







# Secret Twins for My Ex's SEAL Best Friend

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** I hated her -my best friend's ex,

but I ended up savagely devouring her every sinful curve.

And now, I'm damn ready to claim what's mine:

Her and our twins growing inside her.

Guilt. Fear. Trauma...

They're my constant companions since my ex-SEAL days,

never letting me love again after becoming a single dad.

She was no exception from my 'no-love' flings.

I hated her, thinking she was misusing my friend.

Until I tasted her body, wrapped around mine.

She ignited a possessive fire, consuming my self-control.

No fantasy was too forbidden to play out... just that once.

I vowed to stay apart, because she was literally half my age,

and my best friend's ex whom he was still in love with.

But when I saved her life, I got to taste her soul too...

I realized then, she's the only woman who understood all of me,

the only one my daughter ever wanted as her 'new' mom.

And now that she's gifted me a second chance at fatherhood,

I'll break every single rule to make her mine... forever.

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# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:38 am*

Prologue: Delia

Have you lost your mind? What if Jeremy finds out?

He could kick you out of the practicum, decide to stop working with you, and you could lose your career before it even starts.

My head was screaming at me, but my body was defying me, my nipples hardening under my dress as Robert swiped at my thigh with his fingers.

The memory of his dick inside me, swollen and hard, the force with which he held me down, not letting me up until he was done with me...it was all too much.

I wished I could go back in time and say no to this lunch offer.

I wished I could close my eyes and wake up to this all being a nightmare.

I wished a sinkhole would open up and take this entire restaurant now.

Anything to avoid sitting with Jeremy Cross, my ex and mentor ? the man who held the keys to my future career and who obviously still had feelings for me even after dumping me ? and Robert Hastings.

Oh, God! To even think of Robert did my head in.

Robert Hastings, Jeremy's best friend, the man who had broken us up in the first place, who had been patronizing and rude, who turned me into an animal when his

cock was inside me only to kick me out when it was done.

Robert was on my shit list in a major way, and yet for some reason, I was soaking wet at the way his pinkie was inching closer to my pussy.

I felt like I might have a heart attack any minute now. And I hated that I had let it get this far.

All I had wanted was to call Robert out on not contacting me since we'd had sex nearly a week ago. So, I headed to the library where he taught self-defense classes to find him.

I had stepped out of the car and felt a lump rise in my throat. I felt like one of those women, the kind that can't take a hint, can't let go, as I looked at the library, hoping to catch Robert after one of his courses.

When the doors opened, I saw Jeremy and Robert walking out together and panicked, jumping back behind my car.

I stood crouched for a moment, clinging to the trunk and trying not to move.

What was I supposed to do? Get in my car and leave? What if they saw me? No, that would be even more suspicious. I couldn't let Jeremy know I was here to see Robert, I couldn't lie and say it was about class. I was certain he'd see right through me.

Before I could round up my alibi, Jeremy, ever-observant, spotted me. "Delia?" he called out, his voice warm and curious.

I squeezed my eyes shut for half a second and cursed his eagle eyes before standing upright and waving. His smile widened, and I realized with a sick feeling that he thought I was there for him. "What are you doing here?"

“Hey, Jeremy,” I said, forcing a casual tone.

My mind raced for an excuse as I sheepishly stepped out from behind my car, pretending to finish tying my sneakers.

Robert’s eyes flicked to me, and something unreadable passed across his face. “I’m so glad I caught you. I had a question about—”

“Tell you what,” Jeremy interrupted me, wrapping his arm around Robert. “Robby and I are actually just heading out to lunch. Would you like to join us? I’ll text you the address.”

Great. Just great.

“Perfect,” I said, hoping he wouldn’t hear the strain in my voice. “Can’t wait.”

Robert’s jaw tightened, but he nodded. “Let’s go then.”

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That’s how the three of us ended up at a small, cozy brunch spot a few blocks away, not far from where I’d first touched myself in a stall thinking of Robert.

The atmosphere was warm and inviting, but I felt like I was walking a tightrope. At the small, circular table, it was impossible to tell who I was sitting next to, if anyone.

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I felt strangled trying to keep my body to myself, afraid to move and give anything away with the slightest of touches.

“So,” Jeremy started, spearing a forkful of greens, “how are you liking the classes?”

“Oh, I’m learning a lot in my Ethics and Legal Issues class,” I told him halfheartedly, avoiding Robert’s gaze as he watched me with careful and deliberate eyes.

There was a tense edge to the way he regarded me that I couldn’t believe Jeremy wasn’t feeling. It was practically emanating off him in my own mind.

Jeremy laughed, “Oh, I meant the self-defense courses.”

I swallowed hard. That. How could I explain that I hadn’t gone back? I couldn’t exactly say, ‘Oh, I quit going after your best friend gave it to me good in the middle of his kitchen and then never contacted me again,’ so instead, I said, “I’ve been too busy for it lately.” I glanced at Robert and saw that he was smirking, loving this.

“I’m glad you’re liking your classes at school, too, though. That’s important,” Jeremy said offhandedly, smiling thinly as he wiped some excess dressing off his fork onto the side of the bowl.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about it anyway. You’re getting close to the end, huh? Everything on track?”

I nodded, crossing my legs under the table and bumping Robert in the process.

He nudged me back with his knee, and I blushed at the purposeful touch.

I pulled my legs in closer, nervously smoothing my dress down farther. “Close-ish. Well, not really. Eight months. But it goes by fast in semesters. I’m just trying to juggle everything without losing my mind.”

“You make it look so easy, though,” Robert quipped.

My eyes shot to him, watching his impassive face as he picked at the rice pilaf on his plate.

He smiled sarcastically and said, “You must have some really good stress-relief techniques.”

I hid my blush by drinking a sip of my water and muttered into the rim of the glass, “None that stand out.”

Robert grimaced at my response, but Jeremy didn’t let on if he caught the remark, saying, “What matters is that you don’t let that stress get in the way of connecting. You’ve got a way of making people feel understood.”

Smiling proudly behind his spoon, Robert said, “She’s definitely good at connecting.”

He took a bite as if to finish his thought, then swallowed and continued, “With the material in my class. She’s one of my star students. I might just have to give her some one-on-one lessons.”

His innuendos felt so blatant to me that I felt like I was suffocating, worrying that Jeremy would catch on.

Besides that, Robert’s other hand brushed my knee, and I felt a throbbing between my



legs that I couldn't take anymore.

I avoided eye contact, even as his hand started to travel, massaging my thigh, gently stroking the sensitive crease where my underwear touched my skin.

I worried I would leave a wet spot on the chair. I worried that I might touch him back and Jeremy would find out.

As if Robert knew what I was thinking, his pinkie inched under my underwear, touching my pussy lip, feeling my slick juices, feeling just how badly I wanted him, as much as I hated him.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I blurted suddenly, needing an escape.

I slipped out of the chair and hurried toward the back of the diner, my heart pounding. I closed the door quickly, trying to catch my breath.

I stood in front of the mirror, taking refuge in the small space, and tried to do some breathing exercises. In for four, out for four.

When I felt settled enough, I opened the bathroom door to find Robert standing in front of me, his expression dark and his intriguing green eyes blazing.

He was right in front of me, in all his six foot four muscular glory, leaving me no space to move, trapping me in the doorway.

I had to deal with him, no matter how badly I wanted him to go away. I knew what he thought of me. He'd made that clear by asking me to leave his house with my thigh still sticky from his cum. But my body kept betraying me.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice shaky. He used the inches of space I had

given him when I backed up to close the door behind us.

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“What am I doing? What are you doing, Delia?”

I blinked, caught off guard. “I...I’m just trying to get through lunch.”

“With Jeremy hanging all over you?” he snapped, his voice low and rough. “Is that what you want?”

“What are you talking about?” I hissed, crossing my arms. “Jeremy’s just being friendly. You’re the one who’s laying it on thick. Too thick, I might add, for someone who hasn’t called me.”

Robert took a step closer, his gaze locking onto mine. “He’s not just being friendly. And you know it.”

“Why do you care?” I shot back, my frustration boiling over. “You’re the one who kicked me out after...well, you know what.”

His jaw clenched, and for a moment, I thought he wasn’t going to answer. But then he said, “I just don’t like the way he looks at you.”

“What way is that?” I demanded, meeting his eyes.

They lit up as if he were excited to answer. “Like he wants to touch you the way I want to touch you,” he said, pushing me up against the door. It started to push open, creaking as my back pressed against it.

My breath caught in my chest as he got closer, pushing me deeper inside the

restroom. “And how do you want to touch me?” I whispered, my face close to his.

I saw his eyes flicker down to look at my lips, and I unconsciously licked them as though my body was already prepared for what I knew was coming.

“Like this,” he said, his fingers swiping my hair off my neck. He craned his neck as his mouth approached the dip in my clavicle, and I felt the soft press of his kiss on my skin.

I shivered, and he murmured, “And like this,” and his fingers dragged at the straps on my dress, pulling them down to reveal my shoulders.

I sucked in a deep breath, unable to keep from responding to his touch.

“Do you know how obnoxious you were being?” I asked him, my voice sultry with desire even as I tried to sharpen it.

Robert smirked at me as his hand trailed down my curves to my thigh, stopping to just trace the hem of my dress. “Don’t act like you don’t love driving me crazy.”

Before I could answer, his hand was crawling up my dress, his fingers dragging along my inner thigh, fully immersing me in the feeling.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back, and he took my arm and shoved me hard against the door.

Robert’s hand was beside me, and my eyes were drawn in to watch as he locked the door. His other hand was pulling my dress up haphazardly.

A breeze from the vents blew against my skin, now bare and vulnerable, and he ran his fingers along the wet spot growing between my legs, dampening my underwear.

“Hm? Why can’t you tell me how you feel?”

“Because I don’t know how I feel,” I whispered hoarsely, before clearing my throat. “You confuse me. You push and then pull. I don’t know what you want. Maybe you only want me so someone else can’t have me.”

Robert bucked his hips against me, letting me feel his bulge through his pants against my trembling pussy. I bit my lip to keep from moaning out loud.

Then, a knock at the door interrupted us, but Robert didn’t move from where he was. Jeremy called out, “Robert? Delia?” and my walls started to pulse.

This was so wrong and so dangerous. He could figure it out. We needed to be careful.

Robert called out, “Delia said she had to step out to take a phone call! I’ll be right out.”

His mouth trailed kisses along my neck, stopping at my ear. His breath against my ear only added to the tension in my body as he whispered, “Maybe if you would be a good girl and stop entertaining your ex, you would know what I wanted.”

I felt the absence of his weight like a severed limb as he backed away from me.

I stood still for a moment, pressed against the door.

He slapped my ass before unlocking the door and walking out, leaving me to catch my breath and wonder how I was going to pull off pretending I was coming back inside.

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## Page 4

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Delia

Six Weeks Ago

I felt my heartbeat quicken as my eyes landed on the instructor first before I even took a look around the auditorium. It was hard not to notice him with the way he commanded so much authority.

Even though I could tell he was in his forties, I still couldn't tear my eyes away from his chest as he lifted his shirt to wipe his face, bearing a six-pack and a smattering of dark brown chest hair. He was tan and muscular, but what I really couldn't look away from were his piercing green eyes noticing me back.

Next to him was an older woman with a piercing look to her, blue-gray eyes, and gray hair atop an angular face structure. She had on just a sports bra and sweatpants, and she was holding her hands behind her back and swaying.

I glanced at the flyer I'd smooshed into my pocket in case they asked me to prove I belonged there. I held it awkwardly, waiting for someone to eventually demand some sort of credentials, even though my credentials should be obvious. I was at a women's self-defense class, and I was a woman.

Kassandra bumped my ribs with her elbows, and I pulled away from her, hissing, "Ow, stop that."

"Should we go sit with the other girls?" she asked, ignoring my protest.

I looked where she was pointing and realized the instructor was pointing, too, his slender finger stretched out to a half-circle of women on the floor at his feet. From this angle, it almost felt sexual or ritualistic.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he said, not a touch of humor in his face.

“Right, yeah,” I muttered, embarrassed by my momentary lapse in awareness.

I walked toward the girl, keeping my head down and sneaking looks at the male instructor.

He looked so familiar, like I had met him before. I wondered where I might have seen him.

The gym? He obviously works out.

I sat crisscross applesauce next to a younger girl with her mom and looked over at Cassandra, next to a young woman in a full, ankle-length skirt.

There was something like twenty women, an eclectic group that looked like they’d never be together otherwise, bonded by only two similarities: their gender and their desire to protect themselves.

Work at the bar had gotten harder lately, with guys following me to my car, pinching my ass when I walked by, and sometimes shoving dollar bills into my bra even though I was a bottle girl, not a performer. I had a taser, but I still felt like I needed more, an assurance that I could stay safe even if I had no weapon on me.

“All right, ladies. I’m Robert, one of your instructors for today. This is Heather. We’re going to start with some simple self-defense moves that are not kicks or punches. Some of these moves are able to be done from farther away, and some are

good for when someone grabs you and brings you in close to them. Remember that not every move works for every situation. My goal here is to give you more tools in your toolbelt,” the instructor said, his eyes scanning each of us. It might have been my imagination, but it seemed like they lingered on mine for a bit.

I glanced down and noticed my nipples poking out from my sports bra. I tried to will them to soften, hoping no one would notice.

“I know a tool I’d like to borrow from his toolbelt, right?” Cassandra whispered in my ear, and I rolled my eyes, crossing my arms.

The woman, Heather, clapped her hands together loudly and proclaimed, “Okay, ladies, so we’re going to start with one of the simplest tools in your arsenal.”

She lifted one of her legs gracefully and announced, “The leg.”

Robert turned to face her, and before any of us even realized what was happening, he grabbed her around the middle and captured her tightly, his face close to her face.

She immediately began twisting, ultimately sending her foot flying down onto his. He moved his foot before she could, and she then took his shoulders into her hands and pulled him into her so that she could effectively knee him in the groin. He blocked it with a pad on his hand, and the two separated.

“Okay? So what we’re going to do is get into groups of two and practice these two moves. One is a foot stomp, and the other is a groin knee,” Heather explained.

Robert spoke up, saying, “The thing to keep in mind with the groin knee is that you are taking control in this situation. So you’re grabbing the shoulders,” he turned to Heather and took her shoulders in his hands, “and you’re pulling them into you. Otherwise, you won’t have the right kind of force behind the movements. Okay?”



No one responded. We all just nodded quietly, and Robert repeated louder, “Okay?”

“Okay!” we all shouted.

Heather said, “Ladies, the best weapon we have is our voice. People who attack women are cowards. They rely on silence. They want you to stay quiet about what they’re doing. When you do these exercises, I want you to accompany it with a loud ‘Stay back!’ Can you all practice that?”

Her shouting ‘Stay back’ reverberated through the empty room and intimidated all of us.

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I glanced over at Kassandra, who gave me an embarrassed smile, and then we giggled a little.

“All right, on the count of three. One, two, three,” Robert said, and we all screamed ‘Stay back’ from our stomachs, our shouts piercing together.

He nodded without a smile and signaled to us to stand on our feet.

After about an hour of warmups, we got into lines of two. Half of us were in a line with Heather, and half of us were in a line with Robert.

Kassandra and I were at the back with our hands on our hips, chattering away to each other as we watched the other women move fluidly through the line, assaulting our instructors easily and then moving to the back behind us.

When it came to my turn, I looked back at Kassandra, and she gave me a thumbs up, which I lamely returned, unsure. “You can do it,” she whispered, smiling, and gave me a tiny push forward.

I bumped into Robert, and he responded by wrapping his arms around my waist.

My body reacted instantly, my nipples hardening and my thighs tightening. I felt breathless and hot instantly, his arms weighty and strong, pinned against my ribs.

I looked up at him, into those familiar eyes that I couldn’t place, and licked my lips. He nodded, his face serious and his jaw set, and said, “Go ahead. You can do it.”

“Stay back!” I shouted shakily, from my throat instead of my stomach.

He shook his head. “Find your inner strength,” he told me, looking disappointed.

“Stay back!” I shouted again, this time from my stomach. My voice was so loud that it rang through my own ears, and he nodded.

He crowed, “Good! Beautiful! I’ve got you around the waist, you can’t move. All you have is this amount of movement right here.”

He looked down at the space between us. There was so little of it. I could feel his body heat emanating off of him, and I wanted to melt into it.

“Now, feel your legs, feel that you can still move them. This is all about getting more in touch with your body. I want you to stomp my toe in 3...2...1!”

On one, I lifted my leg and sent it slamming down into the ground. He moved back quickly and nodded at me, an approving glint in his eyes. “Good. Now you know what comes next.”

I slid my hands up his chest to his shoulders, feeling self-conscious of how the proximity was turning me on.

I hovered my hands over Robert’s shoulders so that just my fingertips touched his skin, and he reached up and grabbed the back of my hands, pulling them down onto his shoulders.

His hands over mine were warm and strong, and I felt a strange jolt of excitement at his touch.

His fingers lined up perfectly with mine, and he used his to direct mine to sink into

his flesh, saying, “Delia, you really have to hold me. Otherwise, you won’t get the leverage you need to knee me in the groin.”

Something about him saying my name ignited awareness in my brain, and I looked up at him in shock as I finally remembered how I knew him. Robert.

He was my ex, Jeremy’s, best friend.

I didn’t know how I managed to forget him. Being that my ex was my practicum supervisor at the master’s program I was in, I saw him every single week of the year since we broke up, usually multiple times a week. But I had managed to wipe his best friend from my memory.

I narrowed my eyes as it all came flooding back to me, the way he had undermined our relationship the whole time, always in Jeremy’s ear about me until he eventually listened.

When he dumped me, it broke my heart. I had depended on Jeremy, loved him, and respected him. Seeing him afterward, seemingly completely fine, as if we’d never happened, had been even worse.

It tore me up to see him in his element all the time, and now, seeing Robert here, the reason I had to rebuild my life, resentment coursed through me. I could practically taste all the negative emotions I had.

“Hey, where’d you go?” he asked, right before I dug my fingers, nails included, into his skin and pulled my knee back enough to really pack my blow with some force. I pulled his shoulders into me as I drove my knee into his crotch, watching the look on his face as I did.

His green eyes teared up and then instantly closed. He pulled away from me, bending

over to put his hands on his knees and breathe through it.

He peeked up at me under one dark brown curl that was caught in his wet eyelashes.

“Wow, okay. Hey,” he croaked, his voice hoarse, “good job.”

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He reached out and made a patting motion in my general direction, still not standing. “Next time, just let me know that you’re ready so that I can block. But good job. Next!”

He waved me on, and I looked back at Cassandra, who held her hands up as if to say what the fuck was that? I turned away from her as I hid my smile, walking back to the eclectic group of girls.

As I sipped my water bottle, I watched as Robert excused himself, letting Heather take over while he recuperated from the blow.

He sidled up next to me, silently looking me in my eyes as I smirked over the lip of my drink.

An easy smile spread across his face, and he wiped at his chin with a stiff hand, his eyes trailing toward the women and then back at me. “So, you remembered, huh?”

“Yeah. I remembered.”

“Are you going to keep coming to the classes?”

I shrugged and asked, “Will you be here a lot?”

He smiled sardonically, a hint of malice in it. “Yeah, I’m here pretty often.”

“Then, so will I, so I can hit you.”

He put his hands on his hips and spread his stance wide, swaying back and forth. I tried not to look at his sweaty skin, but keeping my gaze toward the glint in his eye wasn't any better.

"I might put you with Heather instead," he said.

I shook my head and returned to drinking my water. "No dice, then," I said, before gulping it down.

"Maybe you need a diary or a therapist."

"Or maybe every few months, I'll enroll in your class and ask for you specifically."

"Violent outbursts can be a sign of emotional immaturity," he snapped. His eyes flicked up and down my body for just a fraction of a second.

Anger burned through me. Is this jerk calling me immature as he checks me out?

"Is that what you told Jeremy? That I was emotionally immature?" I turned to face him, squaring my shoulders.

I thought of my knee smashing into his groin again, and I couldn't hold back a smile at the memory.

"I told Jeremy that you were too young. I'm just now finding out about your maturity issues. Listen, you can finish the class out, but after that, you need to either calm down or not come back. Jeremy dumped you a year ago." He squinted his eyes and tossed out, "Get over it," before returning to the group, clapping loudly to get everyone's attention.

The women stopped what they were doing and stood up straighter, and I cringed,

disgusted by the power he wielded in this setting. He took so much enjoyment from playing the puppet master in mine and Jeremy's relationship, and looking at him now, he still liked control.

I shook my head and walked out, making sure to slam the door so that it shook the auditorium.

two

Robert

I sipped on my beer, lost in thought. I hardly heard Jeremy as he snapped me back into the present by saying, "So, how was class today?"

"Huh?"

"Self-defense class? I assume that's why you're so sweaty, anyway, unless you have a thyroid problem I don't know about."

"Oh, right." I looked down at the mozzarella stick in my hand and dropped it, wiping my greasy fingertips off on a napkin.

This was not the kind of food I usually ate, but most of the times I ended up at a dive bar with Jeremy.

I always offered to go somewhere more upscale, and I would pay, of course, but the propositions seemed to offend him, so I had stopped. That meant a lot of greasy food and beer.



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“Um, it was good. I saw your ex.” I looked at him to gauge his reaction.

“Which one?” he asked, a small smirk across his pale face.

I look at him with a mockingly sad face. “Oh, don’t do that. You know you only have one ex.”

“That isn’t true,” he said defensively. “I’ve got plenty of women wanting a piece of this.”

I took a long sip of my beer, giving him a moment to sit with his lie. “Fine, if you need this charade to keep going, it was Delia. She looked good.”

“I know she looks good,” Jeremy said, a little too quickly, a small blush creeping up into his cheeks. “I see her all the time, you know.”

“Right, sorry. Well, she looks good,” I said offhandedly.

“Okay, I get it.” He sounded annoyed at me, as though by pointing out she looked good, I was basically fucking her in front of him.

We sat in silence for a moment, and Jeremy bit off a piece of a mozzarella stick, clearly thinking about Delia.

For just a second, I felt a pang of guilt for breaking them up. It was clear when I spoke to her today that it still hurt her to think about it. She missed him, and why shouldn’t she? Jeremy was a nice guy, attractive enough, and reasonable.

But it had been inappropriate, their relationship. I couldn't hang out with a guy who would sleep with his students, even if she was an adult. It just wasn't right.

After a moment, Jeremy continued, "I wonder why she was at your class. Do you think everything's okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"I just mean, what if she feels unsafe? What if she's worried about someone?" He looked intensely at me, prying without asking if I knew anything, hoping that I would tell him what I knew.

I shrugged his questions off. "Women take that course all the time because they just want to be prepared. It doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"Maybe I should take one, prepare myself. I'm a small guy. Are small guys allowed?" His tone was joking, but in a way that told me he did want to take the class. I could guess why.

There was something appealing to him, I'm sure, about seeing Delia sweaty in workout clothes. I'd seen it myself, and it wasn't a bad view.

Chuckling, I responded, "How about I do you one better? Why don't you come to the next one and I'll let you be my co-instructor for the day? We can get you trained, and you can teach a couple lessons. It's rewarding work."

Jeremy stuck out his bottom lip, considering, and looked out the window of the dimly lit bar. The light was nearly blinding in comparison.

He looked back at me, squinting, and his pupils were tiny against the sunlight. "Yeah, that sounds fun. Thanks."

“It starts pretty early, though. 6 a.m. Think you can hack it?”

“I’ll manage.”

“As long as it’s not just a scheme to get close to Delia again. It took you so long to get over her, man.”

“Like I said, I see her all the time. I haven’t gone back yet. I’m not going to go back now.”

“Okay, good, because I worry about you.” I watched him over the glass with stern eyes as he ate, his mind somewhere else.

Despite being a successful therapist for veterans and managing a successful partnership with the local colleges in which they sent over master’s students to study underneath him and get their hours, he managed to have the worst self-esteem of any man I knew.

He always seemed to be striking out with women, and he took it hard.

“I know Delia was a lapse in judgment, dating a student like that, but you’ve got a career to think about. You can’t blow it all on some twenty-something.”

“She’s more mature than half the women in their thirties I’ve dated in Seattle,” Jeremy griped, annoyed with me for dragging the conversation on.

“Maybe that’s more about your taste in women,” I pointed out, waving a half-eaten mozzarella stick at him.

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“No, it’s about Delia. Delia’s special. You’ll see if she keeps coming to your classes.”

“I think that ship has sailed. She stormed out of there. She didn’t seem too mature to me.”

That answer seemed to satisfy Jeremy for some reason. It pleased him that Delia didn’t like me. “Well, you do have a way of getting under people’s skin. I mean, I love you, but you’re an asshole.”

I ignored him, wiping some crumbs off the table and into a napkin. “Listen, if she’s so special, why’d you let me talk you out of it?”

He looked up at me with a contemplative face. “I guess I just thought...you had a point at the time. I didn’t want to lose my job, and I didn’t want to go through the trouble of transferring or making her transfer.”

“If it were true love, don’t you think you would have?”

He shrugged. “Don’t do that to me, man.”

I could have let it go, but I pushed it, being the asshole that I apparently was. “No, I mean it. Don’t you think if it were really more than something that stroked your ego, you would have ignored my thoughts on you dating an underling and made it work?”

“Maybe. I regret it sometimes, but I ultimately think it was the right call, even if it was hard at the time.” He looked at me and frowned. “I’m glad you talked some sense into me. I could have gotten into a lot of trouble.”

“Hey, I had to eventually return the favor. You talked sense into me so many times. You kept me alive for a while there. I could have ruined my daughter’s life by ending it all so many times, and you always talked me off the edge. I owed you.” I smiled at him and saw the twinkling in his eyes.

Jeremy may have made a mistake a year ago with Delia, but he’d been my best friend for so long, a man who I could truly rely on. When I entered his office ten years ago, broken and single with a baby to take care of, I had no idea what therapy would be like. I just knew I needed help.

Jeremy had been a guiding light out of a fog, and through my work with him, I learned to enjoy things again, slowly but surely.

Eventually, he became a friend, my first friend in adulthood not in the Navy. I owed Jeremy everything. I owed Jeremy my life.

But then there was the nagging thought in the back of my mind, the way Delia had looked in her outfit, the way her brown eyes got so stormy and angry when she realized who I was, the casual smile on her perfect and peachy lips. I tried hard not to acknowledge that thought.

I especially tried not to think about her touch on my shoulders and the way my skin tingled when her fingers made contact. I tried to get her out of my head because Jeremy had really liked her, and I had ruined it for him.

Nothing could be a bigger betrayal than to like her myself. I would have to push any such feelings away.

three

Delia

That afternoon, in disbelief, I watched Cassandra chug down a mimosa. “How can you drink that right now? I’m so dehydrated. I feel like if I drank anything but water, my body would riot.”

“I guess I’m just stronger than you are,” she teased, winking at me over her champagne flute.

I mimed gagging as I looked over the menu, my entire body sore from the long two hours of class.

The classes are supposed to be six hours, and there are only four a month to finish the entire thing, but I had left early during my temper tantrum, and lucky for me, Cassandra had followed.

Even with leaving early, it was still so hard on the body. I felt like sweat had settled into crevices I didn’t know I had. Somehow, even my ears were sweaty.

Kassandra, on the other hand, looked like a pop icon, with tan skin, somehow even in Seattle, and long brown curls that touched her butt. Instead of sweaty, she looked glowy.

I felt frumpy next to her with my strawberry blonde hair matted in my claw clip and my workout outfit clinging to my skin with moisture.

A waitress in a little dress with an apron on top, on theme for the farmer thing the restaurant was going for, sidled up next to us and asked in a syrupy voice, “You both ready?”

I glanced over at Cassandra, who shrugged and said, “A side salad,” clipping her menu shut with a satisfying noise and looking at me.

The waitress took her menu, and I looked between the two of them, feeling nervous under their gaze. “Um...a side salad also?”

I shut my menu tentatively, and Cassandra rolled her eyes. She looked up at the waitress and said, “Give us a minute. Don’t put that order in yet.”

As soon as the waitress walked away, Cassandra leaned in toward me and muttered, “Hey, what’s wrong with you? You’re acting, I don’t know, not like your usual self.”

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“How am I acting?” I asked, leaning back in my seat and sipping my water, avoiding her eyes.

“I’m not sure. Kind of like how you acted when Jeremy dumped you, all unsure of yourself and indecisive.”

Kassandra became my best friend at work and has quickly evolved into my best friend in life.

Sometimes, I felt like Kassandra saw me better than anyone ever has. Sometimes, I thought she should be the aspiring therapist, not me.

I sighed under her watchful gaze and gave up, avoiding it. “I don’t know. I feel sort of shaken up from class today.”

“So you couldn’t do six whole hours, who cares?” She scoffed and gulped down more of her mimosa. “It’s not like you were getting paid to do it. That instructor was hot, though, huh?” She wagged her eyebrows at me, trying to get me to laugh.

Little did she know the instructor was the problem. I grimaced, pulling my hair out of my ponytail and running my fingers through it. “That was Robert, my ex’s best friend.”

“Wait...the ex?” Kassandra whispered in a hushed tone, as though someone nearby might hear us and know who we were talking about.

I nodded forlornly, thinking about how many times in this past year I had mentioned



Jeremy. Seeing him the entire year had been a special kind of hell, and seeing Robert had brought back the memory of how painful the breakup was, how blindsided I had felt.

I knew what Robert was saying, but I never knew how seriously Jeremy took it. It had hurt when he told me our relationship was wrong, that we could both get into trouble.

“That’s the one,” I confirmed. “Jeremy. And Robert’s a total jerk, too. He’s rude and standoffish and thinks he knows best.”

“He doesn’t come off like that at all.” Cassandra leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. “I mean, he teaches women’s self-defense classes. He seems like a really nice guy.”

Hearing that sent me over the edge. “Well, he’s not!” I exploded, my mind whirling with the memories of all the times I met him, which wasn’t very many. Any time he was around, he seemed like he was watching me and waiting for me to mess up.

He made me feel like a teenager again, my dad out on deployments, leaving me, my brother, and my mom to fend for ourselves. I always felt so out of place at school.

Other kids didn’t get it. They didn’t understand what that kind of abandonment did to a person.

When my parents ended up divorcing, I stopped seeing my dad at all. It was like the divorce had given him permission to be who he wanted to be, a fatherless man.

He sent cards when it mattered, but without seeing him, they felt like letters from a stranger. It was clear when I’d read them that my mother, bitter and lonely and overworked, had told him everything hard about raising me, and he used the cards to tell me to treat her better. They always did nothing but upset my brother and me. We

never showed each other what ours said. I was sure his were just as distant and judgmental.

For the longest time, I had no sense of self. It wasn't until I decided I wanted to work with vets and heal that part of me that it got better. Talking to these broken men gave me insight into my father, and while it didn't fix it all, I felt like I understood him through them.

But being under Robert's scrutiny had brought all that back.

"Look, I was too embarrassed to tell you this back then, but Robert is the reason Jeremy dumped me. He kept telling Jeremy that our relationship was inappropriate, that he shouldn't date a student, and that he could get in trouble. It was crazy. He ruined our relationship. It was all Jeremy could think about. He started to get so paranoid. He wouldn't even hold my hand in public, and then, eventually, he said he couldn't be with me anymore."

Kassandra regarded me carefully. She nodded while I talked and then sat her glass down and leaned forward, asking, "Do you think he had your best interest in mind?"

I looked at her like she was crazy. "I think he was a lonely, bitter man who thought I wasn't good enough to tear his best friend away from the bars. He didn't want some girl getting in the way of their bromance."

"Delia, you are a badass therapist-in-training. No guy tells you who you are. I know that it felt like you couldn't trust anything around you when Jeremy dumped you—"

"I thought he really loved me, Kassie. I thought we were going to get married."

"I get it. But," she put her hands up, like she was already fending off whatever I might say next, "you are under Jeremy. It was inappropriate, and he could have gotten

in trouble. Plus, he shouldn't have used his position like that. I'm sorry, but it kind of sounds like Robert was right."

"He'd love to hear you say that," I shot back, glowering at her.

Kassandra and I looked at each other for a few minutes, our minds in totally different places. I didn't know how to explain the feelings that all of this was bringing up for me again.

But she was right about one thing. I was a badass therapist-in-training, and no guy should tell me who I was.

I needed to stand up straight and show Robert that his judgments didn't make me who I was. Whether he thought I was good enough for Jeremy or not, I knew who I was.

I had worked through all these issues after high school. That therapy I'd gotten had been part of the reason I'd decided to go into the field myself. I couldn't forget all of that because of some guy.

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“Excuse me. I’ll be right back,” I told her, standing up to find the restroom.

On the way, I passed the waitress and told her, “She wants the side salad. I want the steak, medium, please, with a side of fries.”

I walked confidently to the restroom, feeling like I had learned something about myself from that conversation. I needed to take what I wanted. I needed to stop letting people tell me who I was or what I deserved in life.

As I washed my hands, I looked in the mirror, taking in my looks. I was too hard on myself.

When I saw Cassandra, I thought of her skin as glowy, but now that I was feeling better about everything, I could see it on me, too. My skin was tight and shiny, and my freckles popped up along my nose and cheeks. My lips were full and round, and my brown eyes were shiny in the light of the small bathroom.

The image of Robert’s lips, full, round, and an inviting shade of red, popped into my mind.

I shook my head, but the image was persistent, and I soon saw Robert’s lips careening toward mine. I could almost feel them smashed against me, could almost feel how hard my nipples had been at the class just looking at him.

What the actual fuck?

I hated that man. Why was I thinking about him this way?

But I couldn't ignore the way I had felt when I first saw him, the way my body had reacted to his touch. It was like something in me had turned on and revved up.

My fingers explored my body, my hand sliding underneath my shirt and seeking out my hard nipples. I pinched them between two fingers as I looked in the mirror, my mind somewhere else, hazy with lust.

I could see Robert in my mind, reaching for me during class and picking me up, wrapping my legs around him and kissing me deeply in front of everyone.

A moan escaped from my throat, and my head dropped back, my open mouth turning up to the ceiling.

My eyes snapped open and turned to the door, and I scurried over to lock it, suddenly so aware of where I was and what I was doing.

I was masturbating in a public restroom while my friend sat outside it, waiting for me to eat lunch with her.

A stab of guilt went through my body as I pushed one of my hands past my waistband and toward the crop of trimmed pubic hair between my legs. I wanted to know what Robert's face would look like between my legs, what he would do with his tongue.

What was wrong with me?

All I could think about was squirming under his tongue, pressing my thighs together, and feeling his hot breath against my insides. I wanted to feel his hair under my grip. I wanted to feel his lips rubbing against the crease of my thigh.

I opened my legs in shame. I let my finger drift to my clit and rubbed it in gentle circles, feeling the way heat bloomed in my chest like I had planted a flower between

my legs.

I gasped at the intensity of the feeling. I could see Robert wiping his chin of my juices and sliding up my body to kiss me, to swap the taste of me from his mouth to mine, and the image sent my pussy pulsing fiercely.

I closed my legs instinctively, pushing back against the feeling, and let myself be overcome by it. I wanted to stop. I knew this was a risky thing to do in public. I knew that someone might soon come pounding on the door.

My mind was full of thoughts of Jeremy, of what he would think if he knew I was fantasizing about his best friend like this. I saw Jeremy all the time.

What if he could see it on me the next time I saw him? What if he took one look at me and knew how dirty I really was?

The thought did nothing to stop the beating of my pussy. I could feel the sensation in my stomach. I realized I was holding my breath and let out a long and deep exhale.

I could see Robert breathing deeply above me, pulling his cock out of his pants, hard and leaking cum with desire for me. I could see him guiding himself toward my entrance, just as slick, ready for him, sensitive from his mouth.

I sighed and opened my legs wide, imagining him saying to me, "I wanted you for myself. I ruined your relationship with Jeremy so that I could have you. It had nothing to do with you not being good enough. You were always good enough. You were just too good for him. I needed you to be mine."

I let out a cry of delight and pushed one of my fingers inside myself as I came, letting myself be filled for even a second, although it didn't come close to the girth and length my imagination gave Robert's cock.

My musk filled the air as I orgasmed onto my finger, squeezing it and letting it go, and I continued to try and wriggle my finger deeper against the elastic fabric of my waistband.

I held my cries in with my other wrist, biting down onto the bone and letting out whimpers into my skin.

Once I was done, I leaned against the wall, stunned by my actions.

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Had I just masturbated to Robert? The man who was the bane of my existence? In this bathroom with my friend just outside the door? Jeremy never got this sort of reaction out of me.

I awkwardly walked to the sink and washed my hands, looking in the mirror at my flushed cheeks.

I laughed a little at my face, at the way I had acted, at the thoughts that were so intense that my body had needed a release. At what I had just done.

The guilt was strong, but it was also so dormant that I could push it away for just a moment. Jeremy would never know what I had thought or what I had done about it. No one would.

I found Cassandra sitting with a half-eaten salad, swishing her glass of champagne and orange juice and scrolling on her phone. She looked up when I approached and asked, "Hey, are you okay?"

"I'm just fine," I told her as I slipped into the seat in front of my juicy steak.

I was going to eat every bite.

four

Robert

Almost a week later, I sat in the school car lane and drummed on the steering wheel.



I was waiting for my daughter to come rushing out the door the way she always did, a group of children pushing her out like they were at a concert.

I saw one of my lawyers calling and shot a look at the school doors before answering. I didn't want to miss her, even if it meant missing a potentially important business call.

"Hey, Tanya, what's up?" I asked absent-mindedly, as I watched the other grades come out.

We were up to third grade so far. Two more grades and my little fifth grader would come out. I scanned the heads I could see, looking for her crop of red curls.

"It's about the self-defense weapons," my lawyer said, her voice serious. She always got straight to the point, which I appreciated about her.

"What about them?" I asked, watching the fourth graders come out and run to their parents' cars. They had to be reminded to wait for their parents, to not run away from their teachers into the road. It was like watching someone try to catch chickens.

