know what to expect.

"Hi, Max." I cough awkwardly, trying to clear my throat, but I'm sure he knows the nerves are there. "How are you?"

"I'm good, Jordan," he replies in a tone so warm and friendly it allows me to relax just a little bit. "Things are busy here, as always. There is always so much going on, you know how it is. But it's good. How are you and Michelle?"

I can't believe how well he took our being together. I really thought that I was in for a real shit show, but it didn't happen. Aside from the fact that I promised Michelle I wouldn't do the work anymore, Max is the boss I would work for forever.

"We're good. Michelle is at work at the moment. She loves the office job she has now, so she's doing well."

She's made so many friends at her new place, more than she did during her one day at the previous office with Sally, and she's excelling in her work. I've never seen Michelle so happy. She adores our small-town home, too. We get the best of both worlds, the countryside but surrounded by people too. We aren't in a place as remote as our safehouse. It's perfect.

"Good, I'm glad to hear it. And your job is good too? I bet it's a change, security for a finance company."

"It's not as exciting, I'll admit that." I laugh. "But it's much less life-threatening. I haven't been shot yet."

“Well, that’s always good. It’s nice to hear you’re both in a good place, that’s for sure. But there is something I want to talk to you about, which I guess you’ve already picked up on by now. We located Michelle’s brother at last.”

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My blood runs cold. I expect the worst. I don't know how Michelle will take bad news. I've attempted to broach the subject with her just in case she does find out that he's no longer alive, but she hasn't wanted to think about it. She doesn't want to give up hope. If that's shattered today, I can't even begin to imagine how she'll take it. It won't be good, though.

"He's fine," Max finally confirms happily, making my head spin with the news. I didn't dare to dream this was possible, but it is. "Still in the military, in secret divisions, which is why it's taken us such a long time to find him, but he's doing well. Really well, actually. He might have been forced into that job, but he's worked hard and earned respect. He is very happy where he is."

"Oh, wow." I sink into the couch and rake my fingers through my hair. "That's amazing, Max. I don't know what to say..."

"It's good, it's all fantastic news, isn't it? After such a shitty time you've had, it's nice for you to get some positivity."

"It is. This is just... it's incredible. I can't wait for Michelle to come back so I can tell her. She'll be so pleased."

"Unfortunately, I can't get communication to him from Michelle because of his position, for the time being."

"She'll understand that, don't you worry. Thank you so much for this, Max. You have no idea what it means."

For me and Michelle, this is the last puzzle piece, the one thing that we have been waiting on ever since we started trying to find our new life. With this closure and a positive outcome, I just know that we can put the past behind us properly at long last and begin looking toward the future. It's something that we've been talking about and wanting to happen for a while now, but this is the moment we can really do it. We can start looking toward everything that we've wanted at last.

"I'll keep in touch with you, Jordan," Max promises me. "I can't call you all the time, you know how busy life gets, but I'll talk to you as and when I can. I want to know how things are going with you. We might have only worked directly together for a short while, but I care about you. Both of you. I want to know that the pair of you are okay. And if you ever need anything..."

"Same." I'm a little choked up, to be honest, but I need Max to know that the sentiment goes both ways. "Definitely."

We talk for a little while longer, but at the time I hang up the phone, it feels like the end of an era has hit. That whole area of my life is long gone, behind me at last, which means certain things that I've been planning have finally arrived. It's time, at long last, for me to seal the bond between us at last. It might seem soon for us to be considering such a serious future from an outsider's perspective, but for me and Michelle, it feels like we have been holding off forever. It's time. At last.

I set about putting my plan into action right away, not wanting to hold off for another second longer. Everything is ready already. I can do it all myself... well, mostly. But luckily, I have a good friend at work, Dennis Walker, who knows I might need him at the drop of a hat, so I put in a call to him and tell him it's time at last. Things are rolling in the right direction...

She's here. My heart skips a beat as I hear the door clicking open. Michelle is back from work at long last, and she has no idea what will face her. Excitement blooms in

my chest as I just know how much she's going to love this. It'll be amazing.

"Honey, I'm hooome," she calls out in a teasing sing-song tone of voice. "Oh, my goodness, what a day..."

Her words trail off as she takes a look around at the room which is all decorated with hearts, rose petals, and flowers everywhere. Sweet music plays softly, and she drinks me in wearing my finest suit. She's stunned to the core.

"Michelle, I have some good news." I step closer to her with a small smile playing on my lips. "Some great news, actually. Max has found your brother, alive and well, really loving his life in the military. Everything is good there."

"It is?" Happy tears fill her eyes. "Oh, my God, I was starting to think that we would never find out about him. That's incredible. So, he's okay in the military? He doesn't want to leave or anything like that? He doesn't need to be rescued?"

"Not at all. He's really happy." I feel my own eyes well up too. "He's really enjoying what he's doing."

"Oh, wow." She clings to me. I hold her tightly so she doesn't stumble and fall. This has taken the wind out of her sails, but in a good way. Relief is flooding her completely. This has been plaguing her for far too long. "That's awesome, Jordan. Thank you so much. I would never have found that out if it weren't for you. You pushed Max and got the truth for me."