"We can't distribute them to the UK. The UK doesn't allow the use of lethal or non-lethal weapons for self-defense in public. The keychain blades are too long, metal, and locking. There's no way we can get around it. We can't distribute them there."

I felt that anger coming up, the anger that came from my past. Losing friends in the Navy had been difficult. Losing my late wife had been the hardest thing I'd ever gone through. Raising a daughter now sparked the pain and anger over her murder in the strangest ways.

I had started a company devoted to women's self-defense so that I could keep everyone from going through what I had gone through. From losing what my

daughter had lost. From what my wife had gone through.

“I’m not letting women be unprotected because of some bullsh—” My daughter opened the back door just then and climbed in, and I sing-songed, “Rin-Rin, how are you, my girl?”

“Got it. We can talk later, Rob,” Tanya said crisply, “but I’m not letting you catch a lawsuit because of your principles.”

I hung up the phone and looked at Corinne with a forced smile. She was the spitting image of her mother, my late wife, at that age with frizzy red hair and brown eyes.

Every time I saw her, I felt this twinge as I realized that I’d forever see Quinn through my daughter.

It was a strange pain, seeing her as a young girl, only eleven years old, and so haunted. I often felt a twisting pain when Corinne cried, knowing what Quinn would have looked like crying as a child.

I swallowed it down, as I always did, and waited for her to throw her bookbag in the back and flop into the leather seats of my Range Rover.

That day, a sullen look passed her small face, and I shook her shoulder with one of my hands before returning it to the steering wheel. “What’s up?” I asked her, looking over quickly before looking back at the road.

“I don’t like it when you call me Rin-Rin. I’m not a kid.”

“What about Renaissance?” I asked, smiling wide at her.

She shook her head, but I could see a small smile tugging at her lips, even as she

crossed her arms and peered out the window. “What’s wrong, Princess Corinne? Tell Daddy so he can fix it.”

She pouted but turned her body to me and asked, “Did you know Thanksgiving break is coming up in just a couple of weeks?”

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“Yes, of course. We’re going to do something special.”

“You knew? Why didn’t you remind me?” she cried out, re-crossing her arms for dramatic effect. “It’s in two weeks. That’s not far away at all.”

“No, it’s not,” I agreed, watching her through my peripheral vision, trying to understand how Thanksgiving was linked to her bad mood.

I let her sit in silence, something I had learned from Jeremy in therapy. It took a while to get used to not hammering her with questions and forcing her to fess up, but once I stopped, our bond got even stronger. She’d learned to open up, to express herself, and to stop relying on someone begging her to talk.

It was something I needed to learn – to open up. It was so hard for me. Corinne got it from me, and I felt bad every time I saw the learned behavior in her.

Finally, she huffed and said, “That means I won’t see Benny.”

“Who’s Benny?”

“My crush!” she exclaimed, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world, though she’d never told me about any crush. “I won’t get to see him for an entire week! What if he doesn’t like me anymore when we go back to school? I’m going to miss him so much!”

I cringed internally. The reminders that my daughter was growing up came more and more frequently these days, and each one was a painful blow.

I tried not to let her see it on my face as the anxiety started to rise in my chest, a tightening that took away my ability to breathe.

I tightened my grip around the steering wheel, feeling the blood leave my fingers, and looked straight ahead. “You have a crush on a boy? Named Benny? Is he nice?”

“Duh! And he’s funny, and he’s cute, too.”

I didn’t know how to navigate these conversations, conversations about boys, with my daughter.

I missed my wife, and I wished she were here to do this. I knew she would have been able to say the right thing, anything, but I felt powerless and full of anxiety.

I was afraid of what it would be like as Corinne got older, and I was afraid to let her be in the world as a girl who would eventually be a woman.

What had happened to her mother had been so wrong and so unfair. She’d been murdered outside a bar, on her way home, by a patron, someone she also thought was funny and cute and nice. She hadn’t known him well, but she had known him. She’d looked into his face and served him and smiled at him, and he’d looked in her face and thought about what she’d look like underneath him.

He’d wondered what she’d look like with no life left in her, and he’d made it happen.

I glanced over at my daughter, and so much came crashing into my awareness. The night I’d found out, I’d been on active duty, and my master chief petty officer had called to talk to me and broke the news.

They’d discharged me soon after under special circumstances, and I’d gone home a single dad with traumas up to my ears.

The victims' advocates had gotten me into therapy, and Quinn's life insurance had been enough to take care of us, but it hadn't been enough to fix me.

I wiped the sweat away from my forehead. It pricked my brow, and I felt a heat rising through my body. I was breathless, hot, and dizzy.

"Daddy? Are you okay?" Corinne asked, her voice higher pitched, her woes forgotten.

I nodded, or at least I tried to nod, swallowing hard. My swallows felt impossible, like a lump I couldn't pass, and I moved to the left and the right, trying to elongate my torso to get more air into that space.

The world felt like it was crashing around me. I glanced at Corinne and saw her mother's face, gray and unnatural, an open gash on her lip.

I closed my eyes against the image and pulled over to hyperventilate.

Corinne's voice was far away as she attempted to comfort me, and I could only see her mother, then the face of someone from my platoon, his eyes blackened, lifeless, cloudy, flies around it.

I wanted to scream, and I held it back for Corinne, even as the sound crawled up my throat for release.

I squeezed my eyes tight and told myself, "You're safe. This isn't real. You're safe. This isn't real."

Corinne's voice was loud but far away as she shouted, "Daddy, are you okay? Daddy, should I call 911? Are you dying Daddy?" She sounded so panicked. When I opened my eyes, I could see that she had climbed into the front seat, tears streaming down

her face.

I pulled her into me and held her close, rubbing her back and wishing someone was rubbing mine.

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The panic attacks had been getting worse as Corinne had gotten older. There were a few years there when she was young, and I had coping skills and my business was thriving, where I felt on top of the world.

Lately, the more she approached middle school, the more it felt like all of the good was slipping away from me again. It was unmanageable and scary, and I didn't know how to calm my nerves.

I closed my eyes against the warm crown of her head and inhaled, smelling the Target perfume she wore. I could afford something better, but she wanted a perfume that smelled like bananas per some TikTok video she saw.

She was safe.

And I was safe.

five

Delia

The weekend after that first class, I arrived back to class with butterflies in my stomach. I pulled up to the local library and sat in my car for a moment longer than necessary, not really sure why I was there. I half hoped that Robert wouldn't be there at all and half hoped that he would be.

I couldn't understand why I was so tangled up about him, why I wanted him to see me and simultaneously wanted him to disappear. I hated him, but my body wanted



him, that much was obvious.

Sighing, I got out of the car and walked to the door alone. Cassandra had decided to skip this class after giving herself a gnarly hangover at work when a group of guys came in and kept buying her shots. She had been reprimanded for the drawer being wrong at the end of the night.

I knew she felt hungover, but I also thought she might have just needed to recover emotionally from her fuck up.

When I walked in, I saw Robert setting up, putting the padding and the gloves on tables in the corners of the auditorium.

He saw me, and I thought I could see a brief moment of annoyance that I was there. It strengthened my resolve against him. He might not want me there, but I wanted to be there, so goddamnit, I would be.

“Oh, hi, Thor,” he called out, his voice echoing through the large, empty room.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, dropping my water bottle and bag into a corner of the room and sitting down.

“Oh, just talking about your hammer there,” he quipped, pointing to my knee. I nodded at him, rolling my eyes, and went to sit down.

“Do you want to help?” he asked, a tinge of annoyance in his voice, as though I should have offered.

“Not exactly,” I replied.

“Figures,” I heard him mutter under his breath.

“Hey, what’s your problem with me exactly?” I asked. “I have a reason to be mad at you. I can’t understand why you think you have a reason to be mad at me.”

He closed the distance between us, a stack of name tags in his hand. “Now, what reason is that? What have I done to you?”

“Are you kidding me? You were a dick when I was with Jeremy, and you’re a dick now. You ruined my relationship, and then, because that wasn’t enough, you’ve decided you should ruin this experience for me as well.”

He twisted his mouth, and my eyes flickered to it for a moment, remembering the way I had touched myself, picturing that mouth up against mine.

A brief flash of fire went through my body, lighting me up between my thighs, and I cleared my throat. “Anything to say for yourself?” I asked, looking up at him.

From where I was sitting, his crotch was eye-level with me, and I willed myself to keep my eyes focused on his green eyes, to not look at anything but his face, as hard as it was.

Robert’s look was hard, not gentle or caring, and his jaw tensed. I wondered what it was that he thought of me, even though I wished I didn’t care. “In that...situation, none of us were the best version of ourselves. I think we can all admit that.”

I laughed, looking away and focusing my eyes on a nearby wall. “I don’t admit that, actually.”

“Of course you don’t.” He nodded like he was done with the conversation and turned to walk away.

I wasn’t letting him get away that easily. I exploded, “Why do you think I wasn’t the

best version of myself? What did I do that gave you that impression?”

“Well, for starters, I assume you don’t normally fuck your supervisors. Maybe I’m wrong about that, though,” he shot back, the words falling out of his mouth so easily.

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He didn't look apologetic or like it was out of character. He looked relieved, like he'd been wanting to say it for so long.

His eyes were lit up, shining, and his jaw was twitching. I assumed with the effort it took him not to say whatever it was he wanted to say. He was just like I remembered him. Judgmental, rude, and upon the highest horse in the room.

"Wow," I scoffed quietly, shaking my head. "You're really just going to keep going with that narrative that I was some succubus that led your friend astray. Newsflash," I stood up and jabbed my finger into his chest, "Jeremy propositioned me. You can't help who you fall in love with."

"Was it love, Delia? Or did you think fucking the supervisor could get you ahead?"

I threw my head back and guffawed at the ceiling. "Ha!" I looked at him with a steely gaze.

My palms were sweating, and I felt like I wanted to hit him. He made me feel out of control with frustration, like a little kid that knocks another kid's tower again. "You're really something. I spent a long time mourning that relationship. Maybe you think that way because that's how you are. Maybe you're projecting your shitty views on people onto everyone else."

"Maybe," he relented, shrugging one shoulder. His bottom lip poked out a little as though he was deep in thought, and then he smirked at me.

That smallest of smiles, even a condescending one, brought a boyish charm to his

angular face. “But I don’t think so.”

At that moment, I just imagined poking his eyes out and carrying them around on my fingers. He was doing such a good job at being the biggest asshole out there.

I was about to tell him just what I thought of him when I saw Jeremy walk in through the doors.

It was like the world stopped.

I saw Jeremy all the time, but having the two of them together in one room brought back some really painful memories.

I looked at Robert, and he lifted his eyebrows at me as if to say what now? Then he turned around and called out with a loud, happy voice, “Jer! So glad you’re here, dude! Here, take a name tag.”

I wanted to shove those name tags down Robert’s throat. I couldn’t believe that Jeremy was here, that he was going to take part in what felt like a ritual intended to hurt me.

I looked at him with utter shock, my mouth wide open, and didn’t move from my spot. My feet felt glued to the floor. I felt like I was speared in that place, like I might bleed out if I tried to move.

“Hi, Delia,” Jeremy said, with an easy smile. His red beard was trimmed nicely, and he looked refreshed and happy to be here.

“What are you doing here?” I blurted out, then shuffled my feet in embarrassment.

Having the two of them in one room not only brought back painful memories but also

brought back a vivid daydream. Robert kissing me, Robert between my legs, Robert telling me he wanted me and always had...I felt a weird sense of guilt for thinking that way. I knew our breakup had hurt Jeremy, too. He was my mentor. He'd helped me through all my hours at the clinic, even afterward.

He'd be so upset if he knew what was on my mind as I looked at Robert.

But I just couldn't deny how good Robert looked... despite how much I hated him.

six

Robert

While watching Delia try to defend herself against Jeremy as he lay on top of her, mimicking a real-world scenario in which she woke up to a stranger in the night, I couldn't deny my attraction to her.

I hadn't thought I was a 'dick' to her when she was dating Jeremy. I just didn't take their relationship very seriously. I hadn't thought it would last, and then when it did last, I had been concerned for him.

She was young, and it was inappropriate, and I hadn't been convinced that she was in love with him anyway. It had seemed to me that she might be trying to get ahead in her schooling.

It had worked out for her, after all. Here she was, a year after their breakup, and the man still couldn't cut ties with her, not unless he wanted to risk her telling all his higher-ups. He'd made a mess of his life, and she'd helped.

I watched as Delia managed to push Jeremy's arms out from underneath him, straightening his elbow out and crashing her hand into it. He went flat, and she rolled

him, flattened out, then slid out from underneath him.

Delia celebrated with a wiggly dance, her hands high in the air and her breasts bouncing as much as they could underneath her sports bra. Her ponytail flew around, and a smile shined across her face.

She pointed at Jeremy, and he pointed back at her, and then she whipped her head around and smiled at me. She winked, and I felt something stir in me.

That woman had almost wrecked Jeremy. She said that Jeremy propositioned her, but I knew the truth. I knew that she had showed up late one night at his office when he was doing paperwork, and I knew that she had reached across the desk for his hand and stroked it, her eyes trained on his lips.

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I knew because Jeremy had told me, and Jeremy was my best friend. I knew that she had lured him in and that he had fallen for it, having little to no attention from women.

And now she was winking at me, and I could feel myself falling for it, too.

I shook my head and watched as another woman took Delia's place, but my eyes strayed from the scene in front of me to Delia.

She was a few feet away, tossing her water bottle back and gulping greedily, letting water spill down her chin and onto her chest.

She saw me looking and smirked. She mouthed, 'I win,' and stared into my soul.

I looked back at Jeremy, at the woman struggling underneath him, and I felt for him. He still cared about her, and she only cared to win.

A loud sound, short and cracking, cut through the air from outside. My body reacted before my mind could, and I ducked, screaming, "Shots fired!"

I sprang into action, running toward Delia, slamming her body against mine, and pinning us both to the ground. I looked around at the others and screamed, "Get down!"

They all stared at me, frozen to the spot, and I could feel panic coursing through my body, a tension so thick that my body didn't feel like mine.



I was outside of it, watching myself move. I got up to my knees and army crawled to the other women, tugging on their arms, trying to get them to understand.

I was transported to a battle ground, dirt beneath my knees and kicked up into my ears, a ringing so metallic all around me that I felt it in my teeth.

I could hear the difference between a shot that died in the air and a shot that hit a person. I could smell the difference instantly between a brother in arms who was alive but injured and a brother who had already died.

My body was alert and electric with adrenaline, and I was holding my jaw so tightly that my teeth ached.

I looked up, my face sweaty and cold, and realized where I was. Delia was a few feet from me, on the ground still, looking at me with gentle but wide eyes.

“It was just a car backfiring,” she whispered.

I looked around at everyone’s faces and felt the familiar shame that my PTSD had made a home for me.

“Excuse me,” I muttered as I stood up. “Jeremy, can you—”

“I got it,” he told me, a flat smile on his face. He pitied me. It made me want to flatten his smile and his nose.

But instead, I nodded at him and walked out into the hallway to compose myself. I tried to force myself to breathe. I stretched my ribs out and told myself, “It was just a car. You’re safe.” But I could feel myself losing it every second that passed, could feel the old panic and anxiety mounting.

I pinched my wrist with my nails, letting them really dig into my skin to try and ground myself.

The doors opened, and Delia walked out, concern written all over her face. Scoffing, I turned my face away, embarrassed to be seen this way but also angry that she would insert herself.

“I need a moment alone,” I told her gruffly, continuing my stretches.

“Why don’t you sit down?” she murmured, standing next to me and leaning against the wall, her eyes fixated on me.

“I don’t want to sit on the ground, thank you.”

“Why not? You were just army crawling on it.”

I shot daggers at her with my eyes. “I fully understand that you don’t like me. Now is not the time for whatever games you want to play right now. Please go back to class.”

She propelled herself off the wall with her hands and bounced back against it a couple of times before saying, “I just wanted to see if you were okay.”

“I am,” I lied, even as the familiar panic that I’d grown accustomed to shot through my body again.

“You don’t seem okay.”

I glanced at her, at her gentle expression, one of someone genuinely concerned, and I felt something resembling appreciation flow through me.

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“I am,” I repeated firmly, clasping my hands in front of me and falling forward with them over my head. Hanging upside down was good for the vestibular system. I needed that right now. I could feel the blood in my body everywhere but in my brain where I needed it. It was knocking me off balance.

My vision started to go hazy again, and I stretched my sides again.

Delia moved from the wall and walked over to me. She looked at me gently and asked, “May I?” as she put her palm flat against my chest. “Close your eyes.”

I glared at her for a second before doing as she said, but I felt nothing except the buzzing beneath my skin. She continued, “Imagine that the anxiety you feel is a ball of light in your chest.”

“This is stupid,” I told her, opening my eyes.

She was standing in front of me, so close that I could smell the hints of vanilla in her perfume.

“Just try,” she whispered, looking up at me from under long and curled eyelashes. “Please?”

We maintained eye contact for a moment before I closed my eyes again, and she said, “Okay, imagine that anxiety and panic you feel as a ball of light in your chest. That’s where you feel your anxiety, right? In your chest?”

I nodded, keeping my eyes closed.

“Okay. Do you see the light?” I nodded again.

“Good, now I want you to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, and when you do, on the out breath, the light travels, and on the in breath, the light stays still.”

I peeked at her through one eye and asked, “Do you hear yourself?”

“Hey, I’m not the one who goes through an army role-play every time a car backfires,” she said playfully, raising a blonde eyebrow.

“Navy,” I corrected her.

“What?”

“I wasn’t in the Army. I was in the Navy.”

She rolled her eyes and physically used one of her hands to shut my eyelids.

“There we go, perfect. Now, are you ready? Okay, I want you to breathe in through your nose, and can you feel that light getting bigger? Like a flame? Now, in a moment, you’re going to breathe out through your mouth. Make that breath last as long as possible. Ready, and go.”

I breathed out through my mouth, a slow trickle, and Delia said, “Good, the light should be moving. It’s a ball, but it’s flattening, like a ball of dough. Some parts of the light are moving into your arms, and some are going down to your stomach. Do you feel it?”

I did. It was stupid, but I felt it. The panic was subsiding as I felt it move into the rest of my body in a more manageable way.

I nodded, and Delia's hand started to move away from my chest as she said, "Do you feel better?"

With my eyes still closed, I took her wrist and clamped it where it was, murmuring, "Wait. Please, just a little longer."

"Okay, let's do it once more. Remember, the ball is already flat like dough. Hold onto where that light is. Now breathe in through your nose, and you should see that light flickering with the energy you're giving it. And now breathe out...and it should travel, maybe it travels down to your legs, or maybe to your hands. Wherever it goes, it's okay if it moves. It lives inside you. It's always there."

"Should I let it out?" I asked breathlessly.

"No, no, there's no reason," she whispered.

Her voice was gentle and comforting. It reminded me of the way someone might read a children's book to a child who was falling asleep.

"It's okay for it to be there. It just got tangled up, is all. You need it to live all throughout. It's too much when it's in one spot."

"Okay," I whispered back, enjoying the sensation as I pictured the light traveling to my toes and settling.

"How long has this been happening?" Delia asked, her hand still flat against my chest. "The panic attacks?"

"For ten years," I told her, enjoying the sensation of her touch a little too much.

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“Ten years straight?” she asked, concern lifting her voice.

“No,” I said, without elaboration.

“So then, what’s triggered it lately?”

I sighed and opened my eyes. “My daughter likes a boy. It’s dredging up some feelings for me.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you had a daughter.”

“She’s ten. No, eleven. Sorry, she just had a birthday. It’s been a lot.” I closed my eyes again.

“Why is that such a big deal?”

“It’s...too much to get into right now,” I told her.

“You can tell me,” she breathed, and I had another realization that she was still close to me, that I could smell her watermelon shampoo.

I opened my eyes again and could see her curled eyelashes. I could see a small freckle of green in her brown eyes. So, they were hazel. I could see freckles on the bridge of her nose and a small crack in her bottom lip where she’d been chewing it. I wondered what stressed her out. I wondered if I could relieve it.

“I really can’t,” I responded, my eyes trapped, glued to her lips.

I couldn't look at anything else. She had such beautiful lips, so bow-like. I wanted to unwrap her like a present. Dammit! She made me so mad. But she was so sexy.

As if someone else controlled my hand, I reached out and pressed one hand against her face, gripping her jawline, and stroked her skin with my thumb.

"Robert, I—" she started, and I could see a flush creeping up her neck.

"Do you mind if I just...?" Her face was coming closer to mine, and I couldn't tell if she was moving with me or if I was just taking it, but her lips brushed mine, opening slightly. They were soft and malleable and warm, and I wanted to dive into them, to have them all over my body. I wanted her lips on the head of my cock in that moment, and the thought made me groan against her opening mouth.

seven

Delia

I had no idea what was happening, except that I didn't hate it. I let Robert kiss me for a minute, just feeling it, unsure of how to react.

I closed my eyes and gave into it, feeling the way his lips melted against mine, soft and slightly wet, and before I knew it, I was opening my mouth and kissing him deeper. I was letting his kiss overtake me.

I felt like I was falling down a deep hole, a hole that got darker and deeper with every second that I kissed Robert back. His lips were so inviting, and I had shivers all over my body. I could feel goosebumps rising along my skin.

I opened my eyes and saw him looking back at me. We made eye contact for a moment, and it ignited a heat between my legs. I wanted him.

I gripped him back, wrapping his hair around one of my hands, and kissed him even deeper, twisting my neck to cover more of his lips.

I heard him moan, a guttural sound that I couldn't believe came from him, and I groaned in response, delighted by knowing he wanted me just as badly as I wanted him.

His hands moved from my face and down my sides to grip my waist. He pulled me into him, and I felt the same way I did right before I kneed him: lit on fire by his touch.

His cock was hard against me and pressing into my thigh in a way that wasn't unwelcome. I almost touched it. I had just a moment where my hand almost slid down his body to grip his bulge.

But then I heard Jeremy inside yelling, "Good job, ladies! Okay, one more time, and then we'll take a break! Practice with each other, groups of four!" and it snapped me back to reality like I was on the end of a very long rubber band.

I went hurling back to earth and pulled away from Robert's kiss, snapping, "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Robert's hands opened against my waist, not letting go but not quite holding me either. Confusion was written all over his face. "What do you— I thought—"

"You thought what? What is wrong with you? Your best friend is right in there. Did you bring me here so you two could rope me into some ridiculous threesome or what?"

I suddenly felt so angry, so bothered by the idea of my own making. I felt like I was being asked out for a prank, like I was a prop in a joke I didn't yet understand.



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There was no way Robert liked me. This had to be some kind of mean joke.

“What?” He sounded astounded at the concept, and he dropped his hands from my body entirely. “I was just...I don’t know.”

“You give me this crap about being immature and, you know, just generally not good enough for you or precious Jeremy, and then youkissme? Did you really even have a panic attack, or was that a trick?” I spit out, my anger mounting at his manipulation.

“No, of course not, I really had a – you know what, just go.” He stepped backwards from me, and my body felt it. I yearned instantly for his body back against mine, but I could hear Jeremy inside, and I was shut off from it.

I couldn’t believe his audacity. He pointed to the door down the hallway.

I crossed my arms. “Oh, you’re kicking me out? You kiss me, and thenIhave to leave?”

“You don’t have to leave, no. By all means, stay, this seems like it’ll be really fun.” He rolled his eyes and turned to go back into his class in the auditorium.

“I don’t feel like you understand how badly what you did fucked up my life. And you think that I’d ever want anything to do with you? You’re a...” I searched for the words, but I couldn’t find anything that quite fit. ‘Jerk’ wasn’t strong enough.

He interrupted my thought process, “I get it. I have a class to teach.”

“Yeah, enjoy your classroom full of women to dive into.”

He spun around before leaving the hallway and hissed, “I don’t like what you’re implying, Delia. This wasn’t something I planned. I’ve never touched anyone in this class before. If you didn’t like it or want it, I guess I read it wrong, and I’m sorry, but that doesn’t give you a right to try to paint me as some pervert.”

My lip twitched. “My ex, who is your best friend, by the way, is right inside there, teaching your class for you. Just being the genuinely nice guy that he is. And he and I broke up because of you. No other reason, Robert, just you. And you’re out here trying to move in on me like you don’t know that.”

“No offense, Delia, but I wasn’t trying that hard.” He smirked, crossing his arms. In that position, his biceps looked so muscular. I wanted to squeeze one. Why did I still want him?

“Excuse me?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. Was he calling me easy?

“I’m just saying.” He ran his tongue over his bottom teeth and smiled. “You seemed pretty into it yourself.”

“Enjoy your class,” I told him and turned to walk down the hallway.

“Yeah, go ahead and go. You seem really good at that part,” he responded, his voice booming down the corridor as I kept going. A little louder, he shouted, “You’re really proving me wrong about that immaturity thing!”

“And you’re really proving me wrong about that jerk thing!” I spat back as I opened the doors and left.

It was only once I got back to my car that I realized I had left all my things, except

my phone and my keys, in the classroom.

I texted Jeremy, filled with shame and dread and guilt: Had to go pick up an extra shift. Can you bring my things by later?

I felt even worse knowing that I was having him do a favor for me after what I had just done.

As much as I didn't want to admit it to Robert, or to myself for that matter, he was right. I was pretty into it myself. I let him kiss me, and then I kissed him back... and quite passionately at that.

So, maybe I was as bad as Robert said.

Maybe I was even worse.

eight

Robert

I laid my head down that night with a heavy heart and a busy mind.

I kept thinking of what Delia said, of what she thought of me, that I was using my self-defense courses for some sort of weird attempt at meeting women.

It disgusted me.

She must have said it to get under my skin. She was attracted to me, and it bothered her.

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It made sense. It bothered me that I was attracted to her, too. It bothered me that even right now, my cock was hard with lust for her.

I couldn't stop looking at her when she was in class, at the curves of her body and her delicate smile, the way she seemed so sure of herself and so sure of what she wanted.

She had kicked me so hard I had seen stars. I liked a woman who went for it.

Part of me wanted to tame her, to hold her down and make her mine. Under the blanket, my cock twitched, moving the blanket with it.

I held my head in silent frustration, trying to shut out the thoughts of Delia and her form.

I closed my eyes and willed myself to sleep. I woke up with Delia in my arms, her mouth pressed against mine, her breathing throaty, and her chest rising and falling against mine.

I could feel her nipples against my chest, and I reached up and tweaked one, enjoying the moan that awarded me in response.

I leaned down and took one of her nipples in my mouth through her shirt, nibbling against the fabric and her nipple at the same time.

She held my head in her hands, and when I glanced up, I could see that her mouth was wide open, and her eyes were rolling back in her head in ecstasy.

What started as a breathy groan of “God, Robert” turned into a moan, and then Delia looked behind me and pointed, her eyes wide.

Her open mouth stopped moaning, and instead, a scream sliced through the air, piercing, so piercing that it shot a pang of fear through my whole body.

My body was ice cold, and when I turned around, I saw my late wife.

I walked over to her, screaming, “Quinn! Say something, Quinn!” She looked lifeless, her eyes wide open and milky.

I shook her slightly, but her body was stiff and gone.

I moved to pick her up, and when I tried to, I found that she was heavier than I could manage.

I tried to drag her anyway, but she wouldn’t move at all. Just as I became devastated by my inability to move her, someone from my platoon yelled out, “Rob! It’s coming! Let’s go!”

I didn’t know what ‘it’ was, but I felt charged with the knowledge that it was bad and that I had to go. I had to leave, and that meant leaving Quinn.

I wept a few tears, and they sizzled onto her skin, burning her. I glanced over at Delia to tell her that we had to get out of there, but she said, “I’m staying with her.”

Her face turned into my daughter’s, then Jeremy’s, then hers again, and then it went black.

She was gone, everyone was gone, and I was alone in the darkness, listening to ‘it’ breathing and brandishing a weapon.

I heard the sound of a gun being cocked, and before I could react, it was going off, and I was in nothing but pain.

I screamed to check if I was alive and found that I could scream, but it didn't reassure me.

"Daddy?" I heard from behind my bedroom door, and I came out of my sweaty haze as I realized it was Corinne. Her voice was small and afraid, and I could see her shadow sneaking in beneath the door, looming and dark.

I fought the terror, rearing its head again, interpreting the shadows as figures coming for me in the darkness of a dirty foxhole.

I knew it was just my baby, Corinne. I knew I needed to fight the fear to be able to answer her.

"Corinne?" I asked, groggy from my sleep being exhausting instead of restful.

"Daddy, you were shouting again," she said, and I saw her shift her feet under the door.

"I'm sorry, Rin-Rin, I'll be quiet. Go back to bed."

She didn't say anything and instead stood there for a moment in the light of the hallway, and I knew she was considering coming in. I was afraid for her. I didn't know how long I had until the flashbacks won over, and my mind would be lost.

"Go to bed, Corinne," I said more firmly, lowering my voice.

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She turned and padded off, her bare feet retreating against the hardwood.

I needed to protect her. She was so vulnerable, and I felt like I was a threat to her in these moments.

I didn't know how to get around the PTSD. Sometimes, it took me over like possession. Sometimes, I was as powerless to them as she was to me. If she came into my room while I was suffering from a flashback, I couldn't be certain that she'd be safe. And that terrified me.

As soon as she was out of earshot, I sprang from the bed and dragged an armchair from the corner of my room to the door, blocking the handle with it.

I tried to open the door to see if it was something I could do while asleep and found that it was sturdy. But I wasn't sure if it was something I wouldn't be able to maneuver if I was afraid enough. I'd done a lot of things in the middle of a flashback when I thought my life was at risk.

Sighing, I walked over to my black lacquered dresser and opened the bottom drawer. I opened the small lockbox where I kept things I didn't want Corinne to get to, a small bottle of alcohol and condoms. I pulled the handcuffs out, shiny and harshly bright in the dark room.

I had never used them before, but I'd bought them for this exact purpose years ago when it had gotten really bad.

I'd been able to restart therapy and hadn't stopped since, once I realized how

seriously the safety of my family relied upon my going.

With a heavy sigh, I clasped one of the handcuffs around my wrist, pushing it tight until I wasn't able to slip my wrist out at all, and then I climbed back into bed and closed the other cuff around my bedpost, trapping myself into a singular sleeping position for the night. I shoved the key under a slat beneath my mattress, using all my might to push it as far away as possible and make it as hard to reach as I possibly could. I needed it to be hard to reach if I was having a flashback.

Being a father meant protecting my daughter at all costs, even from myself.

I closed my eyes and prepared for the onslaught of images, each more horrific than the last, knowing that I couldn't stop it with all the breathing in the world.

Finally, I gave up and uncuffed myself. It wasn't going to work.

I needed a fucking drink.

nine

Delia

Tonight, after Robert kissed me, I decided to lend some credibility to my lie to Jeremy and picked up a shift at the bar where I worked.

I preferred to bartend, but occasionally, they put me in as a bottle girl, walking around with trays of cocktails and bottles of wine, trying to convince wealthy men to spend unnecessary money.

I was good at it, but sometimes the men got a little touchy when I worked that particular position, which is why it wasn't my favorite.



I walked up to a group of men seated in leather chairs, smoking cigars. They were laughing together about something, their wrists draped in watches and their fingers shining with rings. Their suits were pressed. In short, they had money to spend.

“Hello, gentlemen,” I started, flashing the sincerest smile that I could muster. “Would anyone here like a refill?”

I pointed to an empty glass one of the men had in front of him on the glass table. It was sweating a ring on the surface, and I gestured that I could take it from him.

“How about you? Wouldn’t want those lips to get dry.”

He leered at me, an approximation of a smile, and picked up the glass. He held it just out of my reach, teasing me with it.

“I can think of a few ways you could wet my lips.” He looked over at the group of men, who laughed, egging him on. “And one or two I could wet yours.”

When he said it, he glanced down at the tiny shorts I had to wear for the job, black and spandex, as they rode up into my ass cheeks. His eyes lingered on my crotch, and I tugged down on my shorts legs, smiling at him.

“I only serve drinks,” I told him dryly, and reached to take his drink.

He took the opportunity to cop a feel ‘accidentally,’ his fingers grazing the part of my breasts outside of my shirt as my cleavage almost spilled out.

“Sorry,” he said sarcastically, as I finally got hold of the drink.

“If you’re really sorry, why don’t you tip her extra for the effort?” I heard someone behind me say.

As I straightened up and turned, my stomach dropped to see Robert there, a dark expression written on his face.

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He stood a good foot above me, and I could see the men calculating how tall he was from their seats.

Apparently deciding he was too tall to fight, the man who had harassed me scoffed and reached into his billfold to pull out a twenty dollar bill. He crumpled it up and tossed it onto my tray, smirking at Robert.

Robert closed his eyes and grimaced, and I felt the air charge with masculinity, the kind that scared me.

He opened his eyes and pushed past me, his hand delicately cupping my waist to scoot me out of harm's way.

He leaned close to the man's face and murmured, "Please, take that off her tray and give her a real tip before I feed that bill to you."

The guy looked around at his group of friends, who avoided eye contact, suddenly extremely interested in what was in the bottom of their glasses.

The guy looked from Robert to me, and then asked, "This your boyfriend?"

Robert didn't give me any time to respond. He grabbed the man's collar and pulled him up to his feet before hissing, "I'll make you my boyfriend in a second if you don't do what I say."

"I – fine!" The guy's forehead was gleaming with sweat, and he burned his suit with his cigar in the process of reaching for his billfold.

“You made me fuck up my suit!” he accused.

Robert reached into the man’s pocket for him and set the billfold onto my tray, not letting go of the guy with his other hand.

“Delia, get whatever tip you think is right out of there,” he said, his eyes locked with the man.

“You fucked up your own suit being a fucking creep. Wait while she decides.”

My mouth was dry. I could feel the eyes of the men in the friend group on me, and my chest was tight with the anxiety of it all. But slowly, I set the tray down on the table and reached for the leather billfold. It was engraved ‘To my love – money means nothing when I have you.’ I smirked at it, thinking of whatever woman thought he was the man of her dreams, and took out two hundred-dollar bills. Next time, I hoped, he’d know how to behave.

“Hey, what the fuck!” the guy exclaimed, and Robert jostled him by the collar, setting him down into his chair.

“I promise you that’s a lot cheaper than the hospital bill would be if you even look at her again tonight,” Robert told him, pushing the guy’s legs out of the way to move toward me.

He picked up the tray and took the billfold from me. He threw it back at the man’s chest and handed me my tray. “Come on.”

“What was that?” I whispered, as we walked away from the man. I scanned the rest of the bar for empty drinks, looking for someone to help.

Anything to avoid looking at Robert. What he had done had been reckless and

possessive.

And it had turned me on more than anything I'd ever had a man do for me.

"You work here?"

"No, I just dress up as an employee and scam people out of cash," I told him sarcastically, walking over to a table that was signaling me.

A man with a woman next to him said, "Another bourbon and coke please." I nodded and took his empty glass.

I glanced at Robert and saw the pained expression on his face. He didn't like my joke.

"What are you thinking, working at a place like this?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, making my way back toward the bar with the empty glass.

I could take a few more orders, but Robert was distracting me, confusing me. His presence was intoxicating and strange. I felt like I was in a dream, seeing him here.

"I mean, this is...this is degrading, Delia. And dangerous. What are you doing here? Why do you work here? And why are you dressed like... that?" He made a gesture with his hand, directed at my outfit, and looked genuinely at a loss. And a little bit disgusted.

His disgust cut through me. I was shocked by how much I cared what he thought of me. And I was taken aback by his opinion.

This was a sought-after position. I made a lot of money, and I didn't do much. This

wasn't exactly the kind of job people thought of when they thought of dangerous and degrading jobs.

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Kassandra was behind the bar, looking confused by Robert's presence. I shot her a look like 'Don't ask' and said, "Whiskey coke."

"Bourbon," Robert corrected me.

"Oh! Shit, bourbon coke," I told Kassandra, and she knit her eyebrows together before taking the glass and dumping it into the sink.

When she turned around, I whipped around to finally face Robert and looked him in the eyes.

Disarmed, momentarily, by the blazing green they were, I shook my head and said, "You don't have much room to talk, Robert. If you find this job sodegrading, what are you doing demanding its services? Assuming you aren't stalking me, you're here to drink, right? Someone has to serve you that drink. You know that, right? Unless you want a self-serve bar, in which case, that would be at home." I tilted my head at him. "So why don't you just go home, Robert?"

His mouth dropped open, and he didn't say anything for a moment.

He stepped away from me, just one foot back, but I looked down at his feet and then up at his face. I could see regret in them, and he said, "Sorry to bother you."

Instantly, guilt swarmed me. I knew why he was acting this way.

I had doubted his intentions earlier, but looking at him now, I saw it on his face. I had worked with enough veterans to recognize that trauma was doing this to him.

He had an avoidant attachment style. He was afraid to be hurt, and I had hurt him. Now, I'd hurt him again. But his judgment stung. He needed to know he couldn't talk that way to me, even if he was hurting. He needed to know that his traumas weren't an excuse to be an asshole.

I reached for his arm and said, in a quiet voice, "Maybe we should talk about what happened today."

"What's there to talk about?" he asked, not looking back at me.

I was looking at the curls on his head. I could see a few grays intermingled, a reminder of how much older than me he was, even older than Jeremy. Not by a lot, but still older. He had to be twenty years older than me at least.

I walked around him so that I could stand in front of him and said, "The kiss? Maybe we should talk about how you kissed me?"

He closed his eyes against my accusation and said, "So you're still going with that? You're going to pretend you didn't kiss me, too? And now I'm stalking you, right?"

"No, I just—"

He opened his eyes and grabbed the inside of one of my elbows. His grip was hard, and my skin felt electrified by his touch again.

I glanced at his hand, cleared my throat, and looked up at him.

His jaw was tense, and he demanded, "So, say it. Say that you kissed me, too. And say that you liked it."

I licked my lips and whispered, "I kissed you, too." My voice cracked on 'kissed'. I



held my breath.

His hand snaked down to my wrist, and I felt the muscles in my pussy tighten. “And?”

“And I...” my eyes darted around the room. I caught Cassandra’s eyes, and she held up her hands, wondering if I needed help. I shook my head at her and looked back at Robert’s intense eyes. “I liked it.”

He exhaled out of his nose sharply and twisted his lips. “I know,” he said, and then continued walking to the door and out, leaving me standing at the bar alone.

I dropped my shoulders. I felt stupid. For just a moment, I’d thought that maybe he liked me.

Now, I was thinking that maybe I’d been wrong about his motivations for kissing me. Maybe it wasn’t about me at all. Maybe he was testing the waters for Jeremy, seeing if I was really loyal.

Or maybe he just wanted to hurt me. Maybe he liked the power.

Kassandra’s voice sounded behind me, “Here’s that bourbon coke.”

I looked back at her with tears in my eyes and took the drink. “Thanks.”

“Are you okay?” she asked me.

“Not at all,” I responded honestly, and then I went back to work.

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I kept looking at the door, hoping he'd walk back in and tell me that he wanted me.

What was wrong with me? Why did I want him to want me so badly?

ten

Robert

The weekend after I saw Delia at that bar, being harassed by a man and debasing herself for money, I met with Jeremy for coffee and a game of chess.

It felt disgusting breaking bread with my friend, knowing how badly I wanted his ex-girlfriend.

I could hardly believe the level of disloyalty I'd gone to in my mind with Delia. I couldn't even let myself think about what I'd transgressed with her in actuality. That kiss had been too far already. But the way her body had responded...

No, Robert. Stop thinking about it. Stop thinking about her.

Jeremy sat across from me, only his eyebrows and eyes visible over his coffee mug as he looked at the chessboard in front of him. He only had to make a first move, but he hadn't decided yet what it would be.

I felt antsy watching him try to figure out if he wanted to move a knight or a pawn, his only two choices. I chewed on the inside of my cheek and tried not to think about Delia. Or Corinne. Or Corinne's crush. Or work. Which didn't leave me with much

that I could think about.

Leaning forward in his chair and uncrossing his ankle from his knee, Jeremy moved the pawn in front of his king two spaces to allow his bishop to move, like I knew he would. He always liked that strategy. He liked to come at me sideways. He scooted back in his seat and motioned for me to go.

Without thought, I crossed my knight over in an L-shape. Jeremy winced like it caused him physical pain, and I said, “I saw Delia at work.”

He glanced up, his eyebrows raising slightly then correcting themselves. He didn’t want to give away how much he still cared about her every move, but the more he over-corrected, the more painfully obvious it was to me that he wasn’t over her in the slightest.

“Speaking of Delia,” Jeremy said, clearing his throat, and moving another pawn from in front of his queen to make room for his other bishop. “She texted me to grab her things after she left class early that day. Do you know why she left?” He was looking at me hard as he took a gulp of his too-hot coffee, resulting in a sputtering cough.

Chewing even harder on the inside of my cheek, I shrugged a shoulder as the guilt consumed me.

Should I just come clean now? He was giving me a good time to confess. He’d practically set me up for it.

“No. Well, I don’t know. Maybe it was too much, helping me with my flashbacks,” I muttered, trying to look embarrassed, as I brought my second knight out.

I took a small sip of my coffee and watched him blot at the spilled coffee on the front of his shirt.

“Ah,” he said. “I noticed you’ve had more of those lately, the flashbacks. What do you think is bringing that on?” He moved another pawn from in front of his other rook. He always sacrificed his rooks. He didn’t care much for a straight line.

I didn’t respond at first, choosing instead to look as though I was deeply studying the board, even though I knew what I was going to do.

“I thought we were meeting for coffee, not therapy,” I quipped, grateful that he was distracted by my flashbacks. My lie had worked. It was too bad that Jeremy was my therapist in addition to my best friend. It meant that I had no one to talk to about how guilty I felt for lying to my best friend.

I moved one of my knights to take the pawn in front of his king. That showed that I meant business, but it didn’t allow his king to get me.

He grimaced, hurt that I had already taken something of his, and moved his bishop across the board, diagonal to my knight. He was forcing me to move. He said, “Well, then, as a friend, what do you think is bringing that on?”

I slapped my knee as though I was rattled by his sudden coup and drank my coffee, giving myself a moment to think of what to say.

I didn’t want to tell him about Corinne. I didn’t want to talk about any of that. Instead, I said, “Did you know that Delia worked at a bar?”

Jeremy’s eyes snapped up to mine, and he narrowed his slightly, those milky blue eyes that unsettled me sometimes. They pierced you right to the gut and seemed to see through you. He had the eyes of a therapist, hawk eyes that saw all.

“I did,” he responded coolly, setting his mug down on the table next to the game.

Avoiding eye contact, I moved my knight out of the way of his pawn and took another of his. “And you’ve never said anything to her?”

His eyes flickered from my face to the board, and then, without a second thought, he brought his queen out to take my knight. He didn’t hesitate at all, and then he asked, with a tinge of frustration masked as curiosity, “About what? It’s a job.”

“Right, a dangerous one,” I snapped. How did he not see that this was a problem? “And a debasing one. She was practically being assaulted by this guy when I came in.”

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“Assaulted?” his voice was now going up an octave.

“Well, the guy was all over her.”

“Well,” he trailed off, and I knew he was as concerned as I was. “I can talk to her about it if you think...do you think it has something to do with why she’s taking your self-defense classes?”

“It could.” I moved my knight in, nestled next to his king. He wouldn’t like how close I was to him, even if my knight couldn’t do anything.

He stared at the pieces, lost in thought, then continued, “She’s in school, Robert. She needs money. And what were you doing there anyway?”

He looked down at the board to seem nonchalant, but I knew that I had bothered him. He didn’t want Delia to be in an unsafe situation. And he couldn’t hide all the feelings she still brought up for him.

“I couldn’t sleep.” I shrugged off the question.

Jeremy considered his moves. He had a couple, and I drank my coffee while watching his brain turn.

“And so you decided to drink? That isn’t a good sign, my friend. You’ve done a lot of work to not self-soothe with alcohol.”

“It wasn’t like that. I wasn’t planning on getting black-out drunk. You know I’m past

that. I just...thought I should get out of the house, and do something different. Anyway, I left without having anything.”

I didn’t tell him that I left because I was too upset about Delia and the way she’d painted our kiss.

I didn’t tell him that she’d admitted she liked it, the way it felt to kiss me.

I didn’t tell him how good she looked in those little black shorts or how bad I wanted to bend her over in them. How I wanted to slip a finger into what I knew was a juicy pussy, feel how wet she was for me and...

Ok. That’s enough, Rob!

“But you know, in the past—”

I interrupted him, “Trust me, I know. I’m not going back to that person. I am a changed man. I haven’t gotten like that in a long time. I’m all about Corinne’s safety now. She needs a good role model. That’s what I care about.”

Jeremy seemed to set aside the game for a moment, engaged with me now. He sipped at his drink and settled back in his chair, leaving my knight there by his king.

He was doing a good job today pretending that he didn’t care about a lot of things, as was I. I wondered if he knew I was pretending the way I knew he was pretending.

“How’s Corinne these days?”

“She’s good,” I replied, shrugging. “Too good. There’s aboy.”

“How does that feel?” Jeremy smiled at me. It’s just a boy, no big deal. Nothing’s as

big a deal as my PTSD makes it feel.

I responded honestly. I wanted to be honest with my friend. I would give him honesty where I could. “Fucking terrifying. I don’t even know the kid, and I want to nail her windows shut.”

Giving a small chuckle, he said, “Jesus, Robert, she’s in fifth grade. I don’t think he’ll come by to throw rocks at her windows just yet.”

“Right. I know.”

He eyed me suspiciously. “Could that be why it bothered you where Delia worked? Does she remind you too much of your daughter?”

“She definitely does not remind me of my daughter,” I scoffed quickly, then drank from my cup, trying not to show him how much his comment bothered me. I knew if he could see my face, he would see it on me.

Delia might be much younger than me, but she was nowhere near the age of my daughter, for Christ’s sake.

“Are you going to move or not? Quit bogarting the game.”

Jeremy smirked that he’d gotten under my skin by not making his move.

“Your wife then?” he asked, deciding to ignore my harmless knight by his king. He moved his queen forward to take my pawn and planted himself next to my king as well.



“Check, by the way.”

I stared at him for a second. I could see what he was getting at. He wasn't just saying it. That wasn't his style. How did he know? Was it that obvious how attracted to her I was?

“I just...you know how I am about that sort of thing. I care about women's safety.” I moved my king to take his precious king and grinned triumphantly.

Jeremy shook his head. “You can't do that. My bishop will take your king.” I looked down at the board.

Fuck, he's right.

“Listen, Robby, I've always admired that about you. But it isn't healthy to try to control other people's lives that way. What happened to Quinn was...” he shuddered, “...awful. Of course you're having trouble moving on from that or putting it in a box. But it was an isolated event. It is not the usual outcome. We've talked about this.”

“Yeah. We sure have,” I grumbled, staring at the board, but his talking was making it hard to concentrate on my available moves.

“I'm sorry, Bobby, I'm getting too far into therapist mode again, aren't I?”

“A bit,” I said gruffly, proudly moving my bishop to take his queen instead. I looked up with a grin.

“I’ll back off. Besides, checkmate.”

Checkmate? What the fuck—how?

Before I could look and verify that he really had beaten me, he pulled back with a flair of his hands, greedily excited about his win, and knocked over his mug onto the board. Pieces flew as coffee spilled onto the beautiful wooden set with the velvet inlay.

“Oh, shit!” he cried out, jumping from his chair and scrambling to grab his cup.

I helped him clean, but my mind was elsewhere, even as a friendly barista hurried over with napkins.

I was thinking about what he’d said, about my worry for Delia being connected to Quinn. Of course it was. I could never separate Quinn from the people in my life that I cared about. And I did care about Delia. In my own way. Even if it meant that I had to be someone completely different around my friend, even if it meant I had to live a double life.

Suddenly, a pain shot through my mouth. “Shit, Robert, you’re bleeding. Did I hit you with a piece or something?” Jeremy asked, pointing at my face.

I brought my fingers to my mouth and realized that I had bitten clean through my cheek. The stress of my secret was getting to me.

If no one else would punish me, I would punish myself, apparently.

eleven

Delia

Monday rolled around, and it was time for me to return to what I truly loved to do: help people.

Mondays through Fridays were so full for me, with school and my hours at the counseling center, but I never felt tired of it. I may get tired, but not tired of it. Knowing that I was working toward a degree and a career helping veterans heal from their traumas made it all worth it.

The hardest part of my day wasn't listening to people's problems. It was usually seeing Jeremy and pretending not to be hurt, just looking at him.

I had trouble trusting men after my dad, and Jeremy had really hurt me. But I knew he meant well, and he was my supervisor, so I got through it.

One day, when I had my own practice, I would look back at this time in my life, and it would seem so far away. I just knew it.

Or I hoped anyway.

I drove to the counseling center on autopilot, my mind on Robert. The way he had manhandled that man at the bar had turned me on, though I hated to admit that to myself. I wanted to be more evolved than that, but seeing him be so protective was sexy, whether it was primal or not.

I tightened my grip around the steering wheel as I thought of that look in his eyes as he held that man by the collar, the pure anger and disgust I'd seen in them. It had hurt to see that look turned against me a moment later.

And the way he'd brought up our kiss. What did it all mean, really? How was I supposed to feel? What was I supposed to think?

A more evolved woman would ignore him, Delia. He's your ex's best friend. It's too messy. Jeremy is still in your life, and you care about him.

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I arrived at the office, a tall gray building with all of the offices, all the workers living their own lives, maybe some of them living out their dreams or getting there, like me. They were all doing such different things. Some were dentists, and some were real estate agents. The building was funny like that, a collection of people from all walks.

I took the elevator up and rooted in my purse to put away my keys as I stepped onto my floor.

From the hallway, I could hear the white noise machine that Jeremy and the other therapist played to make sure waiting clients couldn't hear an ongoing session.

I could already smell the calming eucalyptus wafting into the hallway, and it put a smile on my face, knowing how close I was.

I loved doing this. It was like healing a childhood part of me, that part of me that just wanted her dad to be able to be a normal dad.

I opened the door and could feel my face blanch as I saw Robert sitting at the end of the small space, right next to the door I had to walk into.

His hands were folded in his lap, and he was staring straight ahead as though he was disassociating. I could recognize that glassy look anywhere.

But he sure snapped out of it when he saw me. For just a moment, I saw a spark of recognition, instantly superimposed by him convincing himself he was making it up. Then it clicked for him – why I'd be here – and he looked up at me from his chair again.

It made sense that I'd see him here. I'd probably seen him hundreds of times and never put it together. But now that I knew his face so intimately, it was hard to miss.

His green eyes seemed to read through to my soul, and I looked away, afraid to give our relationship away. It wasn't right in a space like this to call attention to it.

I breezed past him, muttering, "Excuse me," and walked into the office where I knew I'd find Jeremy.

"Hi, Delia," he said, without looking up from the stack of papers in front of him. When he found what he needed, he pulled it apart from the stack and turned it upside down on the desk. His eyes found mine, and he furrowed his brow. "What's wrong?"

I pointed to the door, hoping that the white noise machine would keep what I was about to say private. "Is Robert our client?"

Jeremy moved from around the desk and walked over to the camera to make sure the view was correct. We had to record every session, or I wouldn't get my hours, and if I didn't get my hours, I wouldn't graduate.

I watched him fiddling with it, and then he said, "He is today."

"Where's Tim?" I asked, my voice rising to a higher pitch than I meant for it to.

Tim was the man for whom I usually attended sessions with Jeremy. Tim should have been here, not Robert. I couldn't sit next to Jeremy and listen to Robert talk. It was wrong. He deserved someone impartial.

Jeremy glanced at me from behind the camera, his face still scrunched in confusion. "Tim had another appointment he couldn't miss. Why, what does it matter?"

“It matters because we know Robert. I know Robert. I can’t help therapize Robert!” I pointed to the door aggressively, picturing Robert out in the hallway with his ear against the wall.

It wasn’t right. Robert deserved a safe space away from me. No matter what was going on with us, if there was an us – not that I wanted there to be an us – he deserved that. Everyone did.

“You can, and you will, Delia. You need the hours.” He sat down on the therapy couch and patted the spot next to him. “Come sit. Talk to me about what’s going on.”

I stood where I was and crossed my arms. “I’ll make up the hours then. Who cares? I can stay longer another day. This is a conflict of interest. I can’t do it.”

Anger flashed across his face, but it melted away quickly. I must have imagined it. “You barely know Robert. What are you even talking about? How is this a conflict of interest?”

I didn’t say anything, opting instead to chew on my bottom lip. I looked down at the floor.

This scenario made me uncomfortable, and I didn’t like that Jeremy was pushing it.

Finally, I gathered the courage, and I said, “Well, you know him really well. You definitely shouldn’t be therapizing him.” I set my jaw as I said it and watched his face for signs of a suspicious reaction.

“So then you’ll take the lead. It isn’t a conflict of interest to therapize your self-defense teacher that you’ll meet on weekends for one month.” He chuckled, and I started to doubt myself.

Was he right?

All my schooling told me that he wasn't, but he would know better than I would.

Wouldn't he?



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I didn't say anything, and Jeremy got off the couch, stepping toward me. "Delia, are you safe?"

His question caught me off guard, and I dropped my crossed arms. "Safe? What do you mean?"

"I know people are bothering you at work. And you started taking those self-defense classes." He stepped even closer to me, his hands out as if to wrap me in a hug.

I brought my eyebrows together. I couldn't seem to wipe the look off my face. "I—bothering me at work?"

"Didn't a man bother you the other day at work? Or is that not true?"

The man with the wallet. But how would Jeremy know about that?

The expression on my face turned from confusion to anger as I realized exactly how Jeremy would know about that.

"Did you talk to Robert about me?" I accused, tilting my head at him.

"So it's true then? Do you need resources, Delia? We could get you another job if you need money that badly." His voice was soothing, but his eyes were expressionless, simply prying.

He moved to take my hands, and I stepped away from him. "I don't need another job."

“So you feel safe?”

“Of course, I feel safe. But, I’m not—I’m not doing this, Jeremy, I’m sorry. You’ll have to find someone else.”

“Delia!” he called after me as I grabbed my purse and walked out the door. I bumped into Robert’s knee as I did, and I stumbled slightly.

Robert’s hand shot out to catch me, and his hands on my body again brought up memories that I didn’t need rolling in my head at that moment.

“Excuse me,” I muttered, looking at him at the insistence of something in his eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asked me. He looked strangely sad, and for a moment, I almost considered staying.

Almost.

“I’m fine. Let me go please.” I extracted myself from his grasp and kept walking down the hallway, out of the space, down the hallway of the building, into the elevator, and out of the building into my car.

How could they? Who do they think they are talking about me together? What business is it of either of theirs? What business am I of either of theirs?

I drove in a blind rage, my mind racing with images of the two of them cozied up together, discussing my job and how dangerous they thought it was.

How dare they? Neither of them had any claim over me, and they certainly couldn’t tell me where to work. Neither of them paid my bills!

I felt my mouth going dry and my heart racing, and I pulled over to take inventory of how my body felt. The anxiety was all over my body, in my pounding heart and in my quick breathing. I was definitely triggered by the idea of the two of them talking.

And this time, it wasn't guilt. No, it was the memory of all they had put me through the year before – the two of them chatting away about me and Jeremy and our relationship. They had been conspiring together, those two, until it destroyed my relationship. And now it seemed they were back at it.

Those two needed to stop discussing me. It wasn't fair. I didn't deserve it then, and I didn't deserve it now.

I breathed out of my mouth slowly and closed my eyes, hearing the racing of the cars on the road beside me. I would be okay.

But I needed to figure out how to make this stop. I couldn't deal with them talking about me anymore.

It wasn't good for anyone.

twelve

Robert

“Robert, I'm ready for you,” Jeremy said, opening the door and looking at me seriously. I hated it when Jeremy got into therapist mode. I knew I needed him to, but I hated it. I hated that I was in therapy at all.

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But this week had been hard, and I knew I couldn't avoid it anymore. I needed his help, even if it was hard to get through.

Sighing, I stood up, looking down the hall where Delia had left in a hurry. Jeremy was studying me as he held the door open, and I finally walked in, settling on the couch.

"No camera?" I asked, pointing.

"No student, no camera," he said wryly, sitting in his chair and pulling his notepad into his lap.

"Is Delia okay?" I asked, looking behind me at the door as though she may come in, saying, "Sorry about that."

I knew it wouldn't happen. I had seen something murderous in her eyes. She wasn't happy about whatever conversation had taken place.

She had to know that Jeremy was my therapist. Why was she so surprised? Where did she get off trying to make me uncomfortable in my own therapist's office?

Still, I was worried. She had looked not just angry but also upset. I wondered if Jeremy had said something.

Jeremy didn't glance up from his notes. He scribbled something down and tapped his pen, saying, "She's fine, Robert. How about you tell me about you? How did your week go?"

I smirked uncomfortably and reminded him, “Well, you already know some of it.”

“Sure, but as I recall...” Jeremy shifted in his spot in the chair, finally looking up from his notepad, “... you wanted to cut the conversation short, so we did.”

Well, he got me there. Looking down at my clasped hands, I grumbled, “Yeah, I guess we did.”

Jeremy smiled thinly and prodded, “So, what did you want to talk about? The panic attacks? Corinne? Delia? How’s work?”

Work. A safe topic. Breathing a sigh of relief, I launched into a diatribe about my woes with work selling self-defense weapons. It was a bit of a passion project for me. I didn’t really need the money, which is how I was able to make decisions that put the company in jeopardy in the name of women’s safety sometimes.

After Quinn had died, I’d been awarded quite a sum from her murderer, not that I’d ever seen the entire amount. But when he went to prison, I got the amount he’d had in his bank and some liquidated assets. Occasionally, I got garnished wages from his prison job, not much at all, like getting a royalty check from the worst movie of my life.

But Quinn had set us up nicely with her life insurance. She was always the prepared one of the two of us. Neither of us had thought we’d see that money for a long time. I’d hoped I’d never see it, that I’d go first. We probably both assumed I’d go first, being in the Navy at the time.

I’d invested that money, which amounted to roughly half a million, and I’d made slightly over two million from it after just three years. It was one of the best achievements of my life till that point. Then I got a financial advisor and started investing larger sums with the help of more knowledgeable people. I started my

business, and after seven years, I had made a little over a billion dollars. And then that was the greatest achievement of my life, setting Corinne up for success like that.

“Oh, I’ve got an issue with getting inventory to the UK, which of course I’m pissed about. Apparently, you can’t carry weapons of any kind in the UK, and that includes self-defense weapons, so now I’ve got to figure out how to get my stuff over there without putting women at risk for being arrested.”

I planned on talking more, but Jeremy interrupted me, “Are you pissed off? Or do you feel out of control? I know you have issues with control. Especially lately.”

I narrowed my eyes and snapped out of my safe space, talking about work. He was steering it back to feelings like always. Sarcastically, I asked, “What do you mean issues with control?”

“Come on, Robby, we talked about this.” Jeremy looked frustrated with me, but he used a gentle voice, his therapist's voice. “Trying to decide for someone else whether or not their job is dangerous is an issue of control.”

Oh, right. Telling Delia that working at a place where men tried to shove money into her bra was wrong, apparently. Or unhealed. Or whatever garbage word therapists used to say that someone should never give their opinion to others anymore.

Still on edge from the way Delia disappeared, I asked again, “Where did Delia go? Can you just tell me why she left?”

Jeremy said flippantly, “She was concerned about trying to therapize you when she knows you.” I swallowed and looked down.

Of course. Here I was thinking that she was angry at me, and really she was trying to

protect me. Jeremy continued, “That seems to upset you. Does that upset you?”

I scoffed, looking up at the ceiling and spreading my arms out around the back of the couch. “I’m not upset. I’m not a kid.”

“Adults can feel upset.”

I chewed on that open wound in my cheek, the one I’d broken open when Jeremy wouldn’t stop bringing up my late wife. I prodded it with my tongue, indulging the stinging feeling it provided.

“The thing is, when I saw her at the bar, I guess my ‘control issues’ took over since that’s what we’re calling them. And the way I talked to her was...well, I feel bad.”

“Ah,” Jeremy said noncommittally. He closed his notebook. No more notes to take. I guess he thought he had me figured out at this point, then. “You spoke with Delia?”

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“Yeah, I spoke with her,” I sighed, “in a way that was...unkind. I was rattled seeing her there, knowing she was...in my class. I was worried. It came from a place of fear.”

“That’s right!” Jeremy crowed, excited that I was using ‘feelings’ words. “Fear. Fear is trauma’s best friend. It’s holding you back, Robert. Can you tell me what coping skills you ended up using that night?”

I laughed a little. “To tell you the truth, I took some sleeping pills to knock me out.”

“That’s not great, Robert,” Jeremy tsked, opening his notebook again.

“Lesser of two evils,” I responded, poking that godforsaken hole in my mouth.

Really, it was the lesser of four evils. He knew what alcohol did to me. He knew about the nightmares. He didn’t know about the fantasizing I’d been doing about Delia in my sleep, the dreams where I sucked on her nipples, where I ran my hands along her body, and she melted under my touch. I couldn’t afford to drink, and I couldn’t afford to dream. I had to be knocked out to avoid it all.

Jeremy looked at me with a disappointed face. I wondered how disappointed that face could get.

What would his face look like if he knew I’d sucked on his ex’s bottom lip while he taught my class in the next room? Or if he knew I’d held a man by the collar and forced him to empty his wallet for Delia?



Jeremy said, “That’s one way of looking at it. I’m more concerned with your health than with vilifying your actions, though.”

“Right. Seems like some people could stand to vilify their actions a bit more than they do,” I grunted, thinking of the man in the bar.

“But we’re talking about you. You’re a good man, and you’re very hard on yourself. Do you agree?”

“Sure, I’m okay.”

No, I wasn’t. I was a bad, bad man. I was a disloyal man.

“Can you say out loud ‘I’m a good person’?”

“I’m a good person,” I said stiffly.

But it sounded like a lie even to me. How could I look into my best friend’s eyes and lie that I was a good person when I knew what I had done with Delia not so long ago?

And when I knew that I wanted to do it again.

thirteen

Delia

The week passed uneventfully. Luckily, Jeremy didn’t push the subject of why I was so resistant to work with Robert, and he allowed me to make up the hours with another client. But it still cast a dark shadow over my week whenever I remembered that it had happened.

When I went to work that weekend, I half expected to see Robert. I thought he might show up, angry that I had decided not to see him that day.

The look on his face had been so broken. I'd seen broken men before – they came through all the time working where I did – but it was especially hard to see on Robert.

But as the night went on and he didn't show up, didn't tear through making any proclamations or angrily stomping around, I started to resent him again.

“Goodnight!” Kassandra called to me as she bounced her shoulder to lift her purse strap higher up, and I half-waved at her as I dried a glass.

It had been like this all night. In the moments of stillness, a flash of Robert's sad face would enter my mind.

Still, the anger shone through. I felt bad for him. Of course I did, but it was somewhat overshadowed by my anger at the idea of him and Jeremy gossiping about me. I couldn't stand it.

A sloppy drunk who had been at the bar all night came up to me as I dried glasses and slurred, “Hey, what do you think of me and you getting out of here?”

I bit back the words that came to mind and said, “Well, I'm at work, so I can't really leave.” I flashed a smile, as fake as they came, hoping it looked honest.

He narrowed his dark eyes, and for a second, I was afraid of him. But then the light entered his eyes again, and he slapped the counter lightly, flashing a crooked smile. “Sure, I understand. But I've been trying to get your attention all night.”

Suddenly, my body went ice cold as I realized that the night was ending, and I was alone in the bar with this man. I felt like I could see desperation on him. I smiled,

trying to placate him, and said, “I’m sorry about that. Did you get what you needed?”

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“Not everything,” he said grimly, without a trace of humor.

His eyes moved slowly down my body, and I outwardly shuddered. He shook the glass in his hand slightly and asked, “How about another drink?”

“I’m really sorry, but we’re closing now. I can’t serve anymore.” I gestured to my wrist as though I had a watch on. “3 a.m. Not legal to serve after that.”

His tongue flicked over his teeth like he was fishing out a popcorn kernel. His dark eyes were fixed on me. Still staring at me, he brought the glass up to his mouth and siphoned the rest down his throat before dropping it onto the counter with a slimy smile. “Maybe another time.”

“Sure,” I squeaked, watching him closely as he left. As soon as he was out of the bar, I raced from behind the counter to lock the front door and breathed a sigh of relief as I went to finish counting the drawer.

After I finished, I did my closing duties, mopping and washing dishes. By the time I finished restocking, my feet hurt and I was exhausted all through my body. I was just happy to see the outside when I left the bar and locked it, smelling the fresh Seattle air.

I turned around and was face-to-face with the man from the bar, his eyes standing out in his milky white skin against the night. A gasp ripped through me, and I felt all the hairs on my skin stand at attention.

“Delia, right?” he asked congenially.

Should I answer?

I looked across the street where my car was and realized with a plunging terror that I wouldn't be able to run to it and get in before he could catch me. It was too far.

I turned with a smile that felt like it was propped on my face and croaked out, "What are you doing?"

"Oh, you seem scared. I didn't mean to scare you. I just left something in the bathroom, I'm realizing. Could you let me back in? Just for a minute?"

I didn't look back, too afraid to look away from him. My heart felt like it was completely still in my chest, and I didn't know how this was going to end. I tried to reach into my purse for my taser as I started walking away, saying, "You'll have to come back tomorrow."

"Please, it's my wallet," the man said, following me.

"I can't. I can't go back in after I leave," I lied, my voice becoming more frantic as I continued to my car.

The man followed behind me, and I just kept going, not looking back at him. When I reached my door, I opened it, but the man slammed it shut and said, "Hey, bitch, I need my phone."

I almost hesitated. I almost apologized. But instead, I stomped on his foot, and he let out a short cry before I saw a film of rage cover his eyes and his hands come toward me.

I ducked, and I was about to headbutt him – something else I'd learned in self-defense classes – when an arm shot out and wrapped around his neck.

I screamed out of instinct and stepped back quickly, avoiding the man's flailing legs as he tried to kick.

The man let out a strangled sound, and his head went flying back as the arm around his throat tightened.

I looked up at the assailant, my hero, and saw Robert's green eyes narrowed as he used his other hand in the crook of his elbow to chokehold the man, pressing tighter and tighter.

"You okay?" he asked me, from over the man's head. "Good job with the stomp. I'm proud of you."

I couldn't say anything, and I soon realized that I was crying, tears streaming down my face in fear as the man's fingers clawed at Robert's arms.

For a moment, I just silently watched as fresh blood bloomed on his skin as the guy's nails scratched deeply, and then I snapped out of it and pulled out my phone to call 911.

The man tried to elbow Robert for a moment more, and then he was out, and Robert lowered him to the concrete.

fourteen

Robert

"What are you doing here?" Delia asked me, looking completely shaken up as we waited for the police. I had my foot on the man's forehead in case he woke up. If he even so much as tried to move, I'd crush his fucking head with my heel. Internally, I seethed.

I told her this fucking job was dangerous. I told Jeremy, and I told her, and no one listened to me.

“I came to tell you I was sorry for how I spoke to you,” I muttered, looking down at the unconscious man. “Seems like I was right, though.”

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I looked up at her, and she scoffed, her brown eyes full of tears. She brought her hands up to her eyes and pushed the heels of her hands into her eyelids. “I can’t deal with this right now. I’ve had a long day, a long week, really, and I just want to go home.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, did I upset you by pointing out that this fuck—” I grinded the toe of my loafer into his forehead slightly, leaving a streak of dirt on his skin, “is exactly what I was talking about the other night?”

Delia looked around at the empty streets and turned back to me, sighing. “I’m going home,” she said simply, opening her car door.

“You can’t. You need to stay to file the police report,” I protested, pulling her away from the door by her wrist.

She looked down at my hand, circled around her small wrist, and then our eyes met. “Please just let me go.”

“Is that really what you want?” I asked her. I wanted to interlace our fingers, to feel the warmth of her palm against mine.

But tears started to fall, and she shook me loose. “I’m sick of your judgment, the way you talk about my job, the way you gossip with Jeremy about me, everything about you.”

Gossip? Like I’m some teenage girl? What is she talking about?



“I don’t gossip,” I said stonily, and she looked at me with an expression like she was exhausted.

Her shoulders drooped, and her eyes were moving quickly, scanning my face. “So you’re going to deny talking with Jeremy about me?”

I shrugged and reached out to take her hand, but she stepped back, shaking her head, so I dropped my hand and asked, “Is there some reason that’s wrong?”

I couldn’t understand why it angered her so much that I cared enough about her to talk to my friends about her.

“There is when you’re talking badly about me and my choices,” she said coolly, with a hard stare.

Frustrated, I looked away and asked, “And how do you think I feel? You’re so offended by my opinions, but you don’t try to prove me wrong at all. You’re completely reckless. Look what happened tonight!”

“You think this is my fault?” she spit out.

“No, of course not. I just think—”

She interrupted me, “And why do you care if I’m reckless?”

I couldn’t say the real reason. I couldn’t say that I felt drawn to her, that I couldn’t stop thinking about her. She couldn’t know how deep this ? whatever it was ? had gone in my head. I felt insane knowing she didn’t feel the same way. She liked the kiss, but she clearly didn’t like me.

I scoffed and sputtered out, “I don’t care if you’re reckless. I care that – you know, I’d

care if anyone was put in positions like you are, apparently weekly.”

“You wouldn’t even know about any of it if you’d stop following me like some stalker,” she said sharply, and it felt like a stab to the gut. That was twice now that she’d painted it all as nefarious.

Why couldn’t she understand that I cared about her safety?

The man started to stir, and Delia looked down at him. I pushed my foot into his head, and she said, “Yeah, I’m not sticking around to see how angry he is when he wakes up.”

“You can’t go, Delia. I’ll keep you safe. Trust me.” I felt desperation welling up in my chest, a need for her to stay. I needed her to make this police report. If she didn’t, how could we be sure he wouldn’t just come back again? I couldn’t stay outside her work every day. Eventually, he could find her alone, and then what would happen? I felt panic rising up just thinking about it.

“No! I’m going. And I don’t trust you.”

Her words cut deep, and I clenched my jaw in response. If she really felt that way, then what was the tension I felt when we touched? But if it was all in my mind, I would leave her alone.

I waved her off, “Fine, just let this fucking creep do it to someone else.”

“Everyone else isn’t my responsibility. And besides, they have my number and his name. I’m not staying.” She got into her car, slamming the door behind her.

I felt torn. I had a sense of duty to hold this man and make sure that Delia got her justice and that this man was arrested that night. But I also had a sense of duty to

make sure Delia got home safely. She had just been through something traumatic, and I couldn't just let her take herself home.

With a grunt, I left the man and walked over to knock on her window. She rolled it down, not looking at me, staring straight out the windshield.

“You're upset. You've been through something really scary. Can you just let me drive you home, please?”

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She bit her bottom lip for a moment before turning to look at me. She studied me for a moment before pointing forward. “You’re losing him,” she said.

I looked behind my shoulder and saw the guy getting to his hands and knees. When I turned back to Delia, she was pulling out of her parking spot, waving at me.

I watched her leave for a minute, and she stopped at a red light. I glanced back at the man, torn between my principles and her safety. I wanted to know that she got home safely.

I felt the anger brimming inside me as I imagined my late wife in the same situation, scared for her life right before she lost it. I could never fix it for her.

I had a moment where I realized that normally, in a situation so close to one of my traumas, I would be going through flashbacks banging at the back of my head. But for some reason, I didn’t feel any flashbacks or panic coming. They’d been replaced by pure anger and disgust. I only cared about Delia.

I stomped over to the guy as he got to his feet, and I fit his neck into the crook of my elbow again, muttering into his ear, “I want you to remember how easily I can take you down the next time you fuck with a woman and especially that woman. Never come back here, do you hear me?”

He blubbered, “Yes,” his voice thick as I choked him.

I let him go, and as he started running down the street, the bottoms of his feet slapping against the pavement, the sound of sirens started nearing.

“FUCK!” I screamed to no one in particular, to the void, and got into my car to follow Delia and make sure she got home safely.

fifteen

Delia

The light turned green, and I looked in my rearview mirror at Robert, in his car behind me, staring me down.

What does he think he’s doing? Why is he following me?

I knew he wanted to drive me home, but this seemed kind of extreme, even for him. I kept it up for a few more blocks, waiting to see if he would eventually turn a different way and leave, but he didn’t.

At one point, he waved at me, and I rolled my eyes. He was relentless. First, he calls me reckless, and then he follows me.

What does he want from me?

I thought he was going to stay with the creep and make sure he got arrested tonight.

Eventually, I gave up and pulled over at a gas station. I parked and watched him pull up next to me.

From his car, Robert smiled sheepishly, and I laid my head against the headrest in my car. He was right. I was emotional. And I shouldn’t drive. Sighing, I parked the car and stepped out.

I heard him unlock his doors, and I got into the passenger side, saying, “Look, if

you're just going to follow me the whole time, then fine, you can drive me."

I buckled my seatbelt and looked over at Robert. He was suppressing a grin, I could tell. "Don't look so happy about it, please."

"Okay, sorry. So which direction are we going? I just want to get you there safely. I couldn't let you leave and not know that you got home safely; it didn't feel right."

"But following me home is just fine in your book?"

"I realize the lapse in logic now, but at the time, yes, it seemed to make sense."

I looked at him curiously. He seemed like he was being honest. He really didn't see anything wrong with it.

"Okay. Well, my house is pretty far away. And it's almost morning already. How about you just take me to your place?" I asked. "Is that okay? Do you have a guest room I could sleep in for a couple of hours? I'm really just so exhausted."

"Of course, that's perfectly fine," he said, the last words I heard as I drifted off to sleep.

I woke up in the passenger seat of Robert's car to his hand on my forehead, pushing my bangs back. I opened my eyes slowly, exhaustion like a weighted blanket over my body, and he quickly pulled his hand away. "Um," he cleared his throat and gestured with his chin at the windshield, "we're here."

"Oh, sorry, I guess I fell asleep. I had a long day."

"That's okay, I understand," he said, as I unbuckled my seatbelt.

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When I stepped out of the car, my mouth dropped open, and I snapped my head to Robert, squealing, “This is your place?”

He smiled a thin smile at me and nodded as he led me down the cobblestone pathway to his mansion. It really was a mansion, an enormous home with two balconies, a porch that spanned the front of it, and white bricks and red shutters. It was idealistic, a home out of the movies.

When we stepped in, a small alarm beeped, and he typed a set of numbers into the home screen. Walking in, I was confronted by the endless hardwood floors, shiny and waxy. “This is gorgeous,” I breathed.

How did Robert make this much money? What did he do?

“Thanks,” he said glibly, gesturing for me to follow him. I walked into a kitchen with a giant butcher block island in the middle of the room and dark brown shelves with bowls and cups across them. It was homey and expensive looking, all at once, somehow.

“Can I make you some tea? That’s what I do when I’m stressed.”

Taken a little aback by his telling me what he did for stress, I said, “Um, sure,” and scooted into a chair at the island.

“What kind?”

“I don’t really drink tea, I don’t know.”

“I’ll make you chamomile. It’s a safe choice,” he said, with a boyish smile. I’d seen him smile twice already now. It was more than I’d seen him smile the entire time I’d known him. “Thanks for letting me drive you.”

I shrugged. “Are you going to tell Jeremy?”

He turned toward the kettle and said quietly, “Probably not.”

He sounded regretful, and I thought, not for the first time, about our kiss. It was so passionate, but it seemed like so long ago. And it seemed like he regretted it.

But then why was he here with me?

A moment of silence passed between us; it coursed through like it was alive.