She leans into me, and I hold her tightly. We bask in this moment for a little while, enjoying this win. It feels incredible to have this wonderful news surging between us and pushing us forward into the future that we have always wanted.

"Did you do all of this to celebrate my brother?" Michelle asks. "Because this is

incredible. It's a lot, though..."

"Well, we do need to celebrate that because it's the last puzzle piece, isn't it? You might not be able to see your father and brother at the moment, but finally, you know that they are okay. Alexander and his circle of spies won't be getting out of jail anytime soon, and your family are doing just fine. This is a brilliant day for us, don't you think? One of the best ever."

"It's the first step for properly putting everything behind us, I suppose." She nods and giggles. "My God, I never thought that this day would come. I can't quite wrap my head around it at the moment. I can't process it yet."

I step back and give her a little break so she can catch her breath before we turn our attention to the next topic.

"Are you okay?" I hold onto her shoulders as I check in on her. "Do you need a drink or anything like that?"

She nods eagerly, so I hand her a glass of water and wait while she glugs it down. As soon as the glass hits the table, I take the moment to drop down onto one knee and hold up the ring box for her to see. Again, Michelle gasps, and she claps her hand to her mouth as if she can't quite believe it. Her eyes almost pop out of her head in shock.

"What is this?" she gushes as her eyes run over my face. "Oh, my God, is this what I think it is?"

"Michelle Lebedev, I love you," I begin, my voice already getting choked up with emotion. "I've loved you for a very long time. You have changed my life in every way possible and made it so much better. I didn't know how happy I could be until I met you." She's tearing up now, and I might well be too. "You have inspired me and

made my life incredible. I don't ever want this to end. I want our love to last a lifetime, starting today, so what I'm really asking is will you marry me?"

"You want me to be your wife?" she stammers, hardly able to talk in her shock. "Are you serious?"

"Of course I do. I would love nothing more than to be your husband. This love... it's unlike anything I've ever experienced before, and I want this to be my reality for the rest of my life. I'm hoping that you might want that too."

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“I do.” She leans down onto her knees too and grabs my face to kiss me. “Oh, my God, I do. I would love nothing more than to be Michelle Miller for real, this time around. I can’t believe you want me to be your wife. I’m so happy.”

I slide the ring on her finger and lift her upward. “Actually, I have something to show you, if you’d like.”

She cocks an eyebrow at me. “Oh, my goodness, you have more surprises? I don’t know if I can take it.”

I take her hand, admiring the ring on her finger and loving how it feels to have it there as I lead her toward the back yard. There we find Daniel, who’s ordained and standing under the archway waiting for us to be wed, and Michelle’s friends are sitting around to witness this day in what looks like the sweetest wedding scene ever. We don’t need a big, fancy day. We just need one another and everyone that we love. I think this is going to be perfect... at least I hope so.

“Oh, wow.” Michelle looks blown away. “Oh, wow, we’re getting married now? This is amazing.”

“Are you happy?” I have to check because if she doesn’t want this, then I’ll halt it now. “Is this okay?”

“I love it. This is wonderful, Jordan, the best wedding I could have ever asked for.”

EPILOGUE

MICHELLE

I'm stunned to the core. I can hardly believe what I'm looking at. This is wonderful, much more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. The fact that it's in our back yard only makes it even more incredible. And knowing that Jordan planned this for me all on his own, with my friends in on the secret but not quite telling me about it... which is incredible for them. They are usually such gossips who can't ever manage to keep their mouths shut, but they did this just for me.

"This is so romantic." I grab Jordan and kiss him softly on the lips, my heart fluttering as I do so. "I might not have ever been the girl who sat around dreaming about her wedding, but if I ever was, then this is exactly what I would have imagined."

Other women might want thousands of family members surrounding them, and of course, I would love to have my people here if that were possible, but I can feel them, all of them. I can sense them with me, supporting me at all times. My mother's spirit, watching over me and wishing me well, my father sensing that I'm happy at last, and my brother too.

My God, my brother is alive and I'm getting married. What sort of day is this? It's absolutely incredible.

"Actually, just before we walk down the aisle, there's something that I want to tell you." I tug on his arm and keep it with me for a moment. "I came home with some news of my own, but you kinda overshadowed me with all of this."

"Oh, no, I'm sorry." He looks horrified, as if this beautiful evening he has set up for us is a bad distraction rather than the best thing in the world for me. "I didn't mean to."

I just thought that this would be nice... I didn't mean to overshadow..."

"Don't be silly." I giggle, stopping him before he gets too far. I didn't mean for him to panic like that. "No, this is just more good news to add to the day of incredible news. I can't wait to tell you. This is really exciting." I grab onto Jordan's hands tighter, almost bursting with the thrill of this. "I just want to tell you this before we say our vows and everything."

"You're killing me here." He's shaking with the nerves that I have shooting through his body. "What's going on?"