The kiss swirled in my mind, his hands in my hair, on my face, the pressure of his lips... “Does Jeremy know?” I asked, from the counter, fidgeting with my hair. I wasn’t sure if he knew what I meant, what I was asking. Does Jeremy know that you kissed me? That I kissed you back?

“No,” he said, pouring hot water from the kettle into a mug and pulling down a metal box of tea bags.

“Are you going to tell him?” I pressed.

“No,” he said simply, opening the box and pulling out a tea bag.

I chewed on my lip as I watched him steep my tea. I could tell this line of questioning was upsetting him. “Robert—”

“I won’t talk to Jeremy about you anymore if that really bothers you,” he blurted out,



closing the tin and replacing it on the shelf it came from.

I sighed, partially from relief and partially because I felt like we were never going to talk about the kiss. “It does.”

“Why?”

“The last time you and Jeremy talked, it didn’t...end well for me.”

“Ah. The breakup.” The way he said it was almost sarcastic, and it seemed to stab at my ribs.

I winced. “Yes, the breakup.”

“Look, I just, I need you to know that it wasn’t about you.”

“Really? Because it sounds like you thought I was using him to get ahead.”

“Okay, it was a little about you,” he chuckled a little, and I smiled despite myself.

“But it was mostly about him. I thought he was throwing away his life. You have to understand. You were making a choice. He was making a mistake.”

“How?”

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“Delia, a guy in his position can’t date his...mentees. His job is to guide you professionally. He could have been fired.” He set the mug in front of me and looked at me grimly.

“I really loved him.”

“I know. Now, I know. But still, it—”

“I get it.”

“No, I don’t think you do. Maybe you will when you’re older.”

I grimaced a little. When I’m older. Jeremy used to love saying that, too. When he would tell me he couldn’t come to my birthday dinner or kiss me goodbye at the car, I’d understand when I was older.

Well, I was a year older, and all I understood was that he wanted sex without the relationship. Sure, he wouldn’t say it like that, but that’s how it felt in the end.

Changing the subject, I said, “Sorry I couldn’t stay to file the police report. I just—” I shook my head “—I was afraid to see that guy awake again.”

“I understand,” he said quietly, leaning against the counter in front of me, his elbows on the marble. “I shouldn’t have asked that of you.”

“Why did you?”

“I don’t have a good excuse. I just—” he broke off, looking down, before his eyes met mine, and continued, “My late wife, Quinn, was murdered after work one day at a bar. I guess this situation is...bringing up feelings.” He winced at the word ‘feelings’ like it was a dirty word, and I would have smiled if it weren’t for the serious subject.

He tugged at my heartstrings with his serious expression, the yearning in his green eyes. It was the look of someone who longed to be understood. He looked drained but needy at the same time.

“I’m sorry, Robert. That’s...awful.”

I felt so bad for feeling like he was judging me. Of course he thought what I did was dangerous. Of course he wanted to protect me. He probably felt like if he could save me, it would be worth it.

“It was, yeah. Sometimes, though, it feels like it will never be over, like I’ll be forced to relive it over and over.”

He closed his eyes, and I wondered if he was reliving it right then, if his mind replayed the image of when he found out over and over.

I wanted to take that pain from him.

I wanted to reach out and touch his cheek.

Embarrassed by how badly I wanted to touch him, I twisted my lip into my cheek and sipped my hot tea, feeling the herby water coat my throat. He was right. It was surprisingly soothing.

And talking to him was soothing, too. It was hard to think about everything that had

happened tonight when I was focused on Robert. “Who did it, if I can ask?”

“A regular at her work, someone she thought was a nice guy. I was deployed at the time. I thought—I think everyone thought it would have been me that...died early. No one was expecting that. I was going through something horrible every day overseas, and then to get that news was impossible to process. I had to come back to take care of everything and my daughter. I didn’t even realize how real it was for months. I was in a haze, taking care of funeral preparations and a new baby. Nothing made sense. But we made it through. She’s eleven now and so...normal. I can hardly believe it.”

“That’s more than my father ever would have done,” I said, raising my eyebrows over the mug as I took another sip. “He would have pretended he never got the message.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s not true. You don’t really know what kind of man you’ll be until you’re faced with a tough situation.”

“No, my dad was a shell of a man after a few deployments. He was never there for us. He started coming back more and more infrequently, and then when he and my mom divorced, he stopped altogether. Just a card a couple of times a year. I don’t even know who he was outside of the Army. I wonder sometimes if he ever loved us or if the Army was an excuse.”

I chewed on my bottom lip and looked up at him, hoping he couldn’t see on my face the despair I felt internally. It was embarrassing talking about my daddy issues when his wife had been murdered. It was like bringing a knife to a gunfight in terms of trauma.

He shook his head. “I want to say something to fix that. The truth is, I knew plenty of men just like that in the Navy. Some people join just to run from who they really are. They want a stamp that tells the world they’re a good person without doing anything

good. We were all so close that it was hard to begrudge them their choices, but I know it was hard on their families. Being good to your country doesn't..." He trailed off for a moment, then reached out for one of my hands. He touched my fingertip with his fingertip, the briefest and smallest of touches, but it lit me up. "It doesn't make someone a good father."

I swallowed the rising lump in my throat. It was healing having someone who had been through the same situation as my father tell me that it wasn't right, that he wasn't good just because he served his country. He could still be a bad father.

"Anyway," I cleared my throat and shook my head, smiling weakly, "I feel silly for bringing that up. You went through so much. My problems seem so small in comparison."

"No, don't say that," Robert said, and he sounded so sincere that it choked me up all over again. The hand that was touching mine stretched out and linked fingers with mine, stroking my palm with his thumb. "Your problems are just as important as mine."

It was such a small thing, but it made me feel so important. His touch made me feel so important, too, and I felt a stirring in my stomach.

sixteen

Robert

Delia looked down at my hand with an intensity that made my heart thump. I hated that she'd ever been hurt, and I hated even more that some of that hurt was by me. Looking at her beautiful, big brown eyes and the strand of strawberry blonde hair that fell perfectly over them, I wanted to hold her and protect her from all the evil in the world.

She had almost been killed tonight. I didn't know that for a fact, but seeing that man's hands reach out for her had sent shivers down my spine. I felt healed in a small way that life had led me to saving her. I couldn't save my wife, but life had led me to Delia in that exact moment, when she was all alone and helpless.

I reached across the counter and pushed the strand of hair out of her eyes and behind her ear.

She visibly shivered, and I hid a smirk by looking down. Her lips parted slightly, and I could see her breathing deepening, her chest rising and falling. I kept my hand on the side of her face and slightly stroked her cheek with my thumb.

Delia's eyes searched mine, looking back and forth between them, and I moved closer to her, inching to make sure that she wanted it.

And then she inched closer to me, too, and before I could even think about it, about all the regrets that I had had after our first kiss, I was doing it again.

I slipped my tongue into her mouth, and she moaned quietly, her hands flying to my face to cup my jaw. Her hands felt so small on my face, her fingers so thin. I reached up and held her hands against me, wrapping them in mine, fitting my fingers between hers.

I broke the kiss for just a moment so that I could come around the counter, and her eyes were so big as she stood up to meet me.

I wrapped my arms around her back and crushed her against me, feeling her breasts flatten against my chest. Her hard nipples pressed into my chest, and my mouth watered, thinking of sucking on them as my lips explored hers. I nuzzled her face to open her mouth wider and sucked on her bottom lip.

Delia's breaths were quickening, and I could feel the flush of her body. My hands moved down her curves and grabbed her ass to squeeze her cheeks. The fabric of her work shorts was so thin, and I already wanted to pull them to the side and feel her pussy, feel the lips that I knew were already wet.

Her kisses grew in intensity, and her moans grew louder. As I moved one of my hands up to clamp over her mouth, she looked up at me, and I whispered into her ear, "You have to be quiet. My daughter is sleeping. Do you understand?"

She nodded against my palm, and I let her go to kiss her again, my hands back on her ass.

I slid my finger across her slit from outside of her shorts. She was already soaking wet through them, and I pushed my digit further into her, listening to her hold back her moans against my mouth as I fed the fabric into her pussy.

"Robert, I don't know how quiet I can be," she whispered into my neck, and my cock twitched when she said that, knowing how turned on she was and how badly she

wanted to cry out.

I pulled her shorts to the side and slid my finger into her. She was so sloppy wet that it easily moved inside her, and she groaned quietly. I fucked her little hole with the digit of my finger for a few more minutes until her mouth fell open, and she could no longer kiss me back.

I watched that perfect, beautiful, innocent face turn red as I pummeled at her pussy with my finger, pressing my hand all the way to her crack as I did.

She squelched noisily, and her juices dripped down to my wrist. Her eyes and neck rolled back, her face now turned toward the ceiling. At that moment, I grabbed her hair at the base of her neck, murmuring in her ear, “Look at me.”

Her eyes snapped open, and her mouth stayed frozen open, her eyes wide, as she tried to keep eye contact while I fingered her. She was so warm and wet, exactly how I’d imagined her, and her slick pussy lips overlapped against my hand as I continued to jackhammer at her delicate insides, feeling the pliable muscles contract with pleasure.

She murmured, “Please,” while she looked straight at me, and my cock pressed uncomfortably against the zipper of my slacks. Having Delia beg for me made me want to explode.

I pulled her against my body and said, against her ear, “Please, what?”

“I want you,” she whined, and I smirked against her face.

I slid my finger out, feeling the trail of juices that came with it, and she gasped at the sudden exit. I knew she felt empty, and she started to grind against me as she mewed uncomfortably, kissing my neck desperately.



I picked her up and set her down on the chair she had been sitting on. Her eyes closed bashfully, her hands resting on my shoulders as I pulled those little shorts down, finally getting what I wanted.

As much as I had tried to push this feeling aside, I had been wanting this all along. I had been wanting to feel her from the inside and to see what she looked like naked. I had imagined it so many times. She had infiltrated my dreams.

It almost made it feel like this was a dream.

I pulled her shirt up over her breasts, revealing that she hadn't been wearing a bra under her shirt. Her beautiful, perky breasts fell out of the bottom of her skintight shirt, and I groaned, looking at her as I sank to my knees on the floor in front of her.

I looked up at her as I separated her thighs, and she sighed, closing her eyes and leaning back as I fit my face between her legs. I kissed her freckled thighs until I got to the crease that separated her leg from her pelvis. She giggled slightly, pushing on my shoulders, and I smiled up at her as I kissed her again.

I nuzzled my nose between her pussy lips, inhaling her musky scent. She gasped at my touch and squeezed her thighs tight on either side of my face. I slapped her thighs aggressively, digging my fingers into her flesh, and looked up at her from between her thighs. "Keep your legs open," I growled, pushing her legs apart.

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She nodded quietly, and her fingers drifted toward her nipples, pinching them as she looked down at me.

My hands wrapped around her ass cheeks, pulling her hips toward me so that I could bury my face as deeply into her as possible, lapping at her center for a bit. I didn't move my tongue inside her, only licked at the hole, keeping my tongue as flat as possible.

Delia shuddered underneath my tongue, and her thighs shook with the effort of keeping them open. I looked up at her beautiful brown eyes watching me, her breasts spilling over her fingers as she pinched and squeezed at her slightly brown nipples.

She had a freckle on the right side of her hip that looked like a delicacy from where I was. I held my tongue out and dragged it across her wet slit, tasting her tangy juices.

I moved my nose across her clit for a moment, inhaling, smelling her scent, before I twirled my tongue around her clit. She let out a small scream before seeing me jerk back, and she clamped her hand over her mouth quickly.

I stood from my knees, and she shook her head, her hand still over her own mouth. I stood between her legs and removed her hand from her mouth. She whispered, "Sorry. Please don't stop."

I pulled her off the chair and turned her around, pushing her over onto her stomach across it. I leaned over her as I unbuckled my belt and whispered into her ear, "Didn't I tell you to stay quiet?"

“Yes, Sir,” she moaned, and I moved my hand between her legs from behind, pushing two fingers into her. She let out a small groan mixed with a whine, and my cock grew as I felt how soaked her cunt was.

“And were you quiet?” I pushed my slacks down and let them fall to the kitchen tile, my belt clanging against it.

“No,” she whined, bending one knee and then the other.

“Pull your ass cheeks open, I want to see you from this angle.” She paused, not moving from her spot, and I repeated, “Delia, open up your ass for me.”

Her hands moved slowly to her cheeks, and she spread them for me, showing all of herself to me. I groaned, my cock in my hand, and looked at those tight openings.

I started to move my hand up and down my shaft, feeling the veins in my shaft raised against my dry palm. I wanted her wetness all over me, wanted to feel her pussy clench around me, wanted to feel her juices squirt all over my shaft.

“That’s good. You’re a good listener,” I assured her, steadying her by placing my hand flat against the small of her back, and then rubbing the tip of my cock against her wet opening.

“Should I get a condom?” I asked, teasing her spot with my dripping head.

“No, I have an IUD. Please... just fill me up.”

I didn’t need her to ask again. I whispered, “Cover your mouth,” and pushed the rest of my shaft into her, all the way to the base.

She let out a loud scream against her palm, and I enjoyed knowing how much she

loved it as I started to thrust rhythmically.

Fuck, this is Delia. You're fucking Delia.

The thought kept whirling through my mind as I looked at her smooth back, her freckled ass, and the back of her strawberry blonde head.

The thought whirled in my head as I shoved my cock as deep into her as I possibly could, and then as I started to fuck her hard and fast, holding onto the counter to steady myself as I did.

Her ass pressed against my pelvis, bouncing beautifully as I moved inside her, and I could feel her tightening around my member as I grew harder and bigger inside her.

Her moans got more insistent against her hand, and I finally laid across her back and told her, "Don't fucking move your hand." I pinched her nipples and moved into her hard, making the chair rock on two legs. She tipped her head back, tears in the corners of her eyes.

She reached up with the hand that wasn't occupied with keeping herself quiet and grabbed the back of my head. She looked at me with those brown eyes as I moved wildly inside her, and the prolonged eye contact filled me with a feeling of sick intimacy. It hurt my stomach. I loved it.

I grabbed her wrist and moved her hand so that I could kiss her as I fucked her, slowing down with the undulation of her pelvic muscles, feeling the rhythm that she wanted internally.

She sighed into my mouth, and our lips met perfectly as our tongues slid around each other.

She was so wet that my cock was gliding inside her without any trouble, and I could hardly keep my entire length in her, it was so slippery. She moaned almost drunkenly, with no start or end to it, an endless loop, and I felt her orgasm coming.

Delia's pussy was getting loose, the muscles contracting wildly, and I felt my own building, knowing that she felt that good.

"Can I cum inside you?" I asked, but before I could get an answer, she started cumming, crying out as we kissed, our mouths open.

Her face dropped back down to the chair and she said, "You can do whatever you want to me."

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She couldn't have said anything more perfect. I ejaculated like a wild man, holding her body tight against me and emptying ropes of cum against her walls.

We lay there for just a moment, breathing wildly, sticky from our juices and our sweat, and then eventually, I felt her stir, so I stood up and helped her to her feet.

“Can we go to your bedroom?” she asked shyly, holding herself in a hug.

And I wanted to give that to her. I wanted to bring her to bed, hold her, and reassure her that I hadn't just used her. But as I considered it, I started to think of the handcuffs still cuffed to the bedpost, the chair still next to the door, and the sleeping pills on my nightstand.

The panic over her seeing how truly damaged I was began to rise, and I kissed her tenderly on the lips, hoping that that was enough to let her know it wasn't personal when I said, “My driver can take you home.”

Her eyebrows pulled in together, and I saw something shut in her expression. She went from looking like a vulnerable young woman who had just had amazing sex with me to someone who wanted to get out of my house as soon as possible.

“Are you serious?” she scoffed, bending over to grab her shirt and pulling it over her head. “You said you had a guest room,” she said sourly.

“I do, but I just thought after we... that you'd want to sleep with me in my bed. And I don't think ?”

She rolled her eyes and didn't say anything.

I scrambled to come up with an excuse that didn't let her know about the set up I had in my bedroom. I didn't want to scare her. I didn't want her to know just how fucked up I really was.

I pulled my pants up over my legs and continued, "I just think that's best. I've got a daughter here, and I just..."

"Well, who was with your daughter when you were driving around town following me?" she asked sharply, as she jammed her feet into her shorts.

"With the nanny," I answered, just as sharply. We were cutting each other back and forth so soon after sex, and I didn't like it. "And I don't like what you're implying."

"I'm not implying anything," she sneered. I didn't like her delicate features screwed up that way either. It hurt me to see the anger on her face.

"So you're saying it? You're saying that I'm a bad father or something?"

"I'm saying it seems like this was all an act to get into my pants. I don't need your driver to take me home. I'll get an Uber."

She reached for her purse to look for her phone, and I watched her anxiously, my chest tightening.

I reached to take her phone, and she jerked away from me, so I said simply, "Really, Delia, you don't have to do that."

"Just...worry about your daughter, Robert. Seems like she needs you." I knew she didn't mean it in a way that was against my daughter, but I'd never had anyone say

that my daughter needed me negatively before. It squeezed my heart and wrung it dry. I could feel my throat closing, the saliva disappearing from my mouth.

She clicked a button on her phone and started to walk away from me. It was over that quickly.

“Delia,” I whispered harshly, my voice carrying through the hallway, but I heard her open the front door and close it behind her. Although she had sounded angry that I was worried about my daughter seeing her in the morning, she still shut the door quietly so that she wouldn’t wake her.

I knew she was upset, and I knew I should follow her and kiss her and explain it to her, but I just couldn’t. I felt frozen to the spot with my own fears and insecurities.

Jeremy was right. Fear really was trauma’s best friend. This was the right thing to do. It was dangerous for her to sleep in the same bed as me. Even the same room as me wasn’t safe.

Besides, maybe this was for the best. Maybe now we’d gotten it out of our systems, and our respective relationships with Jeremy could go back to normal.

Maybe.

Except that I was already thinking of her getting into an Uber filled with my cum.

seventeen

Delia

The streaming sun through my window woke me from a deep sleep after my late night. For the briefest of seconds, I didn’t think of the night before and what had



happened. I only enjoyed the sun on my eyelids and the knowledge that it was Veterans Day, so the clinic and the bar were closed, and I had nothing to do for a few days.

My eyes sprang open when I remembered the night before. Robert. The way he had felt inside me gave me goosebumps inside my body. The way he had treated me afterward gave me a lump in my stomach.

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I couldn't believe that I had fallen for his game. As an almost-therapist, I should have known better. I should have seen through his tricks and his manipulation. Instead, I fell for his sob story and his green eyes, and he got me into bed.

Well, into a chair.

Groaning, I pushed my blanket off me and decided to go to the grocery store to buy some things for Thanksgiving. It wasn't that far off, and I'd never made a turkey before. I never had a place of my own to host before. I was still in university housing, but it was a house with a kitchen, and my mom and brother were going to visit.

Obviously, I wouldn't see my dad.

I got dressed and brushed my teeth with that empty feeling in the pit of my stomach that one gets after being used the way I was.

I wanted to have a good cry, but I didn't want to give Robert exactly what he wanted. Or what I thought he wanted, anyway. I had to assume that was what he wanted – to hurt me. He and Jeremy must be laughing it up about how he got into my pants.

I spit into the sink and looked at myself in the mirror. Well, he wasn't going to get the satisfaction. I'd had enough of Robert Hastings. He was going to wish he hadn't messed with Delia Sturgess.

I didn't know what I would do yet, but I wouldn't go quietly.

A knock at my door snapped me out of my foolish daydreaming about revenge –

something I knew I'd never get anyway – and I walked to open it. It might be Cassandra. We had said we'd cook together today, and I had woken up pretty late after my long night.

I checked my phone for texts from her and saw none. There was a good chance she'd had just as long a night as me after leaving work that night. She might even be hungover. I still needed to tell her about the crazy man who had followed me to my car.

So much was happening in my life. I couldn't keep her up-to-date even if I was up for telling her about Robert, which I definitely wasn't. And she'd thought he was so nice, too. Maybe she would have fallen for it just like I did, but I was too ashamed to tell anyone.

I looked out my peephole and saw Jeremy standing on my doorstep, looking around anxiously. I sighed. He was always on edge when he was at my place, like it wouldn't be normal for him to be seen with a student at all. His paranoia made me feel so shitty.

I opened the door and leaned against it with crossed arms. I assumed he already knew all about how Robert had gotten me into bed. He must be here to gloat. I had no idea why they wanted to ruin my life so badly.

What had I ever done to them?

“Hey, Delia, can we talk?” His eyes flickered across my makeup-less face, and he asked, “Long night?”

Was he pretending not to know, or did he really not know?

“I'm kind of busy...” I trailed off, looking back behind me at my empty kitchen.

“Well, this’ll only take a second,” he assured me, stepping past me into the living room.

“Sure, come in,” I said sarcastically, closing the door. “Is everything okay? Am I still on track to graduate in May?”

“What?” Jeremy was looking around my house like he was looking for something, but he looked up at me as he sat on my couch. “Oh, everything’s fine with that. I was just wondering if you were okay.”

“Why?” I asked warily, imagining the conversation he must have had with Robert.

“I know you said you’re safe at work, but I keep thinking about you taking those self-defense classes,” he said, and I felt frustration mounting in my chest. I still cared about Jeremy, but I couldn’t talk about work and my safety right now with him. Or ever, maybe.

That had been traumatic, being followed after work and watching Robert choke him out. It was too much to even think about, let alone tell Jeremy about. It was weird, but even though I knew I would tell a client that it wasn’t their fault, I felt a sense of embarrassment about it, like everyone had been right and I’d ignored the red flags. I hadn’t seen any, but maybe I should have.

“I’m fine,” I said finally, knowing it didn’t sound convincing.

Jeremy nodded slowly, his eyes piercing into me. “And the way you left so early that day...are you okay with me teaching those?”

His question caught me off guard, and I was grateful for the distraction from the subject of work. “The self-defense classes? Yes, why wouldn’t I be?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Just seemed like maybe you left because I showed up,” he said gently.

I shrugged. Guilt started to tear at my throat. I hadn’t left because he’d shown up. I’d left because it was too much to face him after what I’d done with Robert. And now, the way he was talking, it was starting to feel like whatever game Robert was up to wasn’t planned with Jeremy.

“You can do whatever you want,” I finally managed to say. I had to mean that. I was doing whatever I wanted, even if it hurt him. He deserved the same.

“Yes,” he agreed, smiling weakly. “Uh, but is it okay with you?”

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“It’s fine with me,” I said, returning his weak smile.

There was so much unsaid between us. I wondered if he could see on my face that I had a secret.

I cleared my throat and looked at the door. “I really do have to grocery shop...I’m cooking for Thanksgiving this year, and I think I need to do a little practicing.”

“Oh, right, sure.” Jeremy stood up quickly. “Well, that was it, anyway. Just wanted to check on you.”

“Thanks, Jeremy.” I grabbed my purse and keys, trying to signal that I wanted him to leave. I still had to brush my hair and put on makeup, but he didn’t know that.

Well, maybe he did.

I touched my ratty hair self-consciously.

“Of course.” Jeremy walked to the front door and stood for a moment with his hand on the doorknob. “So are your mom and brother coming?”

“Mhm, they are,” I nodded, putting on a pair of tennis shoes.

“You know, it would be nice to see your brother when he comes into town. He and I had gotten kind of close before...well, you know.” He trailed off and looked down at his hand on the knob. I wanted him to turn it so badly. I wanted to be free from this conversation.

“Yep. I know all right.”

Jeremy opened the door and started to walk out, then paused and turned back. “Is there something you want to talk about?”

I laughed a little. “You came over to my place. Is there something you want to talk about?”

“Not exactly, but...would you mind if Tyler and I hung out while he’s in town? Only if you’re okay with it.”

“Oh. Um...I guess not.”

“Okay. If you’re sure. Thanks.”

“Sure, of course.” I waved his thanks off. I didn’t deserve it, after what I’d done with his best friend.

“You know, Delia, just because we broke up doesn’t mean you can’t talk to me. I’m still here.” He looked me in the eyes with an intensity that took me back for a moment.

I coughed and looked down at my feet. “I know, Jeremy. I see you all the time.”

“Right, but do you really see me?” We stared at each other. I had no idea what to say to that. I hadn’t gotten the impression that we could have the same closeness after the breakup, and now he was telling me we could? I didn’t know what to do with it.

“Anyway, just something to keep in mind, I guess.”

He left, and I felt like he had punched me in the gut.

Something to keep in mind?

I wanted all of it wiped from my mind supernaturally, if possible.

eighteen

Robert

Corinne woke me up excitedly, banging at my door, and I awoke with a start. I'd been waking up to instant thoughts of my night with Delia and everything that had happened for weeks now. It was like being awoken by electrocution.

I had hurt Delia. It was the last thing I wanted to do. And now it seemed like it was probably too late to fix it. She would never forgive me after how I had acted.

"Baby girl, give me a minute!" I shouted groggily to Corinne, eyeing the chair against my bedroom door. I reached awkwardly for the handcuff key and finally managed to grab it.

After I freed myself, dressed, and brushed my teeth, I opened the door to a happy eleven-year-old, her eyes lit up. She was completely dressed and holding a cup of coffee out to me.



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“Are you trying to get me ready quickly?” I asked, taking the drink and pulling her in for a hug against my stomach.

“I’m just excited. You said we could shop for Thanksgiving today to avoid all the jokers shopping last minute,” she giggled against my stomach, as she quoted me before pulling back. “I made that myself. Do you like it?”

“Did you? Let me see.” I took a performative sip, holding back a wince as the weakest and sweetest coffee I’d ever had in my life passed through my lips. “So delicious,” I told her with a big smile.

Corinne hopped up and down and said, “Let’s go, Daddy, let’s go. Are you ready?”

“Are you?” I asked, eyeing her mix and match shoes.

“Yes!”

“You want to check again?” I pointed at her feet, and she facepalmed dramatically, running off to the front of the house.

“Okay, Daddy, I’m ready!” I grinned as I walked to the kitchen to set the coffee down on the counter, hoping she’d forget all about it.

I loved it when she called me Daddy. I knew I didn’t have many more years of that, and I cherished every one left. It reminded me that I belonged to someone, that I mattered, which some days I needed desperately. Especially today, after what I’d done with Delia, how I’d hurt her, and how I’d betrayed Jeremy, I needed that even

more.

I walked over to the front door and found Corinne with her hands on her hips, tapping her foot impatiently. I put my hands on my hips and said, “Well, let me see, are your shoes matching?”

She burst into laughter, the earlier sour mood over missing her crush, Benny, apparently forgotten in the excitement.

“Yes!” she squealed, holding up one of her legs.

“Teeth brushed?”

“Yes!”

“Okay, let’s go.” I hugged her once more before we walked out.

The plan for today was to go buy some baked goods. This holiday was going to be spent at the soup kitchen. We didn’t have any family left between the two of us, and so we spent our holidays giving back. It was an easy way to raise her spirits at a time that I knew could be lonely for someone who had lost a loved one. And I wanted my daughter to see how fortunate we were.

The only catch was that we couldn’t cook. I had never really gotten good at it, so we were going to buy them, put them in some fancy containers, and pass them off as our own. Some might call it lying. I called it embellishment.

Corinne didn’t care either way. She was just excited to buy desserts.

It was nice to see how simple she still was. Being eleven was such a good age. She didn’t have any angst yet, and it was still fun to do things with her old man.

When we got to the grocery store, Corinne instantly started running to the dessert section, and I called after her, “Corinne, sweetie, no running in the store!”

She slowed down and decided, instead, to speed walk. I shook my head, laughing, and kept my regular pace. I was sure I’d catch up to her to find her with her arms full.

When I finally caught up to my daughter, I found her just as I’d expected, in the dessert aisle with desserts piled up on top of each other in her arms.

I approached her with the cart.

“Need a little help there?” My voice carried the hint of amusement I couldn’t hide.

“I only picked out the most important.” She grinned bashfully, carefully setting them down into the cart.

“Let me see,” I pretended to scrutinize the selection as I ran my hand over my jaw. “Cheesecake, pumpkin pie, angel food cake, apple pie... no fruitcake?”

“Daddy,” Corinne responded seriously, her tone bordering on disbelief, as though I’d just suggested something mortally wrong. With her hand on her hip, she lowered her blonde eyebrows at me and tsked.

“What?” I asked, holding my hands up in mock innocence. “What’s wrong with fruitcake?”

“A cake with fruit and nuts? Seriously? You need me to tell you?” Her tone was dripping with exaggerated incredulity.

“Guess that’s a no then...” I said with a shrug. “Fine, let’s go, since you have it all figured out.”

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“You can pick something else!” she protested, throwing her arms out dramatically to encompass the entire pastry section of the grocery store.

I laughed, “Oh, can I? Is it on you?”

Corinne shook her head with a sly smile, clearly pleased with herself, and I said, “Fine, grab some of that peanut butter fudge and... some of that caramel popcorn snack mix.” I pointed toward the shelf, my finger lingering on the caramel-coated mix with Chex, pretzels, and little caramel bites.

“On it!” she said with enthusiasm, skipping over to grab the items, her fluff of hair bouncing around her shoulders.

Sometimes, when I looked at her hair, I thought about how her mom would have had it tamed by now. Her mother had the same gorgeous curls and a whole fifteen-minute routine in the mornings. I braided Corinne’s hair at night because I remembered that part, but when I’d tried to help her with oiling it one time, I’d overdone it, and Corinne hadn’t let me help since.

“All right, are we good to go?” I asked, as she dropped the popcorn mix into the cart with a triumphant grin.

“We need something to put them in, Daddy,” her voice took on that matter-of-fact tone she’d been using more and more lately. “We can’t bring it all like this in the packages.”

“So, what? Do we need Tupperware?” I smirked at her serious expression.

“No, Daddy! We need something pretty to put them in,” she replied with exasperation, her arms crossing as she stared me down.

I chuckled and reached out to tap her nose.

“Okay, then let’s go get some pretty cookware. I don’t have anything at the house, certainly not enough for all of this.”

Corrine grinned up at me, relaxing her stance and dropping her arms. As I rolled the cart toward the checkout, she snuck up beside me and slipped her tiny hand in mine.

“Do you think they’ll really believe we made all these?” she asked with a mischievous grin, cupping her hand around mine like she was sharing a secret.

“If we really sell it,” I chuckled, bumping her little shoulder with mine.

Her laughter bubbled up, and I marveled at how light it made me feel. I remembered when I couldn’t have done that if I tried—when her shoulder barely reached my hip.

Growing up, my parents had always been so nostalgic about every little milestone. Back then, it had seemed ridiculous to me, but now? Every little change in Corinne felt like something I should be able to stop.

When we got to the checkout, the lady behind the register smiled warmly. “Well, you two must have a big family.”

I winced. I always tried shielding Corinne from comments like these, especially around the holidays, but there was no avoiding them.

Corinne, ever the brave one, took it in stride. “Nope, we’re taking these to the shelter,” she said with a proud smile.

“Oh, how nice. A beautiful girl inside and out,” the cashier cooed, smiling at me.

I was used to these comments—Corinne got them all the time—but this one caught me off guard.

“You and Mom did a good job raising her,” the cashier added, with a warm smile.

I forced a fake smile and bit the inside of my cheek, unsure how to respond. After eleven years, you’d think I’d have a better answer to the “mom” comments, but I never did.

I glanced down at Corinne. She had taken the first comment well, but now she was clamming up, tucking her hair behind her ear and staring at the ground.

“Hey, lady,” I said, my voice sharper than I intended. “How about you just let us buy our sweets in peace? How’s that sound?”

The cashier blinked, startled. “Oh, I’m sorry. I was just making conversation.”

“Well, what happened to the classics?” My voice lightened but was still tinged with frustration. ““Oh, it’s getting cold,” or, “You rooting for anybody in the NFL this year?””

“I’m sorry,” she said again, her tone more subdued.

“Daddy, it’s okay,” Corinne said softly, tugging on my shirt.

I looked down at her wide, serious brown eyes and felt the anger in my chest dissolve. Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly. “Sorry, Rin-Rin,” I muttered.

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She looked up at me, her gaze firm. “Say sorry to the lady,” she whispered, her lips barely moving.

I let out a breathy chuckle and turned back to the cashier. “I’m sorry. Holidays are hard for us,” I admitted, my voice quieter now.

“They’re hard for a lot of people,” she replied gently. “I should have been more sensitive to that. Thank you for the reminder.”

“Glad to help,” I grunted, grabbing our bags and loading them into the cart.

As we finished, the cashier turned to the family behind us and started ringing up their items.

“Oh, you can stop there,” a woman in the family said. “I miscalculated, I guess. We can’t afford any more than that.”

Corinne nudged me, her eyes wide and expectant. I laughed, knowing exactly what she was thinking.

Turning to the family, I said, “How about I get it for you?”

The woman smiled tentatively. “Oh, that’s okay. I couldn’t do that. I know everyone is holding onto their money this time of year.”

I smiled gently. “I’m not,” I said simply.

Corinne grinned. “He’s loaded,” she added, earning a playful glare from me as I pressed a finger to my lips.

“What’s your name?” I asked the woman.

“Melissa,” she replied hesitantly.

“Well, Melissa, I’m not holding onto anything. How about I help you with those?” I nodded at the cashier. “Keep ringing them up. I’ll get it all.”

Melissa shook her head. “No, I can pay for the part I was going to buy anyway, at least. Please, you don’t have to do that.”

“Melissa,” I said with a small chuckle, “I’m going to buy them either way. I can either take it all home, or you can.”

Her shoulders sagged slightly as she relented. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Actually...” I said, looking behind her at the group of families in line. Reaching into my wallet, I pulled out all the cash I had on hand—about \$1,000.

I went around, handing each family behind us \$200, including the cashier.

One woman started crying and wrapped her arms around me, her tears dampening the shoulder of my shirt.

When I looked at Corinne from behind the woman’s head, she was grinning.

She was the only way I could still see good in people. She reminded me all the time of all the good things about humanity.



I wanted to protect her so badly, but even when people hurt her, she still loved them and wanted good things for them.

Just like her mother. It had gotten her mother hurt. I needed to make sure that never happened to Corinne, that she stayed good but didn't let people take it too far. It was a lot of pressure. Pressure that I took seriously.

When I finally released myself from the grasp of the woman, I got our bags and took Corinne's hand, saying, "Let's get out of here before you make me buy everyone in the grocery store a turkey."

"You could..." she trailed off, and I picked her up under my arm like a sack of potatoes.

"That's enough from you!" I yelled into the busy parking lot, carrying my daughter squealing and kicking while laughing all the way to the car.

nineteen

Delia

Two days before Thanksgiving, I went to the grocery store, regretting all the choices that brought me here.

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I should have prepared better. Usually, I would have, but everything with Robert and Jeremy had really shaken me up. The conversation with Jeremy, Robert not calling me for weeks, and then the weird lunch where Jeremy had almost caught me being bent over by Robert...

The memory of that lunch made me cringe. First, Jeremy asked me to dine with both of them, and then Robert had the nerve to be mad that I'd made conversation with him. As though he hadn't seen him ask me right in front of him.

His territorial anger had boiled over while he'd touched me under the table, right under Jeremy's nose, almost bringing me to an orgasm right then and there. And if that wasn't enough, Jeremy had almost walked in on us in the bathroom. Just the memory made me blush.

But the real kicker was that Robert had done all that after dismissing me after we had sex for the first time at his place. Dismissed me and then ghosted me, disappeared completely in the wind, never to be heard from again. After saving me from that man at the bar who wanted to abduct me— or worse.

It was enough to drive anyone crazy, and I was no exception. It had been difficult to get my groove back after all that. Two weeks had passed, and I still felt like I was floating through life, the weight of everything a heavy blanket across me.

I walked the aisles with my grocery list clutched in my hand like a lifeline. A turkey, onions, noodles, milk, flour, cheese, asparagus, lemon, butter, spices...all the spices. Usually, my cooking was pretty standard. I relied on microwavable food a lot. I didn't have any spices besides salt, pepper, and garlic powder. I wasn't exactly a

chef.

I stood in front of the cheeses, my phone in my hand, googling “most meltable fancy cheese for mac and cheese.” The search results weren’t helpful—it was between Gruyère and Fontina—when the smell I’d been trying to ignore the entire trip became overpowering.

It hit me like a punch to the gut: raw sewage, absurdly strong and unrelenting. I gagged slightly, covering my nose with my sleeve as I glanced around at the crowd of people. They were busy with their lists, scanning the shelves in chaotic concentration. No one else seemed to notice. No one was holding their nose or gagging.

How was I the only one? It was so overwhelming I couldn’t believe the entire store wasn’t sick.

I turned to a woman nearby, who was putting brie in her cart, and asked gently, “Excuse me, sorry to bother you, but do you smell that?”

“Smell what?” she asked, pausing and sniffing the air with exaggerated effort.

Her cartoonish sniff made me feel suddenly embarrassed. “The garbage smell?” I pressed, my voice quieter. “It smells so much like garbage. It’s awful.”

She tilted her head, studying me with mild confusion. “Maybe you mean the sewage outside? It comes up sometimes when it rains.”

“But it rains so much in Seattle. I’ve never smelled it before,” I muttered, mostly to myself.

She laughed lightly and waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, I was the same way when I was pregnant. I had, like, a super smeller. It was kind of a blessing—I could tell if

milk was going to expire the next day, I swear. But mostly, it was a burden, because bad smells? Awful. I was so nauseated all the time. Peppermint oil under the nose was the only thing that helped.”

“I’m not pregna—” I started, but the words died on my lips as she walked away, apparently already done with the conversation.

I stood there, a block of cheddar cheese in my hand, doing mental math as my heart plummeted into my stomach.

Three weeks ago. I had sex with Robert three weeks ago. I hadn’t been on my period.

When was I supposed to get my period?

Fumbling for my phone, I opened my period tracker app with shaky fingers. My breath caught as I stared at the screen.

I was supposed to start it...three days ago.

The realization hit me like a freight train, and my face went cold. My phone slipped from my sweaty hand into the cart, clanging loudly against the metal. I gasped, my hands flying to cover my face as my mind spun. But I had an IUD. My IUD had never failed me. This had to be stress or something. It didn’t make any sense for me to be pregnant.

I tried to comfort myself with the thought even as I abandoned my cart and walked through the grocery store straight toward the pharmacy. My feet moved mechanically, disconnected from my body, like I was in a dream. The air felt thick, pulsing, and everything around me tunneled, collapsing in on itself.

When I reached the pharmacy aisle, I grabbed the first pregnancy test I saw. Then I

froze, looking around as if I was in trouble, before frantically filling my arms with every test I could fit.

At the checkout, the woman raised an eyebrow at my armful of tests. “You know, these are pretty accurate these days,” she said with a smirk. “You don’t need...eight.”

Her words barely registered. I stared at her blankly, disbelief coursing through me. Could she see me? I felt invisible as I’d wandered through the store moments ago like I was stuck in some surreal dream.

But now, standing there with this cashier staring at me, the truth began to sink in. I was real. This was real.

“I’ll take all eight,” I mumbled, my voice barely audible.

The cashier hesitated for a moment, then shrugged. “Okay, all eight it is,” she said, sliding the tests across the scanner.

I paid for the tests and then went back for the rest of my groceries like nothing was wrong. Thanksgiving was still going to happen. I wanted to pretend everything was normal for as long as I could.

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I pretended everything was normal while I waited in line, while I packed the groceries into the car, while I drove home, and while I put everything away. I pretended everything was normal as I microwaved a cup of instant noodles, the smell of sodium and chicken broth filling the kitchen.

I pretended everything was normal as I peed on a stick. On a second stick. A third. Fourth. Fifth. Sixth. Seventh. Eighth.

I pretended everything was normal when the microwave dinged, signaling my noodles were ready, and while I scarfed them down over the sink, dread coiling in my stomach alongside the salty broth.

And then, finally, I stopped pretending.

Sighing heavily, I walked over to the bathroom counter. My hands were trembling, and my heart felt like it was beating in my throat.

I caught my reflection in the mirror. My hair was stringy from not washing it that morning, and my face was bare—no makeup to hide how pale I looked. My lips were dry and lifeless, drained of color by the fear coursing through me.

Swallowing hard, I glanced down at the tests.

All eight of them said the same thing.

Pregnant.

I gasped, even though I'd already known.

I was pregnant with Robert Hastings' baby—the man who had made it clear what he thought of me by kicking me out after sex, the man who had told me I was reckless, and that I was debasing myself by working as a bottle girl, the man who had convinced my ex to dump me.

I was also pregnant with Robert Hastings' baby—the man with disarming green eyes and strong arms, the man who saved me when I was in trouble, the man who kissed me with the passion of a lover from a past life, and the man who told me my problems mattered to him.

There were two very different versions of Robert. And I didn't know which one I was having this baby with.

But one thing was for sure. This wasn't a dream. The baby was real.

I was pregnant.

twenty

Robert

"Daddy, let's go in there!" Corinne shouted excitedly, jumping and pointing at an antique store. She was eyeing the vintage dresses in the window, which I could already tell I'd be walking out with.

"Corinne, we're here for dishware," I told her, half sternly, looking down the sidewalk at the rest of the stores at the outdoor mall.

My daughter pouted, knowing that it always worked on me, and I sighed while rolling

my eyes. She started walking inside confidently, aware that she'd won before I even took a step.

"Look, there's dishware here," Corinne teased, running her fingers along a few China plates on display.

"When you're right, you're right," I told her, allowing her to grab my hand and pull me deeper into the store through the narrow aisles that just begged for someone to run into something priceless and send it smashing to the floor.

"Ooh, what about these?" She held up some ceramic cookware with gold leaf and sage green flowers painted onto them. The set of six had scalloped edges and were, admittedly, beautiful. I tried to discreetly check the tags and saw that they were worth quite a few lines of families shopping for Thanksgiving dinner.

"Sure, those are pretty. We can get those and get out of here," I told her, antsy in the close quarters of the store. I glanced over at the woman working the counter. She was staring me down over the rims of her narrow, cat eyeglasses.

"Wait, what about these?" Corinne held up some pink stoneware with handles on the side.

"Rin-Rin, we're not taking them home, you know that, right? We're going to leave them at the food bank."

"So? They should still be pretty."

"I guess you're right," I relented, smiling and taking them from her hands. "They should still be pretty."

"Thank you, Daddy." She smiled her sweet smile, and even as I smiled back, the



thought was at the back of my head that she was going to really have me around her finger in her teenage years.

I went to the front to pay for the items, anxious to get out of the store, when I glanced over at Corinne and saw her standing in front of a vanity.

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She sat down on the bench in front of the little mirror, and I started to snap at her to not touch things when the store clerk saw me open my mouth and interrupted, “She can sit there, it’s okay. It’s sturdy. Antique things always are. People used to really work at their craft, not like now. Now, everything seems to be made of plywood. Do you know some car bumpers are made of Styrofoam?”

Her voice was harsh and shrill, and I could tell that she’d been holding that one in for a while.

Nodding politely, I left my things at the counter and walked over to Corinne, touching her lightly on the back. “Let’s go home, baby girl. We have groceries at home to put in these. Plus, we should wash them first.”

“Okay,” she said obediently, but she didn’t move. “Did you know Mommy had one of these? It was just like this.”

I looked over her shoulder and saw that she was eyeing a boar bristle hair brush with an ivory handle. She wasn’t touching it, just admiring it. Her hands were flat on the tabletop, her thumbs an inch away from the brush, as though she were afraid of it.

The memories of her mother flashed through my head, of her brushing her hair with it, the way it would frizz out at the ends when she did until she ran oil through her curls to calm them.

“How did you know that?” I asked her warily. Quinn had died when Corinne was just a baby. She didn’t have any memories of her mother.

“I saw her in a picture in your room. I know I’m not supposed to be in your room, but I was just in there looking for you, I swear. You have a picture of her with one of those on your nightstand.” She told me like she felt guilty for knowing it, and I patted her shoulder, emotion creeping into my throat.

I swallowed those feelings down and told her, “Fine, we can get that, too. And that mirror,” I said, pointing at a handheld mirror that matched the brush. “She had one like that, too, to go with it.”

Corinne whipped around in the chair and hugged me around the middle tightly, her face pressed up against my stomach.

I settled my hand on the top of her head, running my fingers across her hair for just a moment before saying, “Okay, come on, come on, let’s go.”

After the woman packed up her mirror and brush in a little brown bag with pink gift paper poking out of the top, we headed back to the car, my arms full of what felt like fifty pounds of ceramic and stone.

As we slipped into our seats, Corinne said, “Daddy, I feel bad.”

“What? Why? Seatbelt,” I told her firmly, as I put my own seatbelt on, looking in the rearview mirror to meet her eyes.

I knew she hated sitting in the back because she felt like it was babyish, but she was still under twelve, and I wanted to keep her safe for as long as possible. She put her seatbelt on, and I put the car in reverse to back out.

“I just wish every little girl could have fancy brushes and mirrors.”

I looked at her for a second in the rearview mirror, amazed that I had raised such an

empathetic little girl despite my disdain for most people. I loved Jeremy and Corinne, and they were all I needed. But Corinne had a love for everyone that spilled out of her.

Sighing, I pulled the car back into the parking spot.

“What are you doing? Aren’t we going home?” Corinne asked.

“No, we’re going to buy toys for all the little girls and boys at the food bank on Thanksgiving.”

Corinne gasped and squealed, unbuckling her seatbelt to lunge forward and hug me from the backseat, almost choking me against the headrest. “Thank you, thank you!”

“You’re too good for your own good, Corinne Hastings,” I told her, patting her hands. “Now get out of the car and pick what store to spend all my money in.”

She laughed, clapping, and opened the car door, sprinting out of the car.

It was sometimes so scary that I had to raise her alone, but in moments like this, it was easy to think how lucky I was to get to raise her. She was such a sweet girl, even if I didn’t understand how she’d gotten that way.

How was so much of her mother in her when she had no memories of her? Would I have to look back at Quinn for the rest of my life? What would happen when she got older and looked even more like her? How would I stomach it?

I shook the dark thoughts from my mind and got out of the car to follow her.

twenty-one

Delia

I stared down at the positive pregnancy tests that littered my bathroom. I guess these really are pretty accurate.

At this point, it didn't really matter how I felt about it, because it was real. All too real.

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Strangely, one of the first thoughts that came to me was that I had no idea how I was going to tell Jeremy. Jeremy wasn't my boyfriend. I owed him nothing, obviously, but I knew he was going to be heartbroken by my getting pregnant by his best friend.

He'd understand. It had happened by accident. Neither of us had planned it. I hadn't even planned on getting in his car that night. It had just happened. God, I sound like a cliché.

I felt dizzy, and I clamped my fingers around the counter. This was going to ruin their friendship, and it was all my fault. There was no way he'd forgive Robert for this.

And Robert...did he even want to see me ever again? He'd seemed perfectly happy to get me out of his house that night after... what we'd done. It had felt so good, and then suddenly, it was over.

I wasn't even sure that I should tell Robert. Maybe he didn't want to see me. He already had a child, and his life seemed complicated. Maybe I shouldn't tell him and risk complicating it anymore. Maybe he wouldn't want to be a father again. Maybe he wouldn't want to do it if it meant doing it with me.

I wrapped my arms around myself and resolved to keep it a secret from Robert for now. I didn't know enough about what I even wanted from him to tell him. It would just complicate things further. I needed to figure out how I felt first.

Still gripping the counter with one hand, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed Cassandra. She answered on the first ring, excitedly, bubbly, nothing like how I felt, and exclaimed, "Hey! Are you ready for Thanksgiving?"

My mouth felt dry. I couldn't even begin to figure out how to answer that. I had been ready for Thanksgiving just an hour ago, and all of a sudden, it was the furthest thing from my mind.

Yet, I still had to think about it. I still had to start my turkey and let it marinate until the next day, when I would have to let it cook low and slow overnight until finally my family came.

I wasn't much of a fan of Thanksgiving or any holiday. It was a reminder of what I was missing in the way of family. My father didn't come around, my brother lived a state away, and my mother wasn't that healed of a person.

I knew I had gotten into working with veterans because of my dad, but sometimes I felt like maybe I had gotten into therapy in general because of how unhealed my mother was. She looked for attention and love in all the wrong places. I wasn't a big priority for her, even though I felt like I could give her the love she craved.

It was hard to sit around a table and eat dry turkey on a day of gratitude with my mother, who mostly made me unsure of myself, among the guests.

"Hello? Delia, can you hear me?" Cassandra asked, and I realized that I had been sitting in silence on the other end.

I shook my head and snapped back into reality, saying, "Sorry. No, I'm not ready. Actually, would you want to come over and help me? I need to start the turkey marinade."

"Do you mean brine?"

"I guess. I don't know. See, I need you!"

“Okay, okay. I’ll be over in fifteen then, just hold tight,” Cassandra laughed her tinkling laugh, and for a second, it calmed me down to know that even if everything wasn’t normal with me, at least Cassandra hadn’t changed.

It was a strange thought – of course Cassandra hadn’t changed – but I was feeling a sense of dread as I stared at the pregnancy tests, and they stared back.

I waited in obscurity for Cassandra to arrive. It was almost like I wasn’t there. That’s how I felt as I got the ingredients for the turkey ‘brine’ together – the salt, the brown sugar, the Worcestershire sauce, the garlic, and the pepper. I laid it all out on the counter along with the defrosted turkey.

It was strangely ritualistic, the things I’d need to make this turkey taste good right next to it. The only way it could feel stranger would be if the turkey were actively gobbling.

Kassandra got to my place within the hour, although nowhere near the fifteen minutes like she’d said. She was always ‘stylishly late,’ though I had a suspicion it wasn’t all that intentional. She was routinely late for work as well.

She came with a container of salt and a hug. It was just what I needed. She shook her brown curls around her and said, “Jeez, you look like crap. Have you been up all day or what?”

I laughed a little, even though it stung coming from her. She never meant it that way. She was blunt, but I knew she loved me. “I feel like crap,” I said honestly, taking the container of salt from her. “You thought I didn’t have salt?”

“I thought you might not have enough salt. Brine is pretty salty.” Cassandra surveyed my ingredients, and I felt my secret dying to get out, beating at my chest like a captured animal.



Just as she pointed to the Worcestershire sauce and said, “Well, actually, this stuff is pretty salty, so you might have—” I blurted out, “Kassie, I’m pregnant.”

Her finger midair, she shut her mouth instantly. I could see all the muscles in her top half stiffen.

I stood next to her, my hands in my hair, unsure where to go with the conversation from there. She turned slightly, her eyebrows all the way up in her hairline, and her pointed finger turned into an open, upward palm. “What did you say? I think I misheard you.”

“No, you heard me right,” I sighed, and sat down at my dining table. I pulled my feet up onto the chair and set my chin against my knees. “I’m pregnant.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, her voice strained as she walked over to me.

I stood up quickly and grabbed her hand. “Do you want to see how sure I am?” I walked her to the bathroom with purpose.

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Her hands flew to cover her mouth when she saw the carnage of used pregnancy tests. She leaned down and looked closer at all the tiny little blue ‘pregnant’s, her eyes widening at each one. Standing up straight, she barked in shock, “You’re pregnant!”

“I know,” I groaned, and slid down the wall to the bathroom tile.

For a moment, the air was thick with silence and tense with emotion. Kassandra squatted down so that we were at eye level, and she took my hands in hers. “Well, is this good news or bad news?”

“I don’t know!” I exclaimed, frustrated, and rested my head against the wall.

“Okay!” She moved one of her hands to my shoulder and looked into my eyes.

“Okay. It’s okay. Why don’t you know? What feelings are you having?”

“I’m...I’ve always wanted to be a mom,” I told her, finally really seeing her, my eyes focusing through my tears.

“That’s good, that’s good. Hey, that’ll do it.” She held her hands out on either side of her like she was selling me something.

I laughed despite myself. “But it’s...the dad doesn’t like me very much, I don’t think.”

“Who is he? If you want to tell me.” She added the second part in a rushed voice, concerned that she had offended me by asking.

“Of course, I want to tell you. It’s just...hard to. It’s sensitive.” I scrunched up even tighter into a smaller ball. Maybe if I get small enough, no one will be able to see me.

“Is it Jeremy?” she whispered, her face screwed up like she’d hate nothing more.

“No,” I groaned. “It’s worse than that.” I flopped my face down onto my knees, took a deep breath, and whispered into my lap, “It’s Robert.”

“Robert? Who’s Robe— is that the self-defense guy who came to the bar a few weeks ago? The one who was insane to that customer?” Her voice was accusatory, her eyes wide in shock.

As if instinctively, I defended him, “That customer was being inappropriate with me!”

“No, I know. I’m just saying. That was quite the reaction by him. Nice of him to protect your honor, though, I guess.” She sat down next to me, flopping her body beside me and laying her head back against the wall.

“My honor,” I scoffed. “Did you know that he came by the bar one day looking to apologize to me, and this guy was following me to my car? I didn’t know what was going to happen, and Robert knocked him clean out, choked him until he passed out, Kassie. He was protecting me. He looked out for me.”

“Wait, pause.” Cassandra turned to me, her legs splayed out in front of her, “Delia, I have so many questions.”

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for her response, and said, “I know. The day you didn’t come to class, I went by myself, and he kissed me out in the hall. It was weird, and we ended up sort of arguing. He came by the bar, and that’s what you saw. And then he was kind of rude to me again. So I guess he came by to apologize, and he

ended up saving me, and then we kind of had sex.”

“Kind of? Seems like you definitely had sex, if those pregnancy tests are any indicator,” she chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

But nothing about this felt light. “Very funny.”

“Delia...” Cassandra dragged her words out, looking at the counter like the tests were bombs that might explode any moment, “I don’t want to be the one to point this out if you’re not ready to face it, but is it worth noting that you told me he’s Jeremy’s best friend?”

“I know, I know,” I groaned. “Don’t you think I’ve thought of that?”

“And he’s another older guy. Don’t you want someone young and fun? Like a young professional type that can keep up with you?” Gently, she tucked some of my hair behind my ear, her head tilted to soften the blow of the question.

“I can barely keep up with him, honestly. I don’t think he’s the kind of old man you’re thinking he is.” I flopped my arms down to my side, releasing myself from the fetal position.

“Okay, so here’s what I’m noticing. You want to be a mom, and you’re defending him at everything I say. Maybe, just maybe, you like him.” Cassandra tapped the tip of my nose with her finger, her eyes twinkling.

“I don’t want to like him!” I explained, twisting around to face her fully. “He’s been judgmental and cocky, and after we had sex, he offered to have his driver give me a ride home.”

“What’s wrong with offering to have his driver give you a ride home? That sounds

nice.”

“I was asking where his bedroom was.”

“You weren’t in it?” Kassandra raised an eyebrow.

“We were in his kitchen,” I sighed, turning back to lean against the wall again, readying myself for the response I thought was coming. That I had done this to myself, that I had put myself in a ridiculous situation.

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Instead, with a devious smile, Cassandra said, “Delia, you bad girl.”

“Stop,” I whined, as a small laugh came out of me without my permission. I rolled my eyes and continued on with my plight, “Plus, he already has an older daughter. What if he doesn’t want to raise a child all over again? And he’s Jeremy’s best friend. And all the other reasons you just said. I don’t know if I should tell him. What if I’m ruining his life with this?”

“Dee, he gets to decide that, not you. I don’t understand why you’d want this for yourself, but if you do – and it sounds like you do – you should be honest with him.”

“That’s your advice? Be honest?” I asked shrilly. That advice was childish. There were too many moving parts for it to be so simple.

“That’s my advice,” she shrugged.

I sighed, resting my head against her shoulder as the weight of her words settled over me. Be honest.

It sounded so simple when she said it, but the idea of telling Robert—of saying those words out loud and facing his reaction—felt like standing at the edge of a cliff. What if he looked at me the way he had after we slept together? Distant. Conflicted. What if he turned his back on me completely?

Kassandra reached over and gave my knee a reassuring squeeze, her face softening. “Look, Delia, you don’t have to do it today. Or tomorrow. But if you’re serious about wanting to figure this out, you’re going to have to talk to him eventually. And you’re

going to have to figure out how you feel about him. Not Jeremy, not anyone else. Just him.”

“I know,” I whispered, my voice shaky.

“You’ve got time,” she smiled gently. “But for now, let’s focus on surviving Thanksgiving, okay?”

I nodded, letting her words sink in. Thanksgiving. The turkey. The brine. My mother. For the moment, those were enough to keep me grounded.

Kassandra stood and stretched, offering me a hand. “Come on, let’s get this turkey brined so you know how to do it for Thanksgiving. You know how your mom is. She doesn’t cook, but she’ll still judge your cooking.”

I laughed, weakly, and let her pull me to my feet. As we walked back to the kitchen, I felt the weight in my chest loosen slightly.

The pregnancy tests still sat on the bathroom counter, a silent reminder of the choice I’d eventually have to make.

But for now, I could pretend everything was normal.

At least for one more day.

twenty-two

Robert

I brought my daughter to the food bank luncheon before I went in for the special pre-Thanksgiving Day self-defense class dinner.

It was more important than ever around the holidays to make sure that the women who attended my classes had a sense of community around them. Holidays could be hell for victims of domestic violence. I made sure they had a place to go to safely, a place that they could escape to and ask for help and resources. Or just a place to remind them about the strength they had within.

The noise in the food bank's main hall was as familiar as it was humbling. Forks clattered on plates, bursts of laughter rang out, and the warm scent of roasted turkey filled the air. The tables, lined with families and individuals, glowed with orange and gold centerpieces.

"Dad, what should we do next?" Corinne asked, tugging on my sleeve. She was holding the handle of the wagon that held all of our pastries, her face glowing with the excitement of being part of something important.

"Let's drop these off first," I said, gesturing toward the dessert station. "Then we'll see if they need help at the drink table."

Her eyes darted down toward the desserts she had in tow. "Do you think we'll get to eat some later?"

"Only if you earn it," I teased, nudging her shoulder with my hand to get her to move toward the dessert table.

She grinned at me as she hurried toward it, the creaky wheel loudly alerting everyone of her presence.

Being here felt right. Every year, I made sure we spent time giving back, especially during the holidays. But standing in this room—surrounded by people who were struggling while I had everything I could ever need—always left a knot in my stomach. It wasn't enough to just show up and volunteer.



The guilt lingered, heavy and constant, reminding me how unfair life could be. Most of these people were veterans, just like me, but somehow, it had ended in homelessness for them while I was more than comfortable.

“Wow, these look amazing,” one of the volunteers, wearing a nametag that said Charlie, said, as Corinne started to lift the pastries up out of the wagon and set them on the tabletop.

“She made them herself,” I said, glancing down at her and winking. She hid a laugh behind her hand as she continued to set them out.

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Charlie smiled. “You must be an amazing baker!”

Corinne beamed, and I let her soak up the praise, even if it was undeserved. She had picked them out herself. It was basically the same in my book.

After dropping off the desserts, we moved to the drink table. Corinne jumped right in, pouring cups of water and juice with a focus and enthusiasm that made me smile. I stood beside her, making small talk with the guests as I refilled trays and tidied the area.

“Your daughter’s a hard worker,” an older man said, as I handed him a cup of water.

“She sure is,” I replied, my chest swelling with pride.

For a while, the steady rhythm of volunteering kept my thoughts at bay. But as the lunch rush slowed and I stepped back to catch my breath, the familiar guilt crept in.

I scanned the room, my eyes landing on a group of veterans sitting together at one of the tables. Their laughter was loud, their camaraderie evident, but I couldn’t miss the weariness in their faces. It was the kind of weariness that came from carrying too much for too long. I heard one of them say, “Yeah, people don’t care about us anymore. This is my first hot meal in days. Even the shelter costs \$7 a day now.”

The others murmured their agreement, and one said, “It’s a damn shame. All that we did for their freedoms, and they see us as dirt.”

My stomach twisted. They reminded me of the men I’d served with, some of whom

I'd lost.

I wondered how many of them had struggled to find steady ground after coming home. How many of them were still fighting battles I couldn't begin to imagine. How many of them couldn't find hot meals or places to lay their heads.

And then there was me. A billionaire. A man whose life had somehow turned out better than he ever thought possible—better than it probably should have.

I'd left the Navy the same as them, with a sense of precarity, my life turned upside down and my hands still sweating whenever someone moved too quickly near me, and yet here I was, running a company, raising a daughter, volunteering at food banks in my spare time. This was their meal.

It didn't feel fair.

The room suddenly felt too loud, the laughter too sharp. My heart raced, and I struggled to draw a full breath.

"Dad?" Corinne's voice sounded distant, though she was standing right in front of me.

"I'm... I'm fine," I managed, although the words felt far from true. "I just need a minute."

I turned and hurried toward the door, the edges of my vision closing in. My chest tightened further as I stumbled into the cold November air, leaning against the railing for support.

Breathe. Just breathe.

The memories hit hard, as they always did. The sound of gunfire, the acrid stench of smoke, the desperate shouts of men I couldn't save.

I squeezed my eyes shut, gripping the railing as though it could anchor me to the present.

"Robert." The voice was calm but firm, cutting through the haze.

I opened my eyes to see Charlie, one of the event organizers, standing a few feet away. His shoulders were raised slightly, his posture non-threatening. He held a steaming cup of coffee.

He was an older man, his face lined with years of hard work, but his eyes were sharp. "Are you in a place for this, or am I gonna get it thrown back in my face?"

I wanted to laugh, but on some of my worse PTSD trips, I might have done just that. I could be animalistic in those moments, protective of myself from everyone and everything.

Delia's face flashed in my mind, unbidden. The way her smile had faded when I'd told her to leave that night. The way her voice had wavered, hurt and confused when she asked why. I'd done it to protect her, I told myself. To protect her from me.

But that didn't make it right.

"Hey," Charlie said softly. "You're okay. Just breathe."

I nodded but couldn't find the words to respond.

He stepped closer, his movements slow and deliberate. "Mind if I stay with you?"

I shook my head, and he leaned against the railing next to me, sipping his own coffee.  
“It’s good, what you’re doing here. Bringing your daughter, making this a tradition.”

“It’s important,” I managed to say.

“It is,” he agreed. “But I get the sense it’s about more than that for you.”

I didn’t answer right away, my eyes fixed on the steam rising from my cup.

For a while, neither of us spoke. I focused on my breathing, matching it to the steady rhythm of Charlie’s voice as he murmured quiet reassurances.

“You’ve been through this before,” he said eventually. It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah,” I croaked, my throat dry.

Charlie nodded, his gaze thoughtful. “You’re a vet, aren’t you?”

“Navy SEAL,” I said, my voice barely audible.

“Figured as much,” he said. “I was in the Army. ’Nam.”

“Thanks for your service,” I said automatically.

“Same to you.”

We sat in silence for a moment before Charlie spoke again. “It’s hard. The holidays. It’s nice what you’re doing, showing up here, but it’s hard.”

“You’re doing it, too.”

“I am. That’s how I know it’s hard.”

I didn’t say anything in response, just scoffed and looked back out beyond the railing.

Charlie continued, “You know, you don’t have to carry it all by yourself. Letting people in doesn’t make you weak. It makes you stronger.”

I wanted to argue, to tell him he didn’t understand, but the words wouldn’t come. His words hit harder than I wanted to admit. “It’s just not fair. Why did I make it out and they didn’t? Sometimes it feels like no matter how much I do, it’s never enough,” I admitted. “I see these guys in there, veterans who gave everything, and I can’t help feeling like... I got off easy.”

Charlie nodded, his expression thoughtful. “Survivor’s guilt,” he said quietly.

The words hit like a punch to the gut, but I didn’t deny them.

“I’ve been there,” he continued, his expression kind but firm. “Vietnam was hell, and coming back wasn’t any easier. It took me years to realize I didn’t have to carry it all alone.”

I glanced at him, my jaw tightening. I swallowed hard, staring at the ground. “I don’t know how.”

“You start small,” he said. “One step at a time.”

Before I could respond, the door opened, and Corinne stepped outside. Her cheeks were pink from the cold, her eyes wide with concern.

“Dad? Are you okay?”

I forced a smile, though it didn't feel convincing. "I'm fine, pumpkin. Just needed some air."

She frowned but didn't argue.

"Go ahead and grab us some pie," I added. "I'll catch up."

She hesitated, glancing between me and Charlie, before nodding and heading back inside.

Charlie clapped me on the shoulder. "You did good with her. She deserves a healthy dad. You think about what I said."

I nodded, though I wasn't sure if I could.



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When I stepped back into the hall a few minutes later, Corinne was waiting for me with two slices of pie. Her smile was bright, and for a moment, the weight on my chest lifted.

“Here,” she said, handing me a plate. “You need it more than I do.”

I chuckled softly, ruffling her hair. “Thanks, sweetie.”

As we sat together, eating our pie in companionable silence, I couldn’t help but feel a flicker of hope.

Maybe Charlie was right.

Maybe it was time to stop carrying it all alone.

twenty-three

Delia

The kitchen was an absolute mess. The day before Thanksgiving had always been so stressful in my house, and now I knew why. Cooking was hard. Cooking for Thanksgiving was impossible.

I had been cooking for hours, starting in the afternoon. It was already four, and it felt like I’d gotten nowhere. Flour coated the counters, a turkey breast sat half-thawed in a shallow pan, and the gravy I’d been stirring for what felt like an eternity was still refusing to thicken.

“Smells like progress,” Tyler, my brother, said, as he emerged from the tiny guest room I had stuck him in and walked into the kitchen. He grabbed a slice of bread from the counter and ate it plain, just like he used to as a kid.

“Smells like effort,” I muttered, stirring the pot harder than necessary.

He smirked and leaned against the counter. “You sure you don’t just want to let Mom cook when she gets here tomorrow?”

I sighed, glancing at the clock. “It’s not the cooking, Tyler. It’s the fact that I’m doing all of this alone.”

“You’re not alone,” he said, gesturing to himself dramatically. “You’ve got me.”

I gave him a look, but his teasing grin was impossible to resist. “Right. Because you’ve been so helpful sitting on the couch all morning.”

He shrugged unapologetically. “I’m a guest.”

Shaking my head, I turned back to the stove. “It’s just... I don’t know. I wish Mom had come earlier.”

“She’s gonna show up with store-bought pie and a list of reasons you should move back home and leave Seattle,” Tyler said, laughing.

I couldn’t help but smile. He wasn’t wrong. Mom’s enthusiasm for the holiday didn’t extend to the kitchen—or to making anyone else’s life easier. But at least she was coming.

My thoughts drifted to Dad, as they always did around the holidays. I didn’t talk about him much, especially not to Tyler, but the ache of his absence never really went

away.

Some small part of me still wished he'd step up one day and show up unannounced with stories about where he'd been and why he'd stayed away.

I knew I was only feeling this way because of the whole pregnancy thing. It was terrifying, and it was shining a new light on my family dynamics.

I felt like I was running out of time to make things right. I also felt like I'd never be able to make things right.

"Earth to Delia," Tyler said, snapping his fingers.

I blinked, realizing I'd been stirring the same spot in the gravy for too long. "Sorry. I'm just... tired."

"Why don't you take a break? Go do something fun," he suggested.

"Like what?" I asked, glancing at him skeptically.

Before he could answer, my phone buzzed on the counter. I wiped my hands on a dish towel and picked it up.

Join us for a special Thanksgiving meal at the Seattle Library! All are welcome.

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It was from the self-defense class I'd been attending—a reminder about the meal they were hosting this afternoon. Normally, I'd ignore something like this, but today, the idea of staying in the house all day felt unbearable.

“I think I'll head out for a bit,” I said, grabbing my jacket.

Tyler raised an eyebrow. “Where are you going?”

“There's a Thanksgiving thing for the self-defense class I've been going to.”

“You're ditching me?” he asked, feigning betrayal.

I rolled my eyes. “You'll survive. I won't be gone long.”

“Maybe I'll call Jeremy. Did you know your ex has been texting me asking to hang out?”

I knew he was planning on it, but it still annoyed me that he'd actually done it. I know he came to my house acting like we were buddies and everything was okay, but it made my skin crawl to think of him infiltrating his way back into my life through Tyler.

Even as I had those thoughts, the familiar guilt gnawed at me that I didn't have a right to be angry with Jeremy, not after what I'd done with Robert and what had happened because of what we'd done. Even if the memory made my knees weak. Especially remembering that it had happened in a kitchen...

I sighed. “I knew he was thinking of texting you. Are you going to hang out with him?”

“Yeah, I think I will. It’s been a while since I saw him. Is that okay with you?” Tyler asked casually.

“Fine with me,” I replied back, heading toward the door.

Tyler called after me, “Hey, if you see a pie, bring some back!”

The walk to the library, which really doubled as a community center with all the resources it had, was colder than I’d anticipated. I probably should have driven like usual. By the time I stepped inside, the warmth of the hall felt like a relief.

The room was alive with activity—volunteers darting between tables, children decorating cookies, and groups of women chatting over steaming cups of cider. It was bustling, yet cozy in a way I hadn’t expected.

I scanned the room, and my breath caught when I saw him.

Robert.

He was standing by the dessert table, arranging pies on a tray like it was the most important task in the world. His broad shoulders and calm demeanor made him impossible to miss. Beside him, a young girl was carefully placing cookies on a platter, her red braid swishing as she moved.

I hesitated, torn between slipping out unnoticed and walking over. I had just decided to turn around and walk out when Robert caught my eye and started walking over, his eyes widening slightly in surprise. “Delia.”

“What are you doing here?” I blurted, my eyes flicking over to the pies and planning my escape with a slice of one.

“I’m here every year,” he said, his voice calm. “I started sponsoring these events about ten years ago.”

My eyes widened. “Wait, you’re the sponsor?”

He nodded, his gaze steady. “I told you what happened to Quinn. Holidays can be tough for women with dangerous home lives. It’s important to me that they have a place to come.”

Before I could respond, the redheaded girl ran over to him and tugged on his sleeve. “Daddy, can I have a cookie now?”

Robert’s expression softened as he turned to her. “Go ahead, baby girl.” I suddenly felt like I was intruding, being so close to his daughter.

I looked at her closely before she turned and walked away. She was beautiful, and her eyes were bright. She looked like she adored him, and he looked like he adored her right back. I wondered if he’d adore our child like that. Our child that he didn’t know existed.

Robert turned back to me. “Are you staying for dinner?”

I stared at him, all the unsaid things between us. “My brother’s waiting for me back at the house. And so’s my uncooked turkey.”

He nodded, his eyes lingering on mine for a moment. “Well, you came here, so you must have been expecting to stay a little bit.”

“I guess so,” I shrugged. “Was that your daughter?”

He nodded. "That's Corinne."

"She's beautiful."

"Isn't she? She looks a lot like her mom."

"I bet Quinn was beautiful, too."

"Quinn was a dream."

I expected to feel jealous, but I didn't. I understood where he was at with that. He cleared his throat. "Do you want to come sit with us?"

"Um," I looked back at the door, still contemplating leaving. I didn't want to get sucked up into it with Robert again. I had already felt how painful that could be. He didn't seem to be able to connect with people. "Sure."

"Come on." He held out his hand for me to take, and as I slipped my fingers between his, I was surprised to see how comforting it felt. His hand was worn and warm, calloused, though I didn't know from what.

He led me to his table, where the older woman from the first day of class, Heather, sat, along with his daughter, who was scarfing down as much dessert as she could before her dad saw.

"Corinne," he said firmly, in a voice that warned her. She swallowed hard and looked up at him with big, brown eyes. "Did you put any of the vegetables on your plate?"



“She ate a plate full of broccoli. I saw it myself,” Heather said, winking at Corinne.

“I don’t appreciate you lying for my kid,” Robert scoffed, as he pulled out my chair, seemingly without even thinking of it.

“Come on, Robby, lighten up. She’s eleven. Let her eat a plate full of crap,” Heather said jovially, nudging Corinne with her elbow.

Corinne smiled at her, but her smile was strained. “Sorry, Daddy. I’ll eat some vegetables, I promise.”

“I was the same way,” I interjected shyly. “I never wanted to eat my vegetables. That’s why I’m so puny now.”

“Now, come on, I saw that knee you gave Robby your first day of class,” Heather said with a sly smile. “I wouldn’t call you puny. Seemed like there was some anger there.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Maybe I have some unchecked issues.” I looked over at Corinne and teased, “Probably because I didn’t eat my broccoli.”

Corinne giggled shyly against her hand, her sleeve so long that it covered it. I remembered being her age, all the embarrassment I felt for just existing.

The hour passed by quickly, and I watched as Robert managed to somehow fit in perfectly and say all the right things to his daughter, to me, and to Heather.

He didn’t seem like a man who had just a few weeks ago fucked me mindlessly and then sent me home cold and filled with cum. Either he was an extremely adept conman, or I had misjudged him, and something else was going on.

My phone buzzed, my brother texting me that he was there to pick me up.

“Well,” I said, “I’ve got to go. My brother’s here. Any way that I could take some pie home with me?”

“You could always wrap it in a napkin and sneak it out in your purse. That’s what my grandma used to do with Red Lobster biscuits,” Heather said, her eyes darting toward the napkins on the table.

“Actually, I’ve got something you can use,” Robert said, standing up and walking away. He came back, pulling a wagon, to my surprise, and pulled a beautiful piece of stoneware out of it. “Here, take this.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed. “Is this an antique?”

Robert laughed a little. “It is. Good eye. But seriously, take it. Put some pie in there and take it. This one picked out like seven pieces of cookware at the store, and now we have far too many.” He looked at Corinne, who grinned a little deviously.

I turned the piece around in my hands, looking at the intricate gold leafing embedded in it. “Well, thank you. It’s gorgeous.”

“Sure,” he said simply, shrugging. He was standing so close to me, his hands awkwardly at his side, as though he were considering hugging me.

I leaned forward slightly and then gave up, my mind a whirlwind of all the things that we’d been through. And what he didn’t know.

“Okay. You all enjoy your dinner. And you, little lady,” I looked at Corinne, “It was very nice meeting you.”

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“Nice meeting you,” she said, in a voice that was so sweet it melted me.

I felt my heart pounding in my chest. It was so strange to see Robert. I had halfway thought that I never would again. I had started to feel like that one night was all we would ever get.

I was about to walk out when I glanced out the large windows of the library and saw that it wasn't just Tyler in the car. Jeremy and Tyler were sitting inside together, chatting like old friends. Jeremy got out of the car with a big smile stretched across his pale face.

My stomach twisted.

I looked back at Robert just in time to see that he had noticed.

twenty-four

Robert

I watched through the window as Jeremy approached the building. He had told me he was with family today. Bastard!

I glanced at Delia, who stood stiffly beside me. She was pretending to focus on something across the room, but the way her shoulders were drawn tight gave her away.

She'd seen him, too. My best friend.

And her ex.

“Is he here for you?” I asked quietly, stepping closer to her and farther away from my daughter, trying to keep my voice steady and low.

She didn’t answer right away, her eyes still fixed on nothing. Finally, she shook her head. “No. He must’ve come with my brother.”

I watched as Jeremy entered the auditorium. He knew just how to get here since I’d started letting him teach his own classes here. And now every step he took felt like a challenge, even though I knew he didn’t see it that way. He couldn’t see it that way. He had no idea what was going on between Delia and me.

“Robert!” Jeremy’s voice was warm, his hand raising to wave at me.

I forced a smile, my jaw tightening as I reached out to shake his hand.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” he said, as his gaze flicked briefly to Delia.

“Same,” I replied. “I thought you said you were with family?”

“Well, sure, Delia’s family is like mine,” came Jeremy’s easy answer. I caught the way his eyes lingered on Delia, the faint smile that tugged at the corner of his mouth.

Delia was still avoiding eye contact, her arms crossed over her chest like she was trying to shrink into herself.

“Delia,” Jeremy said, his voice softening, “are you ready to go?”

She nodded, barely glancing at him. “Yep.”