I take his hand and press it to my stomach. "I found out today that I'm having a baby. Our baby. We're going to be parents."

They say that things come in threes, and this is proof of that. But these are the three bits of best news that I've ever heard in my life. It feels like it's all come together in the most incredible way possible, proving that despite everything, we're meant to be together and happy. We're supposed to move forward with this relationship and be together forever.

No one has ever made me as happy as Jordan Miller, and I know no one ever will. There isn't another man like him on the planet. He truly is one of a kind. I couldn't do this journey called life without him, and I wouldn't want to.

"You're... you're pregnant?" Jordan is pale as anything, clearly very shocked by this news, but he's happy too. "We're having a baby? Oh, my God, that's so awesome, Michelle. That's the best news ever. We're having a freaking baby. This is just... it's the best news ever. I'll admit that you've knocked me off my feet, but in the best way ever."

He picks me up and spins me around, cheering the whole time. We might not have

been actively trying for a baby, but we've also discussed that we would be more than happy for it to happen, and now it has. I barely even noticed that it might be possible, aside from a little bit of nausea hitting mostly in the mornings, until I suddenly noticed how late I am.

My God, when I was in the work bathroom with my friends, taking that pregnancy test at lunchtime, I didn't think it was going to be my wedding day. Good thing I'm dressed up nicely, huh? Good thing I'm more than ready for this. It's almost as if fate has me right where I need to be. I fucking love destiny for bringing me here to this beautiful moment.

"You're going to be the best mom ever," he tells me happily. "I'll try my best, but you... wow, I'm lucky to have you."

I grab him and kiss him. "You're going to be the perfect father too. I wouldn't have a baby with you otherwise."

We're both all choked up and emotional. I don't know if we're going to be able to get through this in a moment. We might both end up weeping with happiness and emotion. I need to try and get us moving before we fall apart completely.

"So, do you want us to get married, then?" I chuckle. "Since you've set all of this up? It seems like the perfect time for us to celebrate absolutely everything, don't you think? Especially since my friends are here and ready for it."

"You wait here. I'll go to the end of the aisle so you can walk up to me. Let's do that bit right."

He half runs to the other end of the aisle and turns to stare at me with sheer love in his eyes. I can feel the zinging of chemistry from over here, and it makes me want to race over to him and cling to him forevermore. Being pregnant only makes it even more

intense. I can see our future spilling out in our minds and it looks amazing. Jordan and me, growing old together with our children surrounding us, with our grandchildren too. Just a normal, quiet life, the sort of life I never thought I would be able to have. It's perfect. I've honestly suffered enough drama to last me a lifetime.

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“I love you,” I mouth as I slowly start walking toward him. Music is coming from somewhere, which I attempt to keep in time with, but it’s really freaking hard when I’m in agony because I want to be with him so badly. “I love you so much, Jordan Miller.”

“I love you too.” He has tears in his eyes. “You are so beautiful. I hope you know that.”

I can really appreciate Jordan from here. It’s reminding me of just how gorgeous he is. I knew that from the moment I first saw him, even if he really didn’t like me back then, but he’s even more beautiful with a smile on his face and love in his eyes. My God, it’s no wonder my heart skips a beat every time I look at him. No wonder our chemistry is off the scale. The passion floating between us will never die down for as long as we live, I just know it. By the time I take his hands, I’m really hit with it.

Wow. Electricity. It’s crazy and overwhelming, but in the best way possible. But because I’m so sucked into the sensations rocketing through me right now, I barely hear Daniel, who is apparently officiating this whole deal, when he begins his speech. I get the feel of what he’s saying, and it’s a nice speech about love lasting forever, but I’m lost in Jordan. I’m swimming in the eyes of the man I’ll have by my side for the rest of my existence. Oh, my God, that’s so thrilling.

Finally, it’s time to say our vows. Luckily, because this is all last-minute, we haven’t had time to write specific vows. For a second, I fear that Jordan might burst out with this beautiful, lengthy speech, leaving me very embarrassed when I can’t do the same. I know I’ll be able to pull a speech out from my heart, but it’s better for us just to do the traditional vows for now. We spend every single day telling each other how we

feel about one another. We know how deep our feelings go now, so that's something we can keep private, just for us. I like the traditional vows, anyway. They symbolize a lot to me.

Freedom, the American dream, my new life, everything I've always wanted. I have it at last. The name Michelle Miller will finally be mine, and I can't wait for it. I've come so far and escaped so much to be here, which only means I'm going to appreciate every single second of my happily ever after. When I think about all the ways that this could have gone...

Wow, I got so lucky. I must have done something right to end up here, right? After all the hardships, it's all finally heading in the right direction. Well, from here on out, I'm going to make the most of every single day. America is mine, and this man belongs to me too. My child is going to have the most incredible life, and I can't wait to see it all.

The words 'You may kiss the bride' are the most liberating words I've ever heard. I grab Jordan and kiss him hard once more, claiming him at long last and loving every second of it. My life is incredible.