“Okay, I’ll be out in the car.”

The tension was unbearable. I knew I should play it cool, keep things civil, but the way he looked at her—like he still had some kind of claim—made my blood boil. Such strong feelings... or responses, were new to me.

Keep it cool, Robert!

“Have a good one,” I said, my tone clipped.

Jeremy gave Delia one last glance before heading toward the exit. She started to follow without looking at me, but I grabbed her hand and pulled her back to me. “What the hell was that?” I hissed at her.

She blinked, startled. “What was what?”

“You couldn’t even look at him,” my voice was low but sharp. “Why? Feeling guilty?”

Her eyes narrowed, but she didn’t respond right away.

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“You’re still seeing him, aren’t you?” I pressed.

Her face flushed, anger sparking in her eyes. “So what if I am?”

Her response felt like someone grabbed ahold of my stomach and squeezed it in their fist.

“So you are. I knew it. Was this all just a ploy to get back to him? Go on then! Go get your man! But just remember how easy it was to convince him to leave.”

Delia ran her tongue over her bottom teeth, turning her head away from me in anger before whipping it around to face me again. “Robert, I’m not with him.”

“Then what are you doing here with him?” I demanded.

“I’m not with him!” she snapped. “He’s here because of my brother, not because of me.”

I shook my head, frustration boiling over. “You expect me to believe that? You expect me to believe there’s nothing going on when you can’t even look him in the eye?”

She crossed her arms, her jaw tightening. “I’m not with him, Robert.”

“Then why does it feel like you’re playing both sides?” The words came out harsher than I intended, but I couldn’t stop myself. “If you want to fool around with him and me at the same time, that’s not happening. I’m not going to fight for you, Delia. I’ve

got enough shit to deal with without adding that to the list.”

Her mouth fell open, hurt flashing across her face. For a moment, she just stared at me. “You made it perfectly clear you won’t be fighting for me,” she said finally, her voice shaking. “You did a great job of pushing me away all on your own. You don’t need another man to be in the picture for that.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. I knew what she was referring to, but anger flashed in my chest that she was referring to it as me pushing her away. I wasn’t pushing her away! I had been worried about her safety!

A small voice in my head told me to be honest with myself, but I ignored it, saying to her, “I didn’t push you away, Delia. You decided to interpret the events that transpired that way.”

“The ‘events that transpired’? Who are you? You think I don’t know why you told me to leave that night?” she snapped, her jaw tight and her eyes small in anger. “You’re scared, Robert. You’re scared of getting close to anyone because you think you’ll screw it up. But don’t you dare take that out on me.”

Her words hit like a punch to the gut. I wanted to argue, to tell her she was wrong, but I couldn’t. Because she wasn’t.

She stepped closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “You want me to be honest with you? Fine. I didn’t look Jeremy in the eye because I knew what kind of jealous mess you were. And it kills me that everything that’s happened to you has made you this way. But I’m not with him. I don’t want to be with him.”

I swallowed hard, my chest tightening.

“I’m done here,” she said, her voice cold.

I reached out instinctively, grabbing her wrist. “Delia—”

“Don’t,” she said, pulling free, “touch me. If you’re going to keep pushing me away, then let me go. But don’t accuse me of something I didn’t do just because you’re too afraid to deal with your own shit.”

She turned and walked away, leaving me standing there, speechless.

I wanted to follow her, to say something—anything—to fix the mess I’d just made. But I couldn’t move.

Because she was right.

twenty-five

Delia

The cold air slapped my face as I stormed out of the library, my heart pounding and my fists clenched. Robert’s words echoed in my mind, each one cutting deeper than the last.

“If you want to fool around with him and me at the same time, that’s not happening.”

It was bad enough that he’d had sex with me and asked me to leave before I could even put my clothes on. But he just had to take it a step further and insult me.

I couldn’t believe he had the audacity to accuse me of being with Jeremy. And the worst part? He didn’t have any claim over me. He was in no place to demand loyalty from me.

I’d made it all the way to the parking lot when the anger boiling inside me finally



overflowed.

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“Unbelievable,” I muttered under my breath, spinning on my heel.

Tyler and Jeremy were sitting in the car, the engine idling as they chatted. I could feel that their conversation was about me as their mouths stopped when their eyes landed on me.

I held up my finger to say ‘one minute’ and spun around to walk back inside.

I wasn’t leaving things like this.

I pushed open the doors to the library and spotted Robert as he walked back down the hallway toward the auditorium where we had been eating.

“Robert!” I snapped, my voice sharp and echoing down the hallway.

He turned toward me, his eyes narrowing.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I demanded, stomping up to him. “You think you get to accuse me of being some kind of two-timing liar?”

His jaw tightened. “Delia, this isn’t the time or place. You were right to leave. You should keep going. Go find Jeremy. It’s obvious you two are meant for each other.” His tone was sarcastic, cutting me deep.

“I get to choose who I’m meant for!” I shot back. “You don’t have any claim over me.” I poked my index finger into his broad chest, feeling the tense muscles of his pecs. “You don’t get to be mad if I want to be with someone else. You gave up any

stake you had in..." I gestured between us, "...this...when you told me to get out."

His nostrils flared, and for a moment, I thought he was going to yell back. Instead, he took a step closer, his voice low and dangerous. "I did not tell you to get out. I told you you could stay in my guest room. But that wasn't enough for you. You just had to push for more."

I crossed my arms, angry that he was bringing that up as though I'd demanded his bedroom. It was the way he'd done it, and he knew it. "I thought you were so emotionally mature. Isn't that what you said? But now you're playing games."

"I'm not the one playing games," he said. "You're the one who can't seem to figure out what the hell you want."

I laughed bitterly. "You've got some nerve. So if you weren't kicking me out, why haven't I heard from you?" I looked around the room as if looking for a carrier pigeon to arrive with a letter from him. "You've made no attempt to contact me, Robert. Sure seems like you kicked me out and now you're done."

His eyes flashed with something—guilt, maybe, or anger, or both. "How was I supposed to know you felt so strongly about me? You've pushed me away at every turn. Hell," he turned up his head to the sky with a chuckle, "even that night, it was hell to get you to agree to let me drive you. A man could save your life, and you'd still act like he had a vendetta against you!" He pointed at me angrily. "So stop acting like you have some high ground in running when we both know you don't."

I chewed on my bottom lip, the truth socking me in the stomach. He was right. It was the absolute truth. He had saved my life. And I still thought it was all part of some plan to hurt me.

Even now, while I berated him, I knew the secret I had. I was afraid of him running? I

couldn't even tell him the truth, that I was pregnant with his child.

"You're right. You couldn't have known how strongly I felt about you because I don't feel strongly about you," I lied.

The silence between us crackled like static, heavy and charged. His gaze bore into mine, and for a moment, neither of us moved.

Then he reached out, grabbing my arm and pulling me closer.

"Delia—"

I didn't let him finish. "No, don't. I'm done."

His hand was still on my arm, a static shock between us so strong that I was surprised I was still breathing. And then he kissed me.

It wasn't gentle or sweet or apologetic. It was angry and desperate and electric, and I hated myself for kissing him back.

His hands gripped my waist, and I shoved him against the wall, my frustration and fury pouring out in the way my fingers tangled in his hair, and my teeth grazed his lower lip.

"This doesn't mean you're forgiven," I muttered against his mouth, even as my body betrayed me by pressing closer to him.

"Not asking for forgiveness," he murmured, his voice rough.

His hands slid down to my hips, pulling me even closer, and I let out a low, frustrated groan.

“This is a terrible idea,” I said, even as I pushed his jacket off his shoulders.

“Probably,” he agreed, his lips moving to my neck.

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Somewhere in the back of my mind, I remembered that Tyler and Jeremy were waiting in the car. That they could walk in at any moment. But the thought only made the heat between us burn hotter.

Robert's hands were under my sweater now, his touch igniting a fire in my skin. My nails dug into his shoulders as I kissed him harder, trying to pour every ounce of anger, confusion, and longing into the moment.

"I hate you," I whispered, even though it was the furthest thing from the truth.

"I know," he said, his voice low and rough.

He picked me up by my legs so that they wrapped around his waist, and he carried me into a closet, closing the door behind us. Only a thin crack of light showed beneath the door. We had to feel our way through the darkness to each other's bodies, but it felt easy, second nature. I somehow knew his body like my own.

The world outside the two of us didn't exist anymore. There was no Jeremy, no Tyler, no guilt or frustration or fear. There was only him—his touch, his breath, his heat—and the way he made me feel like I was coming apart and being put back together all at once.

Robert's hands cupped my breasts under my sweater, holding the weight of them in his strong and rough hands, and his fingers tweaked at my nipples as he breathed heavily against my lips.

I was slick inside my jeans, rubbing against the inside seam of my zipper as his bulge

pushed against my wet spot. I needed him.

I groaned at the feeling of his cock pressed against my neediness, and I bit at his bottom lip, tugging it into my mouth to suck on.

One of his hands traveled out of my sweater and roamed up into my hair, holding onto it tightly. He pulled my head back so that we were looking at each other in the eyes in the darkness.

My eyes had adjusted, and I could just make out his features so close to me. His eyes were serious, looking deep into my soul, and his mouth was set tightly. I could see the muscles in his jaw circulating as he tightened it.

My hair was wrapped around his fingers, and he turned his wrist to wrap it further until his hand was up against my head, cradling it. He growled, "I'm done with these games, Delia. You're mine, or you're nothing. I'm not sharing you."

"I'm not asking you to share," I breathed, gasping as he tugged on my hair harder.

"Tell me that you'll be mine, or this has to end," he demanded, trailing his nose across my jawline gently. I could feel his breath on my neck. I felt like I could feel the stirring of his heart in his chest, the beating growing stronger and faster.

He pushed his hips against mine, and his bulge's reach deepened, stretched between my legs. I could feel his member twitching in his pants.

I reached out for him, to hold onto his body and pull him into me, but he backed up just out of my reach. "Say it," he repeated. "Tell me, Delia." His voice was rising, his anger audible. "I'm not fucking around. I need to know that you're all in."

"I'm..." I wanted to say it. I'd mean it if I said it. But I knew the secret that I had

brewing, and I was terrified to let him trust me, knowing that I was untrustworthy. But he was in front of me and so sexy, and I knew the real him, and I did want him. I sighed.

“I’m yours,” I said finally. That part could be true.

“Good,” he told me, looking at me curiously with his hands still in my hair. Finally, he eased away just enough to give himself space to unbuckle my pants, pulling the zipper down as he looked in my eyes.

Then I reached out for his pants, my hands trembling as I unbuckled his belt, his eyes still on me like I was a specimen to be studied.

He smirked at my shaking hands and put his over mine, guiding my shaking fingers as I undid his belt and unbuttoned his pants. He pulled his pants off, kicking out of them and shedding his shirt and sweater together in one go.

His erection sprung from his underwear, and I couldn’t help but gasp when I saw it. I’d missed it. Seeing it again, although in this dim light, reminded me of the way it had felt inside me, and I could feel my pussy drooling for it already.

I sank to my knees, wanting to worship him, and I took it in both hands, admiring the way the skin shined in the minimal lighting, the swollen head in front of me. I stroked his shaft with one hand as my tongue dragged across the ridges underneath his head, the vein that stuck out impressively.

He sighed in contentment and ran his hands down the back of my shoulder blades under my sweater. My skin lit up where he touched me, and my inner thighs trembled at the memory of the way he’d held me open as he licked me clean of all my juices.

Still licking the underside of the head of his penis, I sucked the head into my mouth,



sucking the air of my cheeks in. He shuddered against me and held my head, not pushing it down but caressing it.

He braced one hand against the wall of the closet behind me as his body shook, and I took it as an invitation to suck him down my throat further. I swallowed in order to keep my mouth from trying to breathe, forcing myself to breathe through my nose as I took more and more of his penis down my throat.

I did it until I had all of it, until he was touching the back of my throat, until I could hardly breathe, until I felt a sense of panic over it, until my nose was touching his pelvis.

He was groaning, his breathing growing more and more rapid as his cock grew bigger and bigger in my mouth. It grew until it was filling my throat, until I couldn't tell where my throat ended and his cock began.

My hands planted on his back, and the warmth of his skin was such a lovely shock against the chill of the floor on my knees.

I started to bob my head up and down his shaft, enjoying the way that my saliva gathered at the base of his penis, the way that I lost myself to sucking cock, the way that he gasped in awe of my abilities.

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When I finally emerged, releasing my throat of the obstruction, gasping for air, he pulled me up by my arms and shoved me against the wall with my ass out.

He pushed my hands flat against the wall, kissing my neck and groaning as he teased my slit with his wet, spit-covered cockhead.

Excitement moved through my body, making my toes curl and my fingers shake, and then he plunged the entirety of his inches into me.

The rawness of the feeling made me cry out, but I pushed my mouth into my arm, biting my skin to keep myself quiet even as tears gathered at the corners of my eyes at the sheer size of him.

He moved between my cheeks like butter, slick with my spit and my juices, and his hand reached around to tweak my nipples as he fucked me, his size splitting me open while I quietly took it. I arched my back so that he could hit my G-spot, and the angle was so delicious that I shook and cried into my forearm.

He fucked me more furiously as he sensed that my orgasm was approaching, and I moaned and wriggled against him.

We came together, our bodies shaking violently. As he came inside me, he held my hips tightly so that he could move inside me faster and harder, pushing me flatter and flatter against the wall.

I had a flashback to that night, to the night that got me pregnant, the moment that it all changed, his cum coating my walls. I'd felt so good that I'd given myself over to

it.

And now I was doing it again.

When it was over though, reality came crashing back like a wave.

We stood there, both of us breathing hard, our clothes disheveled, and our anger replaced by something far more complicated: the truth of who we were and what we wanted from each other.

twenty-six

Robert

She turned around, her cheeks flushed and embarrassed, as my cum dripped down the inside of her leg.

Her eyes darted to mine briefly before dropping, her vulnerability palpable. When her eyes met mine again, I reached out and cupped her chin in my hand, jerking her head up to look at me.

“Don’t say his name ever again,” I growled, the words coming out rougher than I intended. “I hate hearing it from you.”

She blinked, her lips parting in surprise, but didn’t argue.

I reached down for my sweater and shirt on the ground, shaking out the fabric. I peeled my shirt from the pile and handed it to her to clean up with.

It felt like such a youthful thing to do, to clean up with a shirt. She brought back memories of being a young man. She made me feel young again.

Wincing, she took the shirt and wiped at her thigh with it, her movements brisk and self-conscious.

I smirked at her, the sight of her cleaning herself with my shirt sparking a possessive streak I couldn't deny. I liked seeing her with my cum on her. I liked making her mine, if only for a moment.

She cringed and said, "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" I asked, my smirk deepening as I pulled my sweater over my head.

"Like I belong to you," she muttered, her voice tinged with frustration.

"Don't you?" I asked, tilting my head, watching her reaction carefully.

She sighed deeply, her shoulders sagging slightly as she pulled her pants back on. I tried not to show that it hurt.

Finally, I said, offhandedly, "You know, you seemed pretty happy about being mine when I was inside you."

"You just seem so happy about marking your territory. It's..." she groped for the word, her eyes roving. She landed on "unbecoming."

I chuckled. "Unbecoming. What is this, a Jane Austen novel? So I like seeing you covered in my cum. Is that so wrong? I'm a man, aren't I?"

Delia squeezed her eyes shut, and I watched her process my words. When she opened them, her tongue was prodding at her bottom teeth again. She was upset. "It's not...I can't promise you anything like that."

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“Why not? I can promise you everything,” I told her, frustration mounting internally.

I was sick of her fucking games. Either she wanted me, or she didn’t. I wanted her. She seemed like she wanted me only when she was bending over for me.

“Robert, as much as I care about you, this isn’t realistic,” she said, her voice softer now, like she was trying to talk herself out of something.

“Do you care about me?” I asked.

Her eyes snapped up to meet mine. “Of course, I care about you. How can you ask that?”

“So then what’s not realistic about it? All it takes is two people who want it,” my voice was firmer than I intended, but I was fighting the instinct to tell her to keep her arguments.

I wanted to run. I couldn’t. She mattered to me. I needed her to know what my intentions were. I shoved my feet into my jeans and bounced into them slightly.

“You don’t even want me to say his name! That’s not possible. Our lives are so intertwined,” she said, gesturing vaguely toward the door.

I got her point. He was right outside. He was so present in our lives. It was true. I couldn’t make any requirements that dramatic. I needed to understand that he was around.

“Fine, you can say his name,” I conceded, the words tasting bitter in my mouth. “But I want to keep seeing you. I like you, Delia. And I think you like me.”

She smiled a small, shy smile as she buttoned her pants. Her hands lingered on the button for a moment as if stalling. “Yeah, I like you, too.”

Grinning, I rubbed my hands up and down her arms. “So do this with me. Be with me, Delia. Try.”

“I just think that’s going to be hard without Jeremy finding out eventually. I mean, he’s your best friend. Plus, he’s your therapist, as weird as I think that is. And he’s still my practicum supervisor. I know you want to protect his feelings, but... is it really possible to keep him from finding out?”

I ran my hand through my hair, pushing my curls out of my eyes, and shook my head. “I don’t know, Delia. All I know is that I don’t want to lose you. Maybe we could just tell him.”

Her head snapped up, and her eyes went wide. “No!” she exclaimed, her voice rising with panic. “I can’t risk my place at the clinic. Please, Robert, we can’t tell him.”

“You wouldn’t be risking anything,” I said quickly, stepping closer to her. “He’s not going to hold it against you. If anything, I’d be risking my friendship. But you’d be safe. He can’t hold it against you. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line, her brow furrowing. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea to tell him. And I don’t know how to keep him from finding out. Especially if we keep doing this in such close proximity to him.”

“You’re right,” I admitted, with a heavy sigh. “We’d have to be more careful. But I want to keep seeing you, Delia. I need to keep seeing you.”

She chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes distant and unfocused as she considered my words. “Be more careful,” she repeated softly, almost like she was speaking to herself.

Finally, she looked up at me, her expression torn. “Would that be possible? I mean, we keep finding ourselves entangled in the worst possible places. Could we tamper it down?”

“I would do anything to be with you, Delia,” I said, my voice earnest. She swallowed hard, her throat bobbing, and a feeling I couldn’t place flashed across her face.

“Are you okay? Is that okay? I mean, you feel the same way, don’t you?” I asked, my chest tightening.

“God,” she whispered, her voice shaky. “I think I do.”

I exhaled, relief flooding through me. “I know it will be hard. But you don’t have that long until you graduate, do you?”

“Six months left,” she murmured, almost like she was reminding herself.

“Okay, so we’ll keep it under wraps for six months! We can do that, can’t we?” I grabbed her impulsively, pulling her into a tight hug.

She stumbled slightly, losing her balance, and I steadied her against me. “Can’t we?” I asked again, pressing a kiss to her temple.

“We can,” she said with finality, lifting her face to mine. I craned my neck to kiss her, but just as our mouths were an inch away, she said, “But what happens to your friendship at the end of those six months?”

I didn't answer. That was something I'd have to find out. I couldn't think about it or plan for it. I had no plan. Instead of answering, I kissed her lips, the lips that were wrapped around my cock just minutes before, the lips that had told me they cared about me and hated me, the lips that had lied to me and told me truths. Complicated lips that stole my breath when they met mine.

Lips that I would betray my best friend for.



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What kind of man was I? Who was I without loyalty to a brotherhood?

twenty-seven

Delia

With a conflicted heart, I walked back toward the car where Jeremy and Tyler were sitting, waiting for me.

Part of my heart was soaring, knowing that Robert wanted to be with me. Another part was wrenched into a tangle, knowing that I was pregnant and he didn't know. Knowing the impact it was going to have on his friendship.

There were so many moving parts to this that I was sick just thinking of them. It was like a rollercoaster.

As I got to the car, Jeremy slipped out of his seat and opened the door for me. "Where'd you go?" he asked.

I froze, guilt washing over me. "Hey, sorry, just had to help with the cleanup."

"Okay, well, let's get going. We've been sitting in the parking lot so long my legs are starting to cramp up," Jeremy teased, his fingers tapping on the top of the car door.

I chewed on my bottom lip and blurted out, "Well, actually, they're not really done in there. I figured I should stay and help." When he didn't respond, I added, "I'm thinking of teaching some of the classes, too, so I might stay and learn about that."

His eyes narrowed slightly for only a second before returning to normal. “You’re clearly a...dedicated student.”

“Well, you know how I am about school. Can’t help it, I guess,” I lied, the lie rolling off my tongue so easily I felt like I didn’t recognize myself. I’d never been a good liar, and here I was, acting like a pro.

“Sure. Well...” Jeremy turned to look at Tyler, who shrugged. “I guess we’ll just head back to the house then. Tyler mentioned you were cooking...?”

“For tomorrow,” I said, panic rising as I remembered the cooking. “Oh!” I reached over, handing Tyler the pie I’d slipped out with. “This is for you.”

Jeremy lingered, disappointed, as if waiting for me to change my mind, but I shoved my hands into my pockets, staying silent.

“Tyler, are you okay with it?” I asked suddenly.

He grinned. “Go! I got what I wanted.” He waved the pie triumphantly.

I spun on my heel and walked back into the library, happy to escape Jeremy. My face burned hot as I pushed through the doors. I hated lying, hated who I was becoming in pursuit of Robert.

“Hey, are you okay?” Robert asked as I entered the auditorium.

“I just... I feel like I’m doing everything wrong,” I whispered, tears stinging my throat.

He sighed and pulled me close. “Let’s get out of here.”

“We have to clean up,” I muttered, avoiding his eyes.

Robert shook his head, a smile crawling across his face. “Nah. I’ll let them do it.” He waved his hand toward the auditorium. “Come on, let’s go get Corinne.”

As he walked back to go get his daughter, I realized that I might be in a tangle of unsureness, but I knew one thing. I’d had enough of the lies. It was time I came clean about the secret in my womb.

\*\*\*

The drive to Robert’s house was strangely fun. Corinne peppered me with questions from the backseat, with Robert looking at me through a sideways glance at each one, gaging if I was bothered.

I turned around in my seat as I answered, making direct eye contact with the wild little girl. Her eyes were a deep, chocolatey brown, and her face got pinker as she talked, her excitement visible.

“How did you meet my dad?” she asked, and I could feel her kicking the back of my chair absentmindedly with her feet.

“I took his self-defense course,” I answered with a smile. “He’s a good teach—”

“Did you learn a lot?”

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“I did. I even used one of the lessons to—”

“Delia, how old are you?” Save my life, I finished my sentence in my head.

“I’m twenty-four.”

“Daddy’s forty-two,” she said. It might have just been an observation, or she might have been making a point.

“Corinne, you’re not supposed to reveal a gentleman’s age,” Robert said with a grin.

I could barely keep up with her questions as we pulled up to the mansion, its expansiveness taking my breath away yet again. She continued as we carried the food inside, following so close behind me that, at one point, she stepped on the back of my shoe.

“Corinne, back up,” Robert said sternly, and I smiled gratefully as Corinne apologized to me and stepped back, continuing her chattering.

“Sorry. So is my daddy your boyfriend?” she asked, and the question hung in the air for a second. I didn’t know how to answer that yet.

“Corinne,” Robert shot a look her way, and the little girl looked down apologetically, “That’s enough.” His phone buzzed, and he looked at it for a moment, reading a message. He opened it and started typing, his face intensely set on the screen.

While he glanced at his phone with an intense look, I glanced down at Corinne and

mouthed, 'No, he's not.' She smiled mischievously, then hid her smile in her tiny palm.

Sighing heavily, Robert stopped typing and said, "I need to make a work call. Show Delia where the kitchen is and put the food away, please." Oh, I know where the kitchen is. My face burned at the mention of the kitchen as I remembered how we had defiled it together. He pointed his phone at her like a wand and commanded, "No more personal questions."

As soon as he was out of earshot, Corinne started walking toward the kitchen and asked, "If he's not your boyfriend, is he going to be?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly, thinking of the child I still needed to tell him about. I didn't know what we'd be after I told him.

Corinne looked at me for a minute and then opened the fridge door. From behind the door, she asked, "But do you like him?"

I considered her question. It was a tricky one. I knew that she probably had complicated feelings about her father dating another woman after her mother. Instead of answering directly, I asked Corinne, "Hey, can you tell me where the bathroom is?" as she sat down at the counter to steal some bites from a blueberry pie.

"Sure!" she chirped, hopping off the chair. She skipped to the entrance of the kitchen and pointed down a long hallway. "Second door on the right. Just don't go into the room across from it. That's Daddy's room, and he doesn't like people to go in there."

I nodded and saluted. "Aye, aye, Captain."

She giggled as I walked away and down the hallway.

From down the hall, I could hear him on the phone in his office, speaking angrily with someone. I heard the words, “Is this a joke? I told you what I wanted to do already,” and cringed. Whoever he was talking to was getting chewed out good.

Curiosity gnawed at me. I glanced toward the bathroom, then at his bedroom door. Before I could stop myself, I pushed it open just a crack and peeked inside.

The first thing I noticed was an office chair near the door—strange for a bedroom. The bed, with red wine-colored sheets, caught my eye next. Hanging from one of the posts was a pair of handcuffs. Anger boiled inside me.

How dare he talk about wanting to lay claim over me? How dare he say that I needed to commit to being with only him when his bedroom was like this?

I felt my anger boiling at the idea of him having kinky sex in this bedroom, the very bedroom he wouldn’t let me stay in because of his daughter, supposedly.

Was this why he wouldn’t have me in here? I might see the evidence of his escapades?

I turned to leave, fury etched on my face, but I ran straight into Robert. His expression was unreadable like a shut door, but his crossed arms and piercing green eyes made me stop in my tracks.

He crossed his arms, his forearms bulging, and tilted his head. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Excuse me,” I said, trying to get past him, but he narrowed his eyes, the green piercing me like a knife through the heart.

“I asked you a question.” His voice was stern, not budging from the doorway.

“I had to go to the bathroom,” I said, not technically a lie, but I felt a blush flooding my face anyway.

“And you thought it was in my closet?” he quipped sarcastically. He was angry. His daughter had warned me, and I’d done it anyway. Not that I cared. I was done with Robert Hastings and his idiosyncrasies.

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I stepped closer to him, trying to worm through the gaps between his body and the doorway. “No,” I said finally, stepping back and looking him in the eyes, “I got curious, okay? And I’m glad I did because I don’t know how else I would have found out that you’re...” I glanced past him, where I knew his daughter could hear, and whispered, “...entertaining guests in here. Or worse. Maybe you’re a murderer.”

Robert’s expression softened, and he leaned his head against the door frame. “Is that really what you think?”

“What part? The murderer thing? No, not really. But I do think you’re handcuffing women to your bed and then telling me you want to be with me, which is so...” I grappled for the words and ended up with, “messed up!”

“Messed up? That’s what you’re going with?” I could hear a smile in his voice, and it frustrated me even more that he wasn’t taking me seriously. It was like I’d always been a joke to him.

“I guess so. I don’t want to curse near your daughter.” I set my jaw, glaring into his smirk.

“That’s very thoughtful,” he said, stepping toward me. He lowered his voice and whispered, “But what if she’s in on it? What if she helps with the murders?”

“That isn’t funny.”

His smirk melted me, and I ignored my instinct to fall into his arms even as he reached out for me. I shook his hands from my body, stepping back.



“Delia,” he said in a strained voice, like he was trying not to laugh, “Come sit with me for a moment.” Brazenly, he walked over to the bed, sat down, and patted the spot next to him.

In disgust, I said, “I don’t want to sit on the old sheets you hooked up with women on, thanks.” Finally, I turned to leave, my path unobstructed.

“For fuck’s sake, Delia, that’s not what the handcuffs are for! Come in here and close the door!” he boomed, so loudly that I jumped. I could see a hard swallow traveling down his throat.

Chewing on my bottom lip, I closed the door. I sat next to him and felt the immediate pull of his body. Even being near him felt like a trial. His heat, his smell, was magnetic.

“Delia,” he said, gathering my hands into his lap and stroking the backs of my hands, leaving little zaps of lightning under my skin.

“I—how do I say this?” He looked up at the sky, considering his words carefully. “Lately, my PTSD has gotten worse. I told you about my daughter and her crush and how it’s been a lot on me. Well, I’ve been having these nightmares, nightmares where I’m fighting off her mother’s murderer or nightmares where I’m trapped on enemy soil, and I need to claw for my life. I don’t know where I am when I have these, and they feel real.”

Swallowing hard, I said simply, “I’m sorry that you suffer. But that doesn’t give you the right—”

He put up a finger, shushing me, and I bit my tongue as anger sparked in me. “They feel real, and I have a daughter to take care of. Do you know there are men out there that hurt their loved ones when they’re in the middle of a flashback? Men who even

kill their loved ones?”

Chewing on my bottom lip, I felt like my stomach was hollow. I didn't understand his point, but I felt his pain. “So,” I cleared my throat, “what are you telling me?”

“I'm telling you that at night, I set that chair up against my bedroom door. And then I take double the recommended dose of sleeping pills. And then I handcuff myself to that bedpost. And I put the key somewhere that'll be hard to reach in my sleep. And only by doing all of that can I be certain that my daughter is safe.”

He looked at me with a serious stare, his jaw squared and his eyes clear. His hands were on mine, but still now, like he'd forgotten he was holding them.

“That isn't a part of some kinky sex ritual, Delia. It's about survival.”

All that hollowness in my stomach, and it still dropped. “Oh.”

“Do you understand now why I couldn't let you sleep over that night? I couldn't risk your safety. And... I couldn't risk you finding out that this is where I am in life. That I'm not always a strong guy who will keep you safe. Sometimes I'm a guy who could hurt you. And I can't risk being that guy.”

He pushed my hair back behind my ear while he talked, his fingers trailing down my back, and I shivered in an automatic response to his touch.

“I'm not afraid of you,” I whispered back, my voice hoarse.

“Well. You should be,” he responded simply, his eyes still on me.

I wanted to argue, but I'd overseen and participated in hundreds of therapy sessions with veterans, and I knew what he was talking about.

I felt tears swimming in my eyes with compassion for Robert. I could feel the pain in his admissions, the fear of failure, and more than failure. Something that people struggled to say out loud. That fear that our fears are stronger than our love.

I had wanted to tell him I was pregnant, but as I looked at the man before me, broken by fear, I realized that he was barely handling the small changes in Corinne's life. I needed to be sure that he could handle the news.

I reached out and hugged him, whispering, "I'm sorry you've carried this alone."

His arms circled around me and squeezed me tight. His chin rested on my shoulder, and he nuzzled his face into the crease of my neck. He kissed me lightly and murmured into my skin, "It's mine to carry."

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I hugged him back tightly, running my hand over his hair, and thought of how I would face his nightmares for him if I could.

twenty-eight

Robert

When the night was over, I watched as Delia climbed into the car that I'd called for her, her silhouette framed by the soft glow of the porch light.

She was going home to continue cooking for Thanksgiving the next day, which she would share with her family. I didn't have that option. When she left, Corinne and I would be alone again.

Delia turned to wave before slipping into the seat, and I nodded back, raising my hand slightly, though my throat felt tight. The car pulled away, and I stood there longer than I should have, staring after it as if that would answer the questions swirling in my head.

What was I doing?

Closing the door, I leaned back against it, letting out a long, slow breath. My pulse still raced, my chest tight with the weight of words, both spoken and unspoken.

The more time I spent with Delia, the more complicated everything became. And yet, I couldn't seem to pull away. There was something about her—something I couldn't define—that kept drawing me closer, even when I knew it was a terrible idea.

I moved toward the kitchen, where the remnants of our eaten leftovers sat on the counter. I placed empty Tupperware containers into the sink and wiped crumbs off the counter. My hands gripped the edge of the counter as I stared down into the basin.

She was young—too young for me, young enough that even my daughter had noticed. She was too entangled in my life in ways that shouldn't have happened, a student of my class, a therapist-in-training where I got my therapy. She was Jeremy's ex, for God's sake. My best friend's ex. How had I let it get this far?

And yet, when she was around, it felt like the first time I could breathe in years. The question wasn't really how had I let it get this far, but why did I want to see how far I could take it?

The sound of footsteps pulled me from my thoughts, and I turned to see Corinne standing in the doorway, her arms wrapped around a stuffed bear. Her mother had gotten it at her baby shower, yet another celebration I hadn't been around for, that the Navy had taken from me.

I wonder if the United States military knew how many families were marred by memories that were lost forever, time that they could never get back.

Her braids were mussed from sleep, stray curls popping out everywhere, her expression groggy as she rubbed her eyes.

"Daddy?" she said, her voice small.

"Corinne, why are you still up?" I asked her, walking over to her and bending down to meet her eye.

"I heard Delia leave," she said quietly, scratching her braids. "Can you tuck me in?" she asked innocently.

“Okay, come on,” I said gently, scooping her up into my arms. I knew some people thought she was too old to pick up and hold, but as long as I could pick up and hold my baby, I would. I’d missed a lot of baby hugs when she was little. I’d make up for them as long as I could. I’d work out until it broke my arms to hold her.

She rested her head against my shoulder as I carried her back to her room, the familiar scent of lavender from her hair calming me. I rubbed her back in circles, the jersey fabric of her princess pajamas rough against my palm.

As I tucked her back into bed, she looked up at me, her brows furrowed. “Daddy?”

“Yeah?” I asked, smoothing the blanket over her.

“Do you like Delia?” she asked, her voice hesitant but curious.

The question caught me off guard, and for a moment, I didn’t know how to respond.

“What makes you ask that?” I said carefully, sitting on the edge of her bed. I wanted to tell her that she shouldn’t worry about grown-up things, but when I looked in her eyes, I saw something more than curiosity. I needed to answer her.

She fiddled with the edge of her blanket, avoiding my gaze. “I just...” She sighed and met my eyes. “I don’t know if I want you to have a girlfriend.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. I swallowed hard, searching for the right thing to say.

“Corinne, I...you don’t get to decide that,” I said softly, hoping it would soften the blow. “But if you don’t like her, she doesn’t have to come over.”

Her face scrunched up, her expression somewhere between confusion and frustration.

“I do like her,” she whined.

“Okay,” I chuckled, twirling one of her curls around my index finger, “so what’s the problem?”

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She turned her face into the pillow, muffling her voice as she mumbled into it, “You’re not supposed to like anyone except Mommy.”

The pain in her voice was unmistakable, and it twisted something deep inside me. I knew how she felt. I didn’t think I would like anyone except Quinn either. This life wasn’t what either of us had planned, wasn’t what Corinne deserved.

“Hey,” I said softly, taking her small hand in mine. “Your mommy was very special to me. No one could ever take her place.”

“Except Delia,” she said, a bit too roughly, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Not even Delia. No one could take your mom’s place, Corinne,” I snapped.

I softened my voice when I saw that her tears were spilling over and down her cheeks, and murmured, “I’m sorry. It’s just that I loved your mom. I don’t want anyone to say that I’m replacing her. That’s not fair,” I told her, my voice raw. “And if I did like Delia, that wouldn’t mean I love your mommy any less. It’s... grown-up stuff. It’s complicated.”

She sniffled, her lip quivering. “I hate grown-up stuff.”

I laughed and bent down to push my forehead to hers, “I do, too, sometimes.”

“I don’t want things to change,” she wailed, and it broke my heart to see her chin scrunched up as she started to sob.



Sitting up, I pulled her into my lap for a hug, holding her close. “Things have to change, Rin-Rin, but you can have your feelings about it. Change is hard for me, too. But I’m always going to be here for you. No one could ever replace you or your mommy. I promise.”

She buried her face in my chest, her tears soaking into my shirt. “Okay,” she whispered, though the sadness in her voice lingered.

I stayed with her until her breathing evened out, her grip on the stuffed bear loosening as sleep took over. When I finally slipped out of her room, my mind was a mess of emotions. Guilt, fear, longing—they all swirled together, leaving me feeling unsteady.

Back in the kitchen, I poured myself a glass of water, staring out the window at the darkened yard. Corinne’s question echoed in my mind. That reaction had shaken me. I hadn’t considered that Corinne wouldn’t want me to date.

I couldn’t let Corinne get hurt again because of me. She’d already been hurt once. Her mother’s passing wouldn’t have happened if I’d just been home instead of overseas.

How could I continue to see Delia if I knew it crushed Corinne? First Jeremy, now my daughter – how many broken hearts would lead the path to Delia?

twenty-nine

Delia

The table was set with far more care than necessary for a small family Thanksgiving. I had bought a new set of dinnerware, a far cry from the plates and cups I’d collected in my years at college. These matched, and I’d even bought cute Thanksgiving

napkins to set next to every plate.

If only I could feel as polished as I felt this table looked. Instead, I sat stiffly, my hands folded in my lap, my stomach twisting with guilt.

I knew the secret I held, the pregnancy tests that I'd stuffed into a plastic bag so that no one would see them in the trash can. I knew the way Tyler had looked at me when I got home late the night before, the way he'd raised his eyebrows sleepily and said, "You are a dedicated student. Don't worry, I won't tell Jeremy," before passing out again while I popped the turkey in the oven to cook overnight.

All that work, and I hadn't even gotten it to brine properly. I just hoped that everyone would attribute it to how bad turkey was in general, dry and bland. No one would think it was my fault, and certainly not because I was out all night meeting Robert's daughter and listening to him pour his heart out.

I glanced across the table at Tyler, who was focused on carving the turkey, his brow furrowed in concentration. He looked up briefly and caught my eye, giving me a small, reassuring smile. I returned it, though mine felt forced.

Tyler always had a way of knowing when something was wrong, although this time, I had made it easy. It was a side effect of our lonely childhood. Having no one but each other had made an unbreakable bond.

"Delia," my mother's voice broke through my thoughts, zapping me out of self-pity. "How's Jeremy been?"

The sound of his name made my stomach flip. I took a slow sip of water to buy myself a moment. "I don't know," I lied. "Why?"

"Well," she continued, undeterred, "you're still single, and the holidays are a good

time to think about settling down.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from snapping. Tyler froze mid-slice, his eyes darting between me and Mom as if preparing for a showdown.

“I’m 24,” I said evenly, forcing a polite smile. “Not exactly out of time.”

Tyler served Mom a few slices of turkey before handing me one, saying, “Here, put this in your mouth.”

“It’s just a shame you two didn’t work out,” she said with a sigh, cutting into her turkey. “He was such a nice young man. Polite, hardworking, successful. The kind of guy who could really help you get your career started.”

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“Mom,” Tyler interjected, his tone warning. “Maybe don’t.” I looked at him gratefully, and he smiled reassuringly as he laid thick slices of turkey on his own plate.

“What?” she asked, feigning innocence as she twirled her fork in the air. “I’m just saying, he was good for her. He had connections, and we all liked him, didn’t we?”

“I like the guy at the gas station I always see,” Tyler told her, with an infectious grin, “it doesn’t mean I think Delia should marry him.”

“But he’s still single, right?” my mom pressed.

Tyler groaned and dropped the knife onto the platter with a loud clatter, making our mom look at him sharply. “Can we not make Thanksgiving about Delia’s love life? Or lack thereof?”

“Thank you, Tyler,” I said, watching the turkey slices as they made their way to my plate.

“I’m just concerned,” Mom said defensively, crossing her arms. “You’re in grad school, sure, but you can’t ignore your personal life forever. And Jeremy was—”

“I said enough,” Tyler cut in, his voice firmer this time. “She doesn’t need to hear this right now.”

“Fine,” she snapped, her eyes narrowing. “But don’t come crying to me when she’s thirty-five and single because she wasted her best years.” She leaned back in her

chair, bothered by what she perceived as a joint attack against her.

I felt a thick blanket of shame cover me that I couldn't get through a dinner with her. She didn't mean to hurt me— I didn't think. Sometimes it felt that way, but I knew she had her own life embittered by loss. We'd lost our father in the wind, but she'd lost her husband and the father of her children. We'd all lost some of our identity to his running away.

The rest of dinner passed in tense silence, broken only by the clinking of silverware and the occasional forced comment about the food. My mother didn't bring up Jeremy again, but I could feel her disapproval radiating across the table. It settled on my shoulders like a heavy cloak, weighing me down with every bite I forced down.

After dessert—apple pie that Tyler had picked up from the store on his way over—I excused myself to the kitchen, eager for a moment alone.

I leaned against the counter, staring blankly at the pile of dishes in the sink. The guilt I'd been carrying all day felt suffocating now, pressing down on me like a tidal wave.

I was pregnant, and my mother was sitting in the other room talking about how great my ex was. She had no idea about the life growing inside me, or about the man who had put it there. And she definitely wouldn't approve if she knew.

To her, Robert would be everything Jeremy was – older, professional – but emotionally unavailable, complicated, with a daughter, and worst of all, a military veteran. A mistake. She would never in a million years approve of a man in the military for me, not after what happened with my dad.

And if she thought I was throwing my best years away now, once she knew about the pregnancy, she'd change her story completely. All of a sudden I'd be throwing away my career and education. She was impossible to please.

And maybe she was right. Maybe I had made a mistake. But as much as I wanted to regret what had happened with Robert, I couldn't. Because along with the guilt, the fear, and the uncertainty, there was something else. Something warm and quiet and unshakable: hope.

I shook my head as I washed dishes, shaking free of the imaginary conversation I'd already had, and lost, in my mind.

"Hey," Tyler's voice pulled me from my thoughts, and I turned to see him leaning against the counter, his arms crossed. "You've been off all day," he said, stepping closer. He lowered his voice, "Or really, since last night. Are you okay?"

I hesitated, the words caught in my throat. I wanted to tell him—wanted to unload the secret that was eating me alive. But I couldn't. Not yet. "It's just school," I lied. "And work. It's a lot."

He studied me for a moment, his brow furrowed. He knew that there was more, but he didn't push it. Instead, he reached out and gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze before heading back to the living room where my mom was watching TV, a glass of wine tipping dangerously in her hand.

I watched him go, my chest aching with the weight of everything I wasn't saying.

As I turned back to the sink, the sound of my mother's laughter floated in from the other room, grating against my nerves.

So I did what I always did. I swallowed the guilt, plastered on a smile, and went back to the couch, pretending everything was fine. Even if it wasn't.

thirty

Robert

The day after Thanksgiving, Jeremy and I were seated at a quiet corner table in one of those pretentious farm-to-table restaurants he seemed to favor. He usually chose either the most pretentious place I'd ever been to or the lowliest diner, nothing in between.

By my estimate, he thought he was balancing his late-night fried food and beer binges at a diner with organic greens. He had no consistency for these types of things. The only thing he was consistent about was work, and when he felt his life was out of control, that was when he took to fixing mine.

"It's good to see you," Jeremy said, glancing over the menu like he wasn't already going to order the grilled salmon he always got. "You've been busy every time we've talked lately. Is everything okay?" He sipped his iced tea.

A pang of guilt stabbed me in the chest, the real reason I'd been avoiding him. "Fine," I said quickly, maybe too quickly.

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His sharp gaze flicked up to meet mine. Jeremy had an eye for lies and unspoken truths. He knew how to catch people in them, and he was fast about it. It was irritating, having a best friend who knew your past and could almost read your mind.

But not everything on my mind. If he could, he'd be disgusted and enraged by now, I knew. He couldn't stay in the same room with me if he knew that when my mind wandered these days, it wandered to sweet Delia's body under mine, the whispered truths we'd told each other in the closet and in my bedroom.

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "You know, you can talk to me. I can tell something's wrong."

I grunted, shifting uncomfortably in my seat. "That's rich coming from you." I saw something in Jeremy's eyes flicker, and I knew my projection had landed on something partially true.

I leaned forward and asked, "When's the last time you talked to me? Or is this just a one-way street? Do you get off on being the helper?"

"Hey, easy there, soldier," he said, holding up his hands in mock surrender. I winced, and he said, "Sorry, poor choice of words."

Before the conversation could veer into dangerous territory, my phone buzzed on the table. I glanced at the screen and frowned. It was an email from one of my instructors. I unlocked the phone and scanned the message, my jaw tightening as I read the words.



“What is it?” Jeremy asked, his tone casual but curious.

“My self-defense classes,” I muttered, my stomach twisting. “One of the instructors is harassing the women after his sessions.”

Jeremy’s expression darkened, and he leaned forward slightly. “What kind of harassment?”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is, it’s enough that someone complained.” My voice was tight, anger simmering just below the surface. “And, of course, it’s happening on days I’m not there. Whoever it is knows that I’d put an end to it my way.”

Jeremy’s eyebrows lifted at my verbiage, but he didn’t argue. He knew it was true. I’d knock out any man bold enough to make people uncomfortable at my classes. Classes about women’s empowerment. What a fucking monster.

“What are you going to do?” he asked, his tone calm but edged with concern.

“I’m shutting it down for now,” I said, already typing out a response to the instructor and the woman who’d emailed me, someone quiet whose name I didn’t even recognize. “Nobody should feel unsafe in those classes. That’s the whole damn point.”

Jeremy nodded, his lips pressed into a thin line. “Of course.” He looked on as I continued to type. “Let me know if you need help. I could talk to them, if that would help.”

I glanced at him, surprised by the offer. “Talk to who?” I asked, tilting my head.

“To whoever came forward. I’m a therapist. I’m pretty good at getting things out of people,” he said, as though it was obvious what he had been suggesting.

I blinked, then shook my head. “Thanks, but I’ll handle it.”

He shrugged, picking up his tea again. “Suit yourself. But this kind of thing—it can stick with people. Don’t underestimate the damage it can do.”

His words lingered as I hit send on the email, my fingers hovering over the screen for a moment. I’d asked the woman if she’d be willing to name the instructor responsible, but I already knew what the answer would be. Fear kept people silent. I understood that better than most.

I wondered what Jeremy was insinuating – that people might stop coming to my classes? That these women would be permanently damaged by this?

“Um, I’m sorry Jeremy, but I need to take care of this. Just get me the, uh, the burger,” I said, standing up.

“What burger?” he called after me, his hands planted on the menu.

“Whatever!” I shouted back, heading outside.

I stood under the awning as the rain poured, tapping the vinyl fabric aggressively.

I looked through the window at Jeremy. He was holding his head in his hands, no doubt worried for me and the future of the self-defense classes.

I pulled out my phone and looked through my contacts for Delia, whose number I hadn’t yet used. It felt strange to call her, like our meetings had all been chance and now I was disrupting fate.

She answered as the waiter walked up to Jeremy. I turned around with my back against the window, looking out at the onslaught of water coming down in sheets.

“Hello?” Delia’s voice was soft and slightly breathless like she’d been running.

“Delia, it’s Robert.”

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She laughed a little, and I could picture the upturn of her lips. “I know,” she replied with a smile in her voice.

“Right. Hey, I can’t talk long. But there’s been a problem with the self-defense classes,” I said carefully. “One of the instructors has been harassing a woman. Well, one woman that we know of right now. I’ve shut things down for now anyway, but even if they start up again, until I figure out who’s responsible, I don’t want you going back. Don’t go near that building at all, in fact.”

There was a pause on the other end, and I could hear her breathing, steady but slightly quicker than usual. “Okay,” she said softly. “Thanks for letting me know. I’m sorry this is happening.”

I appreciated her care, but I felt sorrier than she should. I’d vetted all the men and women on my team. I had trusted each of them. Most were former cops, firefighters, self-defense teachers themselves. This was a betrayal. “Be careful,” I said, the words feeling inadequate but necessary. “And if anything feels off—anything—you tell me. Understand?”

“I understand,” she said, her voice quieter now. “Thanks, Robert. I...” she hesitated and then blurted, “I miss you.”

I paused, taken aback. I missed her, too, but what Corinne had said had stuck with me. I didn’t know how to handle any of this. “I miss you, too. We’ll see each other soon.”

“When?” she asked fervently, her voice quiet and low.

“Soon,” I promised.

After we hung up, I stood outside for a moment, the weight of everything pressing down on me. The situation with the classes, the growing feelings I couldn’t seem to shake for Delia, the way Corinne felt about Delia, the unspoken tension with Jeremy - it was all too much.

But I couldn’t afford to lose focus. Not now. Whoever was responsible for the harassment at the center would be dealt with, no matter what it took. And as for Delia... I’d figure that out later. Right now, I just needed to keep her safe.

I checked my email and saw that the woman who’d come forward didn’t want to tell me who it was. Go figure.

I knew I shouldn’t be angry. It was a scary position to be in. But how was I expected to help without knowing who was doing it? Was I supposed to shut down the classes forever?

I needed some more time to think before going back inside the restaurant, so I got in my car and just sat there, staring at the steering wheel.

I needed answers. If the woman wouldn’t name the instructor, I’d have to find another way to figure it out. As I watched people file in and out of their cars, I glanced up and saw a camera in the corner of the building. Another way.

I pulled out my phone and called the instructor who’d told me, Heather. She answered on the second ring, her usually friendly voice brisk. She knew how bad this was for the classes and how hard this hit was for me.

“Robert,” she said, inviting whatever it was I was going to say.

“Question. Would you be able to get me the parking lot footage from the library? The whole center, really, obviously. I could try, but I think people generally respond better to you.” I smiled as I leaned back in the driver’s seat.

It was true. I wasn’t good with people when I was on a mission. I could come off as intense, angry, too much.

“Hm,” she said, to herself more than to me. “I could try. I don’t know. They might hold that close to the chest. But I could try.”

“Well, if they hold it close to the chest, we’ll involve lawyers,” I spat angrily, as if they’d already told me no.

With an exhale out of her nose, she corrected, “You mean you’ll involve lawyers.”

“That is what I mean, yes,” I agreed. “I’ll involve lawyers if I have to. So let’s hope they’re...receptive.”

She chuckled. “I knew this would put a fire under your ass, Robert, knowing that pretty young thing you’re sweet on might be in trouble.”

I cringed at her word choice. “Are you done?” I asked, tightening my fingers around the steering wheel.

“If I get the footage, what days do you want them to send?” Heather asked, her voice softening when she realized that she’d bothered me.

“Every day that the victim was in class. No matter who was there. Just have them send it all to me if they agree to it,” I told her, looking out the windshield of my car at the people returning to their cars. I wondered how many of the men holding the hands of the women they were with had hurt someone. I wondered how many of them

would do the same if I were there to see.

thirty-one

Delia

The week after Thanksgiving, the room smelled faintly of disinfectant and stale coffee, a mix I had grown used to over the last year and a half. I adjusted my blazer, the fabric suddenly feeling too tight around my shoulders, and rubbed the back of my neck.

I was hot all the time lately, and it didn't help that my stomach churned every morning before I left for the counseling center. Subtle, but undeniable, symptoms of my pregnancy that I wasn't ready to name. At least not out loud. But my secret was becoming harder to ignore.

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My client for this session was already seated with Jeremy when I entered the room, his broad shoulders hunched forward, his gaze fixed on the floor. He didn't look up when I greeted him, his focus on the tightly clasped hands resting on his lap.

"Hi, Matt," I said gently, sliding into the chair across from him. "It's good to see you again." Jeremy sat in a chair next to mine, looking at me, letting me guide the session.

"Hey," Matt mumbled, his voice low. He glanced up briefly, but his blue eyes darted away before they could meet mine.

"How's your week been?" I asked, keeping my tone light but open.

He shrugged, his fingers twisting together. "Same as always."

I nodded, giving him space to fill the silence if he wanted. When he didn't, I pressed a little further. "And when you say the same, you mean..."

Matt shifted in his chair. His jaw tightened. "The dreams, obviously!" he snapped, his frustration bubbling to the surface. I didn't react, holding his gaze patiently. He exhaled sharply. "Sorry. They're worse."

"What's happening in the dreams?" I asked carefully, leaning forward just a bit.

Matt's hands clenched into fists, his voice low and shaky. "It's not just dreams. It's the smells, sounds, the way light hits...like I'm right back there. People burning. Rotting flesh. Darkness so heavy it's real. And the crying—always crying. I wake up, and I can't breathe."



My chest tightened with sympathy. “That sounds overwhelming,” I said softly. “It must feel exhausting.”

Matt’s gaze flicked to mine, and his voice dropped. “I just want it to stop. I can’t keep living like this.”

I glanced at Jeremy, who nodded slightly from his seat, but Matt’s words made my stomach twist. Saying he couldn’t live like this was serious—an indicator of suicidal ideation. “Matt,” I began gently, “when you say you can’t live like this, do you have a plan?”

His eyes snapped up, sharp and defensive. “If I didn’t kill myself when I was there, I’m not going to now. Jesus. Is there anywhere I can tell the truth without someone freaking out?”

“You can always tell me the truth, Matt,” I assured him, my voice steady. “But if I don’t take what you say seriously, I’m not a safe person for you to talk to, am I?”

He stared at me, his face softening slightly. “You think I can get better? That this...this isn’t all there is?”

“I do,” I said firmly. “This isn’t all there is for you, Matt. It’s not going to be easy, but it’s possible. And you’re not alone.”

Matt nodded slowly, some of the weight lifting off his shoulders as we worked through some grounding exercises together. But as I guided him, I couldn’t stop thinking about Robert.

Matt’s struggles reminded me of him—how his face had gone pale at a backfiring car, how he’d confessed to handcuffing himself to the bed so he wouldn’t hurt Corinne in his sleep. The war still lived inside Robert just like it lived inside Matt.

And yet, Robert had kept going. Ten years, still fighting the same battles. Was I lying to Matt, telling him it would get better? Or would it always just...ebb and flow like the tide?

I pushed the thought aside, focusing back on Matt. He needed my full attention right now, and I owed him that. When our session ended, I walked him to the door and gave him an encouraging smile. “Same time next week?”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice a little stronger now. “Thanks, Delia.” He turned to Jeremy and said, “Hey, she’d better graduate.”

Jeremy gave a thin smile, but I could feel the tension lingering between us since the library before Thanksgiving. I couldn’t tell if he wanted to get back together or if he just wanted to keep me hanging on, but whatever his goal was, it wasn’t working.

As Matt left, I gathered my notes, my mind still lingering on the session. Jeremy shut off the camera and said, “You did good. That was a good session.”

“Thanks, Jeremy,” I said, holding my notes against my chest, but the tension in my body didn’t let up.

“I mean, it was bullshit, but it was good.”

My smile faltered, and I felt a rush of cold go through my body. “What?”

He started to unwind the camera from the tripod, not looking at me as he said, casually, “We both know these guys don’t get better, Delia. Look at Robert—he hears a car backfire, and he’s a total mess. And he’s in his forties. We’re just keeping them alive, that’s all.”

Clearing my throat, I asked, “Why would you say that? Do you really believe that?”

Jeremy fiddled with putting his hand through the strap on the camcorder. When he met my eyes, he said, “I’m kidding. Jesus, Delia. Of course, I don’t.”

I gave a fake laugh and muttered uneasily, “Oh, sure. Of course. Sorry, I guess I’m just...somewhere else today.”

“I noticed you seemed distracted. I hope Matt didn’t notice. It can trigger Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria in these guys when they think people don’t care.”

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I felt a stab of guilt in my chest. I hadn't realized I'd been so obvious. "Gosh, do you really think...I mean, he seemed like he felt a little more optimistic when he left."

Jeremy shrugged. "These guys always hide their feelings. No way to tell, really. You'll get better at being more present, don't worry about it." He patted my shoulder. "I still think it was a good session."

"Okay..." I hesitated at the door before leaving, feeling like I needed to fix it but knowing that I couldn't. But when I looked back, Jeremy was already attending to his notes, not looking at me anymore.

I walked through the hallways to the office and found one of the administrative assistants, a woman named Linda, standing by the filing cabinets with a clipboard in hand. She looked up when she saw me and gave me a sheepish smile.

"Hey, Delia. Can I talk to you for a second?" she asked, her tone hesitant.

"Of course," I said, setting my notes down on the desk. "What's up?"

Linda hesitated, glancing at the clipboard before meeting my eyes. "We were doing a routine check on the recorded hours for your practicum, and... well, you're missing some."

"Missing?" I repeated, my stomach sinking. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you reported more hours than we have videos of," she said, her brow furrowing. "We've checked the system multiple times. Do you know why that could

be?”

“No,” I said, a little shrilly, then evened out my voice. “No. Is there somewhere else to check?”

“There’s no trace of them, Delia. Are you sure you reported the right amount?” Linda asked evenly, and I felt fear knot up in my shoulder blades. Was she accusing me of defrauding the system? An accusation like that could ruin my academic career.

“I’m...I guess I could have made a mistake, but it’s unlikely. I mean, I work the same amount every week,” I said lamely, as panic bubbled under the surface.

“I know,” Linda said comfortingly, sensing how anxious I was. “It’s like they were deleted.”

“How many hours?”

“192,” she said sheepishly, looking down for a moment, unable to meet my eyes.

“192?” I shrieked. I did the math in my head. I worked eight hours a week. Eight hours a week, times four weeks, times... “That’s six months!” Six months of hours. Gone.

Those hours were crucial for completing my practicum—without them, I’d be at risk of not meeting the requirements for graduation.

“Could they have been deleted? Is that possible?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady, as I leaned forward over the counter like I might see them somewhere labeled ‘Delia’s missing videos.’

Linda met my eyes with her watery hazel ones. I could tell she felt bad, but her

sympathy wouldn't help me graduate. "We're still looking into it. None of the other students' videos were missing—just yours."

Her words sent a chill down my spine. Just mine. The timing of it felt too coincidental, especially after what Robert had told me about the harassment at his classes. Was it possible someone was trying to sabotage us? And if so, why?

"I'll figure it out," I said weakly, though I wasn't sure what I'd be figuring out exactly. What was I going to do, manifest the videos? If they were gone, they were gone.

I forced a smile and walked quickly out the door, my hands trembling slightly.

Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself that I'd faced challenges before and come out stronger. I could handle this, too. One step at a time. If I was late graduating, okay, so what? I could handle two more semesters. Couldn't I?

And it still might work out. They might find the videos.

Or at least for now, that's what I needed to think to get through the rest of the day without letting the weight of it all crush me.

thirty-two

Robert

The house was unusually quiet with Corinne back in school. She would be home in just a few hours with the nanny, but I had the house to myself the whole afternoon for the first time in a week. The fall break had been nice to have with her, but I always felt a bit of looming dread over what I'd return to during the holidays.

That, and I missed being able to hear myself think. But though the silence was something I'd craved, now that I had it, it pressed down on me, heavy and unrelenting. It gave me too much room to think.

I stood in the kitchen, a cup of coffee in one hand and my phone in the other, scrolling through emails. Nothing urgent—just the usual updates about the company and the classes.

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There were a few lingering details about the self-defense tools I wanted to market in the UK. I had found that if the tools were made of plastic instead of metal, we might have a shot, especially because they were keychains. The issue was that they couldn't actually be used for self-defense, regardless.

The other emails were from instructors asking when they could expect classes to restart after I halted all of them pending the harassment investigation. I didn't have an answer for anyone, and that fact didn't settle me.

Heather had emailed me that she spoke with security at the center, and they had promised to send her the footage from the day that the woman reported, on the off chance it had happened then, since the woman wasn't being very straightforward. I was hoping for answers soon either way.

Still, my thoughts weren't entirely on the investigation. They drifted in and out, from and to Delia, as they always seemed to lately. She'd been at the house last Wednesday, and I couldn't stop replaying her interactions with Corinne. She had done well, handling the questions lobbed at her at the speed of a tennis ball to the face.

But still, Corinne had managed to come away from the interaction with no desire for me to date. It had been a letdown, one I hadn't expected or even considered.

The sound of the front door opening jolted me out of my thoughts. Corinne's voice rang out from the entryway. "Daddy? You're home!"

I set my coffee down and walked to meet her. She was still in her school uniform, her



red curls slightly disheveled, and her backpack hung loosely from one shoulder.

She looked more excited than I'd seen her in weeks. Her nanny, Lizzy, was trying to coax Corinne into taking the backpack off before untying her shoes, so that it didn't flop into her face, but Corinne was looking at me with wide eyes and a grin.

Finally, Lizzy gave up and stood up straight, saying, "Someone is very excited to give you some big news."

"Oh yeah?" I asked, raising an eyebrow and stepping forward to take the backpack off Corinne. "Must be pretty big for you to be out of school already. Why are you home so early?"

She twirled around to let me peel it off her shoulders. "Half-day," she said quickly, kicking off her shoes. "I told you last week, remember?"

I didn't, but I nodded anyway. "That's right. Silly me. So what's your big news?"

Her eyes lit up, and she bounced on her toes. "I got in! I'm going to be in the winter recital!"

I blinked, blindsided by her announcement. "Wait, what? What recital?"

"The winter recital, Daddy, pay attention," she said, shrugging as if it were no big deal. But the smile tugging at her lips told me otherwise. "It's The Nutcracker ballet. I tried out, and they told me I got in!"

"When did you try out?" I asked, looking from her to Lizzy.

"Before we went on break. They said they had to go over the auditions, and they'd have a decision for us when we got back," Corinne said, and the sentence sounded so

adult coming from her mouth that I almost laughed out loud. “And I did.”

“Well, that’s great news,” I said, my heart warming at her excitement. “What made you decide to go for it? You haven’t danced since you were a little kid.”

She hesitated for a moment, her cheeks flushing slightly. “Benny said I should. He said he did it last year, and he had fun, and we might even get to dance together!”

Ah. There it was. The boy. I tried to keep my face neutral, but something must have shown because when I glanced at Lizzy, she shook her head at me slightly, encouraging me to shut my mouth, no doubt.

“She’s really excited,” Lizzy said, driving home the point that I shouldn’t do anything to ruin it.

“Well, that’s great, pumpkin. Do you want a snack?”

“Yeah!” Corinne crowed, following me into the kitchen and chattering about this Benny kid. Benny this and Benny that. I’d thought her crush would have died by now. Wasn’t that how it worked with fifth graders? Apparently, I was mistaken.

“When is the recital?” I asked, snapping her from her Benny talk.

“In a month! We have one month to learn all the moves, and I’m going to do the best because I have a really good memory,” Corinne bragged, hopping up into the chair and watching me pull leftovers out of the fridge. “Daddy...not more turkey, please.”

I held the Tupperware in my hand, wishing I had taken less back home from the Thanksgiving dinner. I was tired of turkey myself. Sighing, I asked, “How about a sandwich?”

“Yes, please. Peanut butter and honey,” Corinne replied in her chirpy voice. “Do you think Delia would want to come to my recital?”

“I thought you didn’t like Delia,” I said warily, pulling out the bread.

“Daddy, I never said that,” Corinne said in a warning voice, watching me squirt honey onto one side. “More, please.”

I looked at her disapprovingly, but put double the amount of honey on anyway. “Fine, I thought you didn’t want me to hang out with Delia.”

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“Yeah, but Benny says he has a bonus mom, and he likes it. He even has a bonusdad. He has four parents, and he gets double the Christmas presents. Plus, he says his bonus mom is a really good cook, and they make brownies together. Maybe Delia knows how to make brownies.” Corinne was talking at lightning speed, swinging her legs and spinning in the chair while she did. No part of her body was still. Behind her, Lizzy cleaned up.

“Maybe. If she doesn’t, would it still be okay?” I asked, eyeing her carefully as I spread peanut butter on the other side.

“I guess so...” Corinne trailed off, suddenly halting all of her fidgeting. “But I would really like her to be good at baking brownies.”

“I’ll give her the note for consideration,” I chuckled.

“So do you think she’d come?” she pressed, getting onto the chair on her knees and leaning over so that she was almost halfway on the counter.

“I could ask her, sweetie. I’m sure if she can make it, she’d love to.”

“That would be good. Benny says his parents all come to his recitals and cheer him on. Wouldn’t that be nice? I could have you and Delia, and then you guys could cheer at the same time, and everyone would think I did really good.” She smiled a satisfied smile at the thought of her adoring fan section.

There was something in her voice that tugged at me, a longing. She didn’t say it outright, but I could tell she was thinking about her mom. About the space she left

behind that no one—not me, not anyone—had been able to fill.

“Tell you what,” I said, meeting her gaze as I set her sandwich in front of her. “I’ll be cheering for you so loud, it’ll feel like you have four parents even if Delia doesn’t come.”

Corinne beamed, satisfied with my answer. “Good. But I think she’ll come.”

As she skipped off to the living room, I stayed rooted in place, my mind racing. I hadn’t expected Corinne to take to Delia so quickly—or at all, really. The fact that she wanted her at the recital felt like both a blessing and a complication.

Falling for Delia meant risking Corinne’s feelings, too, not just mine. It meant opening myself up to the possibility of failure, of loss, of making mistakes I couldn’t take back.

Corinne’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. “Daddy, can we get ice cream to celebrate?”

I turned to see that she’d finished her sandwich, peanut butter built up in the corners of her mouth. The small evidence of childhood and her hopeful expression softened the edges of my anxiety. “If you’re buying,” I chuckled, grabbing my keys.

She laughed as she followed me out the door. “You don’t give me an allowance, though.”

“I thought dancers made the big bucks,” I teased.

“Yeah, when I get famous,” Corinne said easily, as though it were a given.

“Oh, okay, I’ll spot you for now.”

thirty-three

Delia

By the time I made it back to my house, the weight of the day pressed down on me like a boulder. I couldn't move.

My bag felt heavier than usual as I tossed it onto the couch, and my footsteps dragged as I shuffled into my room. I hadn't even turned the lights on yet; the gray Seattle sky filtering through my window was enough to see by.

I sat on the edge of my bed, my knees shaky, my breaths shallow. My hands hovered over my face, and I tried to hold it all back, but the more I tried to push it down, the harder it fought to come up. My throat felt like a weak dam, and my tears a flood pressing against it.

Missing hours.

Those two words repeated over and over in my head, more and more ominously, until all I could hear was the tone of failure. My hours at the counseling center, the ones I'd spent months building up, were gone. Vanished. And no one knew why. Or, worse, no one was saying why.

It was not what I needed at this point in my life. Aside from all my trouble with men, I was pregnant. I had been holding onto the knowledge that at least I would graduate before I had the baby, but now reality was crashing around me.

I had stayed calm on the way home, told myself I'd be able to do another two semesters, but would I be able to do that with a baby? How would that even be possible?

I pulled my legs up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them as the tears finally broke free. They came quietly at first, like a trickle, but soon, I was sobbing into my knees.

I'd worked so hard—pushed so hard—and now I could see it all crumbling. If I didn't graduate on time, I may never graduate, not with a new baby to take care of. The last six years of school would be for nothing.

I let my head fall back against the wall as the tears continued, feeling raw, broken, and so very tired.

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My phone alarm went off, blaring and reminding me that despite all of this, I still had to go to work. I couldn't afford to call out—not financially and not mentally.

“I’m going to figure this out,” I whispered, more to myself than anyone else.

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The bar was already packed when I got there. Music pounded through the speakers, and the joy in the throngs of guests sat in sharp contrast to the heaviness that still sat in my chest. I slipped through the throngs of people and clocked in without saying much to anyone.

The routine of pouring drinks and dodging flirtatious comments helped. For a while, at least. But my luck ran out a few hours into my shift when I looked up and saw Jeremy walking toward me.

There was something hollow in his expression, a tension in his jaw as his eyes locked on mine. I tightened my grip on the shaker I was holding and set it down carefully.

“Jeremy, what are you doing here?”

“Hey, Dee,” he said, his voice soft. He leaned against the bar, his elbows resting on the sticky surface. “I just came to check on you. I heard about what happened with your hours.”

My stomach twisted at the reminder of what I’d been pushing aside while I pushed cocktails.



“I’m fine,” I said numbly. Mostly because I didn’t want to have this conversation with Jeremy. I couldn’t handle talking about it with anyone yet, much less him.

“Well,” he said, his voice laced with concern, “It’s not fair. You’ve worked so hard for this. And I want you to know that I’m going to help in any way I can. I’ll go to bat for you.”

I swallowed thickly and looked away. “Thanks, but I’ll figure it out.”

“Delia...” He reached for my hand, but I pulled back before he could touch me. I thought back to what Robert had said about my not playing the field. If he walked in right now, he wouldn’t like what he saw.

“You don’t have to do everything by yourself. I care about you. I always have.”

I felt that familiar feeling, the one that felt like the ground beneath me was crumbling in favor of the ground that Jeremy said was there.

Jeremy used to make me feel like if he pointed at a blue sky and called it purple, I ought to listen. He always made me second guess my instincts and choices, and there was a time when I would have not only let him fix things but begged him to. But now... everything was different.

“I’m fine,” I said again, though my voice wavered. “Really. I’ve got it under control.”

Jeremy studied me for a long moment, his gaze lingering on my face like he was trying to figure me out. Then, he gave me a sad smile. “You’re not fine. I can see that. Whatever’s going on with you... I want to help.”

“How could you help?” I asked him, wanting a lifeline even if I didn’t want it from him. Maybe he really could help. Maybe I would be stupid to not take his help.

“I could vouch for you, tell your advisor how often you were there, offer my notes.” His hand reached for mine again, and I didn’t fight it.

I understood his unspoken implications. He was the only one who knew for certain how many hours I’d been at the clinic. He held my fate in his hands.

“Okay, that might be—” I started to answer, but Jeremy leaned across the bar, his hand reaching out again, this time to cup my cheek.

I froze in shock, too stunned to move as his face came closer, as he tried to kiss me. “Jeremy, stop!” I exclaimed, turning my head sharply.

His lips grazed the corner of my mouth, and he looked at me with an expression that could only be described as anger mingled with disbelief.

He slammed his hand on the bar, and I turned to leave, but he grabbed my wrist, pinning it down.

“Delia, I know you haven’t stopped loving me. I’ve seen the way you look at me. I know how badly our breakup hurt you.”

“You broke up with me,” I reminded him, my eyes glued to his, that same terror flooding my senses that I’d had the night that guy had followed me to my car.

“And I regret it,” he said simply, his hand on my wrist pulling me in closer. I recognized the technique from the self-defense classes, the technique that forced people to come closer.

I wracked my brain for the counter to it, but I couldn’t think straight, I was so numb with fear where despair had been before.

When my face was close to his, he tried again to kiss me, his other hand reaching around to grab the back of my head.

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I turned my head into my arm and blurted, “I’m pregnant!”

And then I was met with the kind of silence that sucked the air out of a room.

thirty-four

Robert

With an extra pep in my step – maybe it was the ice cream – I drove to Delia’s bar to invite her to Corinne’s recital. I couldn’t believe that little shit Benny had come in handy, after all.

Two Christmases, huh, Benny?

As I stepped into the bar, the noise hit me like a wall—laughter, clinking glasses, the thumping bass of music.

It was a different atmosphere than when I’d been there before. It was more reserved that night, but this night it was packed, and people were laughing shrilly like they’d never been told a joke before in their lives.

I shoved my hands into my coat pockets and scanned the room, but I didn’t have to look far because Delia was at the counter. She was with someone, a little too close for my liking.

I could just make out her gorgeous locks pulled into a high, loose ponytail, tendrils escaping freely, and I could see half of her form, her ass pushed back as she arched

her back to get close to whoever it was she was with. She could have been wearing a toga, and I would notice her ass.

The guy moved in closer to her, and when she turned, he turned, and I felt an ice cold hand reach out and squeeze my heart when I realized I was looking at Jeremy and Delia together.

I watched as he leaned toward her, his body language far too familiar, a lazy grin on his face as he said something that made her frown and glance away.

He said something else, and I saw her stiffen. His hand brushed her arm, lingering just a moment longer than it should have. She jerked back slightly, subtly, but enough for me to see.

That was it.

I didn't remember crossing the room. I didn't even register the blur of faces as I stormed toward the bar. All I knew was the heat rushing to my head, the pounding in my chest.

My voice came out sharp and loud enough to cut through the noise. "What the hell are you doing?"

Jeremy's head whipped toward me, his brows furrowing at the sudden interruption.

Delia turned, too, her eyes going wide when she saw me. I barely looked at her. My focus was locked on him.

"Robert?" Jeremy said, his tone casual, like he wasn't doing anything wrong. That infuriating smirk was still on his face.

He spun in a circle on his stool, planting his hands on the seat between his legs so that he looked like some absurd redheaded frog.

“What are you doing here? Is everything okay at home?” I understood his dig, that I must be getting drunk.

“Right as rain,” I shot back, my voice colder than I meant it to be. “What are you doing here, Jeremy?”

Jeremy straightened, letting out a laugh that had no humor in it. “What does it look like? I’m having a drink. Talking to Delia.”

“Talking to her?” My voice dropped to a dangerous level, and I stepped closer, towering over him now. “That’s what you call it? It didn’t look like talking.”

Jeremy rolled his eyes, still smug, still so damn calm. “Relax, man. I was just checking in on her.”

I glanced at Delia, who stood frozen behind the bar, her face flushed and her lips slightly parted as if she didn’t know what to say.

My jaw clenched, and I turned back to Jeremy. “Jeremy, I saw what you were doing. I don’t fuck around about harassing women.”

“Harassing women? She’s my ex. I work with her. We know each other, and we’re fine.”

I reached out and grabbed his collar roughly, pulling him down from the chair so that he stumbled awkwardly.

Jeremy looked at me with wide-eyed shock for a moment before a grin broke out on

his face.

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In a smarmy tone, he murmured, “Maybe you should go home, Robert. I know how fragile your headspace has been lately.”

I growled into his face, “You think I care that she’s your ex? I don’t give a fuck if she’s got a sign that says ‘harass me.’ Step away from the lady.”

Jeremy barked out a laugh, but there was nothing friendly about it. “The lady?” He looked back at Delia, whose eyes were wide in horror, then back at me and hissed, “This isn’t a lady, Robert, trust me.”

Before I could even register what I was doing, I felt my knuckles make contact with his face, crushing the bone underneath them. I felt my vision go black and heat rise into my face.

I came out of it breathing heavily above him. Blood gushed from his nose and mouth. Delia was sobbing softly behind the counter, gesturing wildly to a bouncer that was already making his way over.

Jeremy rose to his feet and spat, and blood trailed down the front of his shirt as a bouncer approached us.

Delia gestured for him to take Jeremy, and I saw confusion pass the bouncer’s face. Jeremy was the one covered in blood. It didn’t seem fair. Guilt stabbed me yet again, even as Jeremy hissed, “Don’t pretend this is about chivalry. You’re pissed because it’s her.”

I froze. The words hung between us.



The bouncer stepped forward, and Jeremy held up his hand to signify he was leaving. Before he did, he tilted his head, his expression suddenly sharper.

“You like her, don’t you?” he continued, almost amused, smiling a smile that showed teeth outlined in red. “I get it, Robert. She’s beautiful, kind, smart. But you might be a little too late, bud, because she’s pregnant.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. I watched Jeremy walk away, his form blurry like I was waking up from a dream. Everything in me stilled. The noise of the bar seemed to fade into the background. My breath caught, my thoughts racing.

Pregnant. Pregnant?

I glanced at Delia, whose face had gone pale, her eyes wide with panic. She looked like she wanted to disappear.

thirty-five

Delia

“You’re pregnant?” Robert repeated softly, like he was trying to make sense of the word.

I felt frozen in place, my feet glued to the bar floor.

Around us, people stared, their murmurs like static in the background of a moment that felt far too loud and far too quiet at the same time.

I forced myself to nod, my throat dry. “Yes,” I managed, my voice barely above a whisper.

His gaze didn't move from mine, though the intensity of it made me want to look away. "Is it...?"

"It's yours," I confirmed, the words trembling as they left my mouth. My voice cracked, and I had to swallow hard to keep from losing what little composure I had left.

For a moment, the world seemed to stand still. Robert just stared at me, his disarming green eyes unreadable. He wasn't angry—not exactly—but he looked like someone had pulled the ground out from under him.

A tiny, fragile part of me wanted him to say something—anything—but at the same time, I dreaded whatever might come out of his mouth. I didn't know how long we stood there, but finally, he spoke.

"Let's get out of here," Robert said abruptly, his deep voice steady as he leaned over the bar and reached for my hand.

I blinked, his words breaking through the haze that had surrounded me.

I glanced around at the bar littered with glasses and the small crowd that still hadn't gone back to their conversations. "I... I still have a shift to finish," I stammered.

Robert frowned, his brow furrowing like I'd said something absurd. "Close it down early."

"Robert, I can't just leave," I said, exasperated. "This is my job. Management would lose it if I closed early. We make most of our money at night."

"You're not staying here," he said, his voice like stone. He stood abruptly, towering over me. "How much would it cost to close the place down right now?"

“What?” I sputtered, staring up at him as if he’d lost his mind.

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“What does the drawer usually make on a Wednesday night?” Robert asked, his gaze sweeping across the bar as though he could calculate it himself by sheer force of will.

I hesitated, thrown off by the absurdity of the question. “I don’t know... on a Wednesday...maybe \$4,000?”

He nodded, seemingly unfazed, as though that number meant nothing to him.

Slowly, he reached for his wallet and pulled out a sleek black card, heavier than any credit card I’d ever seen. He handed it to me without hesitation. “Run it for \$8,000.”

I stared at the card like it might explode. “Robert, are you serious?”

“Dead serious,” he said, climbing up onto one of the tables before I could stop him.

His size and weight made it creak dangerously, but he didn’t seem to care. He turned to me over his shoulder and winked. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Robert, no!” I hissed, but it was too late.

“Excuse me!” he boomed, his voice cutting through the noise like a knife. The entire bar fell silent. Heads turned, all eyes on him.

Robert had that kind of presence—the kind that commanded attention without even trying. I remembered noticing it when I saw him in class before I recognized him, how he seemed larger than life, someone impossible to ignore.

The quiet murmurs of the crowd turned to nothing but expectant silence as he continued.

“Listen up, folks! I need you all to leave. Now.”

A ripple of annoyed groans and protests ran through the room.

“Hold on,” he added, holding up a hand. “I’ll make it worth your while. Talk it over, and tell me how much you’d want to make it worth your while. Name a price.” Everyone stood silently, no one turning to talk it over. “Go on. You have three minutes. I’ll be the guy on the table.”

The crowd erupted into chattering, people whispering and throwing numbers around.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing—Robert Hastings, standing on a table, negotiating with a bar full of strangers. I didn’t know whether to laugh or sink into the floor in embarrassment.

After a moment, a man stepped forward, clearing his throat. “150 each,” he announced, his voice bold and certain.

Robert grinned, satisfied, and began counting heads before stepping down from the table with a grace I wouldn’t have expected.

“That works for me.” He walked over to the ATM near the door and withdrew a thick stack of cash. As he did so, I did the math. I had about 25 customers in the bar. At \$150 each, that was \$3,750. He waved it and announced, “Everyone will get theirs as they leave. Please close out over at the bar and then come this way when you are leaving.”

I could only stand there, stunned into silence, as patrons came to me to close out and

made their way in an orderly line toward the door to eagerly take their cash. Within minutes, the place was empty.

When the last person left and the door shut behind them, I finally found my voice. “You didn’t have to do that,” I muttered, though the words lacked any real fight.

Robert shrugged, his tone softer now. “You needed a break.”

I folded my arms, frustration bubbling up even as a small part of me felt grateful.

“I need the money, Robert. I’m still trying to pay for school. Now that you’ve sent everyone away, I won’t get tips.”

His gaze softened, and something flickered in his expression—guilt, maybe, or regret. “I should have thought of that,” he admitted. “How much do you usually make in tips?”

“Robert, seriously—”

“Humor me,” he said gently, holding my gaze.

I sighed, reluctantly answering, “Around \$500.”

Without another word, Robert reached into his wallet and pulled out a few crisp hundred-dollar bills, laying them neatly on the counter.

“What’s this?” I asked, my brows furrowing as I stared at the money.

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“Your tip,” he said simply, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “For tonight.”

I shook my head, my chest tight. “I can’t take that.”

“You can,” he said firmly, his voice low and steady. “Use it for school. Use it for whatever you need.”

“You can’t buy me,” I told him, offended, though my voice cracked, betraying me.

His eyes softened, and he stepped closer. “I’m not trying to buy you, Delia. If we went on a date, I’d spend it on dinner, drinks—whatever. This is the same thing.”

He paused, his gaze earnest, sincere. “I care about you. And I care about... this baby.”

My breath hitched, tears threatening to spill again. I looked away, unable to handle the intensity of his words.

Robert gently reached for my hand, his touch surprisingly soft for someone so strong. “Sit down,” he said quietly. “Let me clean up, and we can talk.”

I let him pull me toward one of the stools, my body feeling heavy and unsteady as I sat. He walked around the bar and started gathering empty glasses, his broad shoulders moving in a way that somehow comforted me.

Robert’s presence—steady, reliable—was like an anchor. As I watched him work, I

realized I'd been telling him he didn't have to carry his burdens alone.

But maybe I didn't either.

thirty-six

Robrt

The air along the Seattle waterfront was chilly as Delia walked beside me, her hands tucked into the pockets of my coat that I'd wrapped around her scant work uniform. Her face was turned slightly away as she admired the horizon.

"So, have you been to a doctor yet?" I asked her.

"Yes, everything is good so far. The doctor gave me a prescription for prenatal vitamins. The first ultrasound isn't recommended for another month or two."

"And you? Areyouokay?" I continued, my voice low as we walked along the paved path. It was too simple a question for what had just happened and what I'd just learned.

A few people passed us, couples holding hands or friends chatting quietly, but I didn't pay them any mind. My focus was on her.

Delia turned her head slightly, giving me a small, wistful smile. "Yeah. Just thinking."

"Dangerous habit," I teased lightly, trying to ease her out of whatever had a hold on her.

She shook her head. "Oh, no. This from the king of overthinking himself? I'm done



for.”

Ahead of us, the water lapped against the wooden docks, the gentle sound somehow calming.

I spotted a gondola docked further down, the kind that was reserved for tourists or couples who wanted to pay for the romance of it. The man working there was half-dozing under a canopy, clearly not expecting customers this late.

“Come on,” I said, tilting my head toward the gondola. “Let’s take a ride.”

Delia raised her brows, pausing mid-step. “I think they’re probably closed.”

“Not for us.” I nodded in the direction of the gondola operator, who was now sitting up, blinking in confusion. “Wait here.”

I pulled my wallet out of the coat pocket she was wearing, and I brought it over to the man. “How much to take us out for an hour?”

“We’re done for the night,” he said, his tone polite but firm.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” I said smoothly. “Double your rate.”

He snorted. “I only charge \$20 per person.”

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I looked at my wallet, at the pithy amount I had left after my scene at the bar. “How about \$500? One hour.” He glanced back at Delia, sighed, and accepted the cash.

Grinning, I turned back to Delia. “Come on.”

I offered her my hand as she climbed into the gondola, my hand a ball of light where she touched, and I steadied her as she sat down.

I settled across from her, and the operator pushed us gently off the dock, the boat swaying softly as it glided into the water.

Delia leaned back, exhaling slowly as she looked up at the sky. “What’s going to happen with you and Jeremy?”

I swallowed hard, watching her profile illuminated by the moonlight. “I think we’re probably done for.”

She sighed, “I guess I’ll have to get a different practicum supervisor, move to a different clinic. I’ll put in the request, but it’ll take ages, I bet. I might have to just avoid the clinic. I’m behind, anyway, with my missing hours.”

“Your missing hours?”

“Oh, right. You don’t know. That’s what Jeremy came to see me about. Apparently, the clinic is missing months of my recorded hours. Basically, six months. Two semesters. Gone. Just like that.”

Her voice cracked, and I reached for her hand without looking at her, offering her silent comfort.

“I can help you with that, you know. I have a lawyer on retainer. I could fix it for you.”

She had worked hard, and the hard work was gone. I’d been there before. It could be crushing.

“No, I can do it myself. Thank you, though,” she said quietly.

“Are you sure? I know how important—”

“You have to let me do some things on my own.” Her voice was still quiet but firmer this time, and she squeezed my hand slightly.

I grimaced, but I let it go. I’d done enough as it was. If she thought she could handle it, I would have to trust her.

We both stayed lying on the boat, one hand behind our head, one arm at our side, our fingers intertwined. It felt so natural, more natural than anything had felt in a long time.

After a moment of quietly watching the sky, Delia asked, “You really think your friendship is over with Jeremy? You’ve been through a lot. Maybe it could pull through.”

“It probably had a chance before I punched him. Now, yeah, I’m thinking it’s dead and in the ground.” I sighed, looking up at the sky, a sky which used to be dark, but now the city wouldn’t allow for it. The lights from people’s apartments left it so bright only a few stars were visible.

“I’ll probably have to find a different therapist.”

Delia turned to me and propped up on her elbow. When I glanced over, she looked serious, her brown eyes moving quickly over my face.

“That’s probably a good thing. I didn’t think it was appropriate for him to be your therapist, being your best friend. It’s a conflict of interest. It isn’t healthy.”

She reached out and stroked my face, and I flinched before relaxing under her hand.

“Eventually, it got that way. But, you know, when we met, he was my therapist only, and I guess I just...started to be afraid of telling someone else about what I had been through.” Her hand was warm on my cheek, and I leaned into it. “Not you, though. You’re easy to talk to.”

“I can’t be your therapist either,” she teased, bumping my shoulder with her hand. My cheek was cold in the absence of her palm.

I chuckled. “Well, good. Because what I really need is a girlfriend.”

Delia’s eyes widened a small amount, and her top lip covered her bottom, as though she was afraid to smile. “Do you mean that?”

I stretched my hand out and wrapped it around her head, pulling her close to me and craning my neck to kiss her gently on her wind-chapped lips. “I mean that,” I whispered against her mouth, as my heart pounded in my chest.

The silence between us felt charged, heavy with things unsaid. Delia bit her lip, her brows pulling together like she wanted to argue, but I didn’t give her the chance.

“When you were with Jeremy,” I continued quietly, “I thought you were too young

for him. I thought he was out of line for dating you—his student—but I didn't realize how much of that was jealousy."

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Her eyes widened slightly. “I didn’t know that.”

“I didn’t know how to say it without sounding like a hypocrite,” I admitted. “Maybe there is no way to say it. It does make me a hypocrite.”

“You’re not a hypocrite,” she said softly, letting me off the hook.

I took a breath, holding her gaze. “I don’t care anymore. I want you.”

Her lips parted slightly, but she didn’t say anything, and the boat rocked gently as the gondola operator guided us through the dark water.

“Corinne told me something this morning,” I said after a moment, breaking the silence. “There’s this boy she has a crush on—”

“You told me. Benny,” she chuckled, putting her hands behind her head and looking up at the sky. “That’s a good crush name.”

“Right. Benny. Still can’t believe my daughter has a crush. Anyway, apparently his parents are divorced, and he has two stepparents. He told her he has two Christmases, and now she likes the idea of a bonus mom.”

Delia smiled faintly, tilting her head, encouraging me. “It made me think,” I admitted, my voice low. “That could be a good thing for her. Having someone around who knows what to say when she has a crush. Someone like you.”

Delia looked at me, her expression softening. “Robert...”

“I’m serious,” I said, my voice steady. “I know you’re young, and I don’t expect you to want the same things I do. I’m not asking you to be her stepmom today. But I need you to know that I’m here for you. And I’ll do anything for you and that baby. I’m not going anywhere.”

She held my gaze, her lips curving into the smallest of smiles. “I believe you.”

When the gondola docked again, neither of us moved right away. We sat there, the boat swaying gently beneath us, and I realized how much I wanted her—needed her—to know how serious I was about all of this.

“Come back with me,” I said gently, reaching for her hand.

Delia hesitated, her eyes searching mine. “Are you sure? Isn’t Corinne home?”

“She’s at a friend’s house, celebrating.” I smiled. “Sleepovers on a school night aren’t something I usually do, but she earned it.”

She laughed. “So you’re a strict parent, how’d I know?” She squeezed my hand gently and nodded, a quiet “Okay” slipping from her lips.

When we got back to my house, I didn’t take her to the kitchen this time. I led her upstairs, into my room, and for the first time in a very long time, I let someone in—truly in.

We undressed in silence, her eyes bright circles of white in the quiet darkness. For a moment, we stood a foot away from each other, admiring each other’s bodies as they came into focus, fuzzy outlines at first, then finally, distinguishable forms.

She stepped forward first, her hand reaching out and tracing a finger down my chest to my stomach. It was a shock of cold against my warm skin, and I shuddered at the

chill. I grasped her wrist and pulled her into me as I sat down on the edge of the bed.

Her steps staggered toward me until she dropped into my lap, straddling me with her strong legs. I could feel her stomach pressing against me, and for the first time since she'd told me, I felt like I really understood what it meant that she was pregnant.

I looked at her stomach and ran my hand over it in circles. Her skin was so soft, gentle, and naked, like innocence itself.

Keeping my hand pressed against her abdomen, I looked up at her and whispered, "My baby is really in here?"

She answered with a kiss, a kiss that felt purposeful, tears crashing down onto my cheeks. I wiped at her cheeks with my thumbs, kissing her back with the same intensity.

Inhaling deeply, I ran my hands up her back and over her shoulders, holding her tightly. I could feel her heart pounding in her chest, and I could feel the heat from her pussy in my lap, the wetness just grazing my cock as she rocked back and forth.

I pulled her hair back out of her face, into a ponytail, so that I could hold her face while our tongues touched. Delia wrapped her arms around my head, holding me so closely that I could barely breathe except to smell her scent, the watermelon shampoo.

I reached down and grabbed her ass to lift her up and plop her down on my member, and she let out a small gasp, her eyes widening a fraction then rolling up to the ceiling.

We continued our embrace, our kiss deepening as she rocked on my cock. She let out small moans of satisfaction as I pumped into her from my seated position. My hands



gripped her shoulders, pushing her as far down onto me as I could.

“Delia,” I groaned, grabbing her face, “I will always be here for you.”

Her face turned as I kissed down her neck, and with every kiss, I punctuated a word, “I. Will. Never. Leave. You. Needing.”

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Her mouth opened in a silent moan, and she grabbed my chin, moving my face up to hers to kiss her again.

I gave her one small kiss and then dipped my head back down to take one of her nipples in my mouth. She cried out in enjoyment and bounced on my shaft, and I grew inside her, my cock throbbing in pain as I stroked.

Her nipple was hard in my mouth, and I twirled my tongue around it, feeling the way it stiffened in my mouth.

She rose up like she was levitating, so that her pussy was only swallowing an inch of my cock, and my head was tipped back to keep her nipple in my mouth. I reached out and grabbed her breast, making sure to hold on as she started to gyrate harder.

Sweat matted the hair on the back of her neck, and I felt it as I grabbed her, steadying her, reeling her in.

Delia looked down at me, and the sudden eye contact sent a jolt shivering through my erection. I felt it twitch inside her, and she gasped, her hands flying to cup my face. She closed her eyes, but I growled at her, “Look at me. I want to see you react.”

She opened her eyes and whined at the intensity of our mutual gaze, her fingers jerking and pressing into my jawline. A stray pinkie ran along my mouth.

We watched each other with open mouths as our rhythm caught up to each other's. We moved as if one, and she grunted, “I loved the way you stood up for me.” Her voice was breathy with effort.

“Is that what you’re thinking about now?” I asked, my hands steady on her back, forcing her body to move with me. I pulled her into me, thrusting my length up into her.

“I’m always thinking about you. I love the way you protect me,” she mumbled, her words almost a slur as lust took over her cognition.

“I’ll always protect you, Delia,” I whispered, slowing down to really feel her warm, wet pussy drag along my shaft.

I could hear the sounds of her juices suctioning me, and I almost couldn’t take the intimacy of the speed. I forced myself to keep moving slowly, as agonizing as it was. “I love you.”

She stopped moving for a second, her strawberry blonde hair tumbled around her shoulders in waves, stray pieces covering some of her breasts. She didn’t say anything.

Still inside her, almost unbearably still, I moved her hair behind her shoulders and said it again. “I love you, Delia Sturgess. I’m sorry you ever doubted it.”

I felt her pussy spasm, and I smirked. “Seems like your pussy loves me back, at least.”

“I love you, too, Robert,” she said finally, breathlessly. She remained still as if to preserve the moment.

“I’m going to take care of you and our baby,” I told her, taking her face in my hands and looking deeply into her eyes, trying to mentally show her how much I meant it. It was the first time I had said our baby.

“I’m going to let you,” she murmured against my mouth, and when we kissed again, I felt her orgasm explode inside her in a frenzied convulsing that squeezed my shaft tightly.

I held her close to me, letting her ride it out, my arms wrapped around her back as she tipped her head back and moved on me, using me for her orgasm.

When she finished, my lap was sticky with her cum, but I stayed holding her, taking in the moment.

I knew that everything had changed.

thirty-seven

Delia

Two months after that horrible night at the bar turned wonderful with Robert, I sat in Corinne’s school auditorium with him.

Things seemed so different now without the clinic to keep me as busy. I’d still been going to school, but my practicum hours were halted until the school approved my change-of-supervisor request. I couldn’t risk seeing Jeremy. He was a loose cannon, as far as I was concerned.

Without a new clinic for therapy yet, Robert had been throwing himself into the self-defense classes, opting to co-teach every single one of them rather than halt them indefinitely.

We were busy, and we were happy, even if concerns were floating in the back of our minds, taking up space.

For today, those things were on vacation as excitement hummed in our chests over Corinne's recital.

Kids in their costumes peeked from behind the curtain, and the sharp smell of construction paper and cheap stage paint filled the air.

Parents stood in the aisles with camcorders and phones, holding them up to the stage to capture the first moments. I couldn't remember a time when my parents had ever sat in a crowd for me.

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I looked around, taking it all in, and then glanced at Robert. The tenderness in his expression as he stared down the stage with quiet intensity, already half-smiling, was something I hadn't seen before tonight, and it tugged at something deep inside me.

"She's nervous," he said suddenly, breaking the silence.

"Corinne?"

"Yeah." He kept his eyes on the stage as he spoke. "She hasn't danced in a long time. She did ballet when she was younger, five to eight, but she stopped. So, she's nervous about tonight."

"That's normal," I replied softly. "She'll do great. It matters that you're here for her."

He glanced at me then, a gentle smile on his mouth, and reached out to trace my face with his finger. My heart stuttered, and I looked away, tucking my hands into the folds of my coat. Being near Robert was beginning to feel like standing too close to an open flame—dangerous, intoxicating, and impossible to pull away from.

The lights dimmed, and the quiet hum of the crowd hushed to a soft murmur as music swelled and children filed out, all looking adorable in their costumes.

Robert leaned closer, his shoulder brushing against mine. "There she is!" he whispered, his excitement contagious.

I followed his gaze, squinting to pick out the small group of girls shuffling into position onstage.

Even in the dim light, I recognized Corinne—her shock of red curls pulled back into a neat bun, her little frame poised as she took her spot.

Something about seeing her there, her chin high and her arms tucked gracefully at her sides, made my chest ache. I wasn't even her mother, but I felt proud.

Robert's focus snapped to the stage as Corinne started to dance, like he was seeing the most important thing in the world. The softness in his expression grew as he watched Corinne move, her feet light as she twirled and leapt across the stage. I couldn't help but watch him, as much as I tried not to.

He was smiling—a real, genuine smile that crinkled the edges of his eyes. He wasn't the brooding jerk of a man I'd known just a few months ago or the protective giant who carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

In this moment, he was just a father, one who adored his daughter so much that it lit him up from within.

"She's incredible," I whispered.

Robert seemed to have a soft smile plastered onto his face as he nodded. "Yeah. She is."

At some point, my knee bumped his under the narrow row of chairs. I murmured a quick apology, but Robert didn't move away. Instead, his boot nudged mine lightly, teasingly.

I shot him a look, one eyebrow raised. "Really?" I whispered, barely able to hold back my smile.

He shrugged, that faint smirk tugging at his lips. "What? I didn't do anything."

He nudged me again, and I retaliated, pressing the side of my knee into his. For a moment, I forgot where we were. I forgot everything except the warmth of his touch against mine, the quiet laughter in his eyes, and the way I felt like a giddy teenager. The kind of silly, innocent joy I hadn't felt in years.

"Shhh," someone behind us hissed, and we gave each other a mischievous look before I tucked my head into his shoulder and giggled. He stroked my hair while I did, laughing softly against my hair.

But when Corinne stepped forward for her solo—delicate and graceful as she glided across the stage—we both stilled.

I could feel Robert's tension beside me, his shoulders rigid, his hands curled into fists against his knees. He wasn't breathing, not really, and I could tell he was holding back tears as he watched her.

The moment her solo ended, the crowd erupted into applause. Robert exhaled, his pride radiating off him like a beacon, and he clapped along with everyone else. "She killed it," he said, his voice gruff with emotion.

"She really did," I said, my heart swelling.

Something in me shifted as I looked back at Corinne, standing center stage with her head held high. I imagined her ten years from now, older, confident, full of dreams. I imagined my own baby, still just a tiny thought inside me, growing into someone just as brave, just as beautiful.

I could see myself in Corinne's life. I could see myself as a mother, someone who showed up to recitals and clapped so hard my hands ached. Someone who made my child feel loved, cherished, supported. Someone who was present.



Maybe I could give this baby something different than what I had growing up. Maybe I could give them more.

The lights came back up as the recital wrapped, and we stood with the rest of the crowd, shuffling toward the exit.

“Thank you for coming,” Robert said quietly, his voice low in the bustle of the crowd. “It meant a lot to have you here.”

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I looked up at him, trying to ignore the way my heart raced at his words. “I wouldn’t have missed it.”

“There she is,” he said, pointing at Corinne as she held hands with a little boy while chattering at her signature speed.

“And I’ll bet there’s Benny,” I quipped, nudging his shoulder with mine. He grunted in response.

The little boy, almost a foot shorter than her with a crop of wavy blonde hair, got on his tiptoes and kissed Corinne’s cheek. She blushed and ran toward us, her face flushed and beaming. “Daddy! Did you see me? I had my own solo!”

“I saw you, Rin-Rin,” he said, grinning as he bent down and hugged her tight. “You were amazing.”

She turned to me, her big brown eyes wide. “Did you see me, too?”

“I did,” I said warmly, smiling down at her. “You were so graceful. The best dancer on stage.”

Her cheeks turned pink as she beamed up at me. “Thanks, Delia.”

“Oh! Hey, I got something for you back in the car,” I said suddenly, remembering the bouquet of flowers I’d gotten her.

“A surprise?”

“Come on, let’s go get it!” I told her excitedly, and to my surprise, she reached out for my hand, and her little palm was sweaty against mine.

We walked out into the parking lot, crunching against gravel and trying to rein in Corinne as she excitedly skipped. “Corinne, cars!” Robert boomed out roughly, and she instantly stopped skipping, running back to our side.

Watching the two of them, Robert holding her so close, Corinne looking at him like he hung the moon, cracked something inside me. This was what family was supposed to feel like. Safe. Whole. Real.

I’d never felt like I belonged to anyone, but maybe this... this was where I was meant to be.

thirty-eight

Robert

“Okay, wait here!” Delia said, transferring Corinne’s hand to mine a few feet away from the car. She rustled around in the backseat for a minute, then emerged holding out a bouquet.

“Here you go.” Delia walked back to us and held out the flowers to Corinne. “These are for you. You were amazing up there.”

Corinne’s face lit up, her hands flying to her mouth as though Delia had handed her a treasure. “For me?” she squeaked.

Delia nodded, crouching down so they were eye level. “Of course. The best dancer deserves flowers.”

Corinne took the bouquet and said in her small voice, “Thank you, Delia.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart,” Delia replied gently, brushing a curl from Corinne’s face. She stood up and glanced at me, something soft in her expression that made me feel stripped bare. “She really was incredible.”

I managed a nod, but my throat felt tight. I looked down at Corinne, who was now cradling the flowers like they were the most precious things in the world. It hadn’t even crossed my mind to get my daughter flowers for her big night.

It hit me like a punch to the chest that Corinne needed someone like Delia. She needed a woman’s touch, someone with the instincts and warmth that I didn’t always have. I loved my daughter fiercely, but there were moments, like now, when I realized how much I didn’t know. I couldn’t be everything she needed on my own.

“Let’s go grab some dinner, huh?” I said, forcing the roughness out of my voice as I ruffled Corinne’s hair. “We’re celebrating.”

Delia turned to go back to her car, but I stopped her and said, “Drive with us, come on. We can come back for your car.”

Delia smiled and looped her arm in mine, shivering against my body. Corinne skipped ahead, her arms wrapped around the bouquet like she thought someone might take it from her.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said quietly, glancing at Delia as we walked.

She shrugged, hands tucked into her coat pockets. “It felt right.”

I hesitated, looking at her profile in the dim glow of the parking lot lights. “You’re...good at this.”

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“Good at what?” she asked, looking over.

Before I could answer her, Delia grabbed Corinne’s hand and yanked her the other way, saying, “Let’s go find that little boy you have a crush on. What’s his name again?”

I looked around in confusion, but then I saw what she had seen first. Jeremy, in his own car, looking at us with a hard stare.

“Benny,” Corinne said happily, but looked back at me, “Daddy, are you coming?”

Jeremy emerged from his car, walking with purpose toward us. He turned to look at me and Corinne, Corinne holding the bouquet, ridiculous now, and he spread his arms, calling out, “Congrats, Rin-Rin!”

“Jeremy!” Corinne called out and ran toward him to hug him around the middle. I felt a lead brick in my stomach seeing him hug my daughter. I knew that he wasn’t here to congratulate Corinne.

“Jeremy,” I warned, my voice low, dangerous. That feeling of needing to fight for my life was building inside me, and I didn’t want to make a scene. Not here. I couldn’t ruin Corinne’s moment.

“See, I knew something was up,” Jeremy said angrily, holding my daughter hostage. Fire burned through me, the fear that this might go haywire any second. “You’re supposed to be my best friend.”

“I am your friend,” I told him, standing my ground, “but I’ll put you down if I need to.”

“I’m sure that’ll show her what a stable choice you are. Go ahead, Robert, punch me in the face to prove that she should choose you. Ruin your daughter’s night.”

He put his hands behind his back and leaned forward, showing me his chin, and Corinne stepped away from him quickly, running to Delia and clinging to her.

I stared at Jeremy’s chin. I’d already bruised that chin once. When I didn’t move, he continued, “That’s what I thought.”

“How did you even get here? Are you following us?”

He sucked his teeth in reply, and that was all the answer I needed. “Why? You broke up with her.”

“Because you told me to! If I had known it was so that you could get in her pants...I should have known, but I thought better of you. Now I know the truth. I came to see Corinne’s recital, saw it in the local paper. I thought we could make up. I haven’t seen you around the clinic since that heroic night of yours at the bar. I thought maybe you were in a bad state... that you regretted it all and needed some time... space to get your grasp of reality back. But now I see what you’re occupied with. You got the girl, so you’re done with me. Well played.” Jeremy’s face was reddening, his eyes deader by the second.

“No, it wasn’t like that. I promise. You know how much you mean to me. I wasn’t trying to betray you,” I protested, my voice sounding tinny even to my own ears.

“You’re pathetic, man.”

I could feel my grip on the situation loosening. My head started to get fuzzy, and I stuck my palms to my temples, willing myself to go through the grounding exercises I knew.

Name five things I can see. Number one, Jeremy...Through gritted teeth, I said, "Let's not name call. We can talk like adults."

"No, you always have been. You knew she wouldn't choose someone like you, so you had to steal her. And you're right."

As he talked, my vision blurred, and the distinct outlines and colors that made Jeremy darkened. I started to sweat, a cold sweat that felt like the onset of nausea.

Jeremy continued, his voice sounding deep and distant, "Delia might convince herself she wants to be with you for a few years. She'll need you. But that can only last so long. She likes men that are a little more...put together."

"Tell that to our baby," I told him, setting my jaw.

Jeremy barked out a laugh.

"Your baby? That baby is yours?" He turned to Delia with a condescending smile. "I thought so much better of you, Dee. Running right into the arms of your ex's best friend wasn't enough. You had to get pregnant by him, too? Seriously? He's almost as old as your dad, for God's sake. On top of everything else, he's a veteran. You, of all people, know how they are. He'll never be able to support you, not really, not the way I can."

"What?" Corinne's voice cut through Jeremy's tone. My neck whirled to face her, and I could see tears wobbling in her eyes.

She looked up at Delia with a face of betrayal. “You’re pregnant? With...?” She looked back at me, and I took a step toward her, but she shook her head and ran across the parking lot, her tutu bobbing behind her.

“I’ll get her,” Delia told me with fire in her eyes. She looked at Jeremy and spat out, “Why would you come here? Why can’t you let go?”

Jeremy moved forward, advancing toward her, and I stepped out in front of her. “I think you should step back, Jer,” I said, smiling at some parents passing us in the parking lot.

“So she banged one out with you while she was missing me. It happens. But I think you need to get through a couple of weeks without a nightmare before Delia will consider a serious relationship with you. I doubt she’s interested in unlocking your handcuffs in the mornings.”



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His figure darkened so much that it looked like a shadow before the darkness entirely swallowed me. His face was decaying, his mouth opening wide into a sea of teeth that dropped one by one. His eyes were just sockets in a face with sloughing skin.

I felt that prickly fear all over my body, shuddering through me in waves. I tried to breathe through it, to remind myself it was just Jeremy. But I felt a hand on my shoulder, and before I knew it, the bone in that hand was crumbling underneath my grip.

Jeremy came into focus again, and I saw myself out of my body, holding his arm behind his back as sweat from the pain rolled down his face.

“Go ahead and hit me, but you know deep down that you can’t take care of her the way I can. You can’t even take care of yourself. You’re damaged.”

For the first time since I could remember, I had pulled myself out of a flashback. I let go of him, and he jumped back. While he cradled his hand, and walked backwards toward his car, he spat out, “I hope you two have fun. With her daddy issues and your savior complex, you should make a perfect pair.”

I watched his retreating form, something I hoped to never see again, before turning to find the two most important people in the world to me.

thirty-nine

Delia

The hum of people walking through the hallways, of the little kids screaming their joy at each other and parents trying to reel them in, was unsettling as I looked for my own kid. Notmykid, but the kid I was responsible for.

I knew which direction she had gone, and I had seen her tutu disappear around a corner. I looked through the glass of a classroom door and saw her little form under a desk. I paused, my heart twisting, and opened the door.

Corinne's red curls tumbled around her shoulders and hid most of her face. When she saw me come in, she flinched and turned her head farther away from me. "Go away," she said in a tiny voice, with little conviction.

"Hey," I whispered, crouching down beside her, my hands gripping the edge of the desk. "I'm sorry that we upset you."

Corinne peeked up at me with one eye, hesitant, before burying her face into her arms again. "I just... I miss my mom," she said finally, her voice small and cracked.

A pang of sadness cut through me. I hadn't expected that. I expected her to say she didn't want to share her dad, but this was something else, something deeper.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and sat down completely, making the desk rattle and clang as I did.

I hesitated for just a moment before reaching out and gently rubbing her back. "That's okay. You're allowed to miss her. Missing her is a part of your love for her."

After a long pause, she let out a shaky breath. "It's just... sometimes I feel like everyone's forgetting her," she admitted quietly. "Even Daddy. He never talks about her anymore. And now... now you're gonna have a baby, and the baby's gonna have a mom."

Her words hit me square in the chest, and for a second, I couldn't breathe. My heart ached for her, for the little girl who had lost her mother far too young and was still trying to figure out her place in a world that didn't feel fair. I kept my hand on her back, letting her know I was still there.

"I promise your daddy didn't forget about her. He talks about her to me."

"Well, he doesn't with me."

"Mmm. I'll have to remind him to do that, then. I'm not trying to replace her, Corinne," I said softly, my voice careful and measured. "No one could ever do that. But I could do my best to feel like a mom."

She was quiet for a second, and I didn't push her. I just stayed next to her, waiting for her to be ready to share. "Like how?" she asked quietly.

I exhaled slowly, a tiny glimmer of relief in the distance. "Well, I could cook and take you shopping, and we could talk about boys. You can't do that with your dad, right?"

A small smile tugged at her lips, and she sat up, coming out from hiding under the desk. "Right," she agreed quietly.

"And you know what a new baby means? It means you'll have a special relationship with them that no one else in the family would. Because you'd be a big sister."

She gasped, as though it hadn't occurred to her before. "I'd be a big sister," she repeated, her voice filled with awe.

"Yeah, neither of us gets to be a big sister," I said, my voice rising as I saw her excitement. "And you know what? That's a really big deal. Your little brother or

sister is going to look up to you so much.”

She frowned, her little nose wrinkling. “But what if I’m not good at it?”

I blinked, surprised. “Not good at what?”

“Being a sister,” she whispered. “What if I mess it up?”

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I reached for her hand, folding her small fingers into mine and then setting them onto my stomach so she could feel the hard ridges where feet sometimes pressed against it.

“Sometimes you will. Everyone messes up sometimes. But sometimes you’ll be really nervous and then surprise yourself by being amazing. Like tonight.”

Corinne looked at my stomach with her mouth open, then looked up at me uncertainly. “What if I mostly mess up?”

I shook my head. “Oh, you won’t. Because you’re kind and brave, and you care about the people you love. That’s what makes someone a good big sister. And you already have all of that.”

She sniffled, considering my words. “You really think so?”

“I do. And you know what? We could decorate the baby’s room together and pick out clothes, and maybe you could even help pick out a name.”

Corinne sat up a little straighter, brushing her curls out of her face. She looked a little softer, a little more curious. “Could his name be Benny if he’s a boy?”

I smiled at her and said, “Sure, Benny’s a good name.”

She giggled softly, wiping at her cheeks with the back of her hand. “Okay,” she said, sounding a little steadier now. “What kind of stuff does a baby need?”

For the next half hour, we stayed sprawled out on the classroom floor, in the middle

of the carpet that she sat on every day, and we talked about what colors the baby's room could be and what the baby would need. How the baby could have walls with polka dots or a zoo mural, and the baby could have a wall of shelving with stuffed animals, and she could even share the stuffed animals if she wanted.

Her enthusiasm was contagious, and it was hard to imagine that just two months ago, I'd been terrified for this baby, thinking that it would ruin everything for Robert.

For a little while, I forgot all about my nerves and fears. She was a bright light, and I could see so much of Robert in her—the fierce determination, the gentleness behind her eyes.

Just as we were finishing up, I heard the sound of the door opening. My stomach flipped, and Corinne sprang up from our spot on the floor.

“Daddy!” She hugged him around the middle, and he gave me a tense look over her head. He closed his eyes and melted into her hug while she told him all about her ideas for the baby's room.

I could see the way he set aside whatever had happened with Jeremy so that she could have her moment. He took her hand and mine, and we walked out of the room, and I had this feeling that filled me like sunlight.

Maybe this was what family felt like. Helping each other. Emboldened by the thought, I glanced at Robert and asked, “Hey, I think I could use your help after all. With my hours. If you're still offering, that is.”

He looked surprised, but a smile spread across his face. “Of course I'm still offering. I'm always still offering.”

“Thank you. But let's talk about it later. Tonight is about Corinne and getting her the

most delicious dessert a big sister could have.”

Corinne beamed up at me, and I beamed back. Nothing I was dealing with felt as big with these two by my side.

forty

Robert

It took about two weeks for Alan, one of my lawyers, to have any time to properly talk to me about Delia’s predicament, but when he finally did, I wasn’t happy with what he had to say.

I sat on the edge of my desk, the phone pressed to my ear, staring out at nothing. The skyline of Seattle stretched beyond the floor-to-ceiling window, snow clouds looming over the city like a warning.

Alan had been droning on in my ear, reciting legalese and processes I hadn’t had the patience for at the time. What I needed were straight answers from him.

“Robert, I’ll need to pull all the files. That’ll take time,” Alan had said calmly. Too calmly.

“Time?” I snapped, rubbing my temples. “She doesn’t have time, Alan. This is her career. Her future.”

“I understand, but—”

“If you understood, you’d have been prioritizing your paycheck,” I barked, gripping the phone tighter, feeling the tension in my forearm. “I needed you to make it happen, and I don’t have time for you to fuck around, driving up your hourly, Alan!”

There had been a pause. Alan had sighed and said, “Look, Rob. I didn’t want to say this until I knew for sure, but there’s no way this is a fluke.”

My heart had stilled. My breathing had turned ragged, and I had trouble slowing down the world so that I could think straight. “What do you mean?” I had asked.



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He chuckled dryly, the laugh of a man who had seen the worst in people and had no time for naivete. “You’re telling me only her videos were deleted and no one else’s? Someone did this on purpose. And I’m thinking someone pretty high up, considering the protocols most clinics have. We’ll need evidence.”

I’d cleared my throat. “What kind of evidence?”

“Surveillance, a log of who had access to those videos. Let me do some digging. I’ll start by contacting the clinic and reviewing their systems. But yes, all that might take time.”

I had muttered a quick thanks and hung up before Alan could say another word.

But now, a week later, I was looking at two emails in my inbox. One was an email from the security station at the library where my classes were held. The other was an email from Alan. Both had attachments, and my gut twisted looking at them like they were bombs with live wires.

I chose to open the email from the library. I wasn’t sure why. Maybe I thought it was easier dealing with my own impending doom than Delia’s. I leaned over the desk, watching the grainy black-and-white feed begin to play.

The first minute was nothing. Just a few cars coming and going on the street beyond the parking lot. I fast-forwarded, tapping my fingers impatiently on the desk.

I watched footage of classes filing out and students and instructors alike returning to their cars. I went through so much that my eyes felt bleary and pained. I rubbed my

head and kept going.

And then I saw it. A class filing out, but the woman who had reported the harassment stayed behind, her arms wrapped around herself as she waited near the door.

The instructor came out, their back against the camera, and it was only a few moments, a few exchanges, before her back was up against a wall and she turned her face away.

The instructor turned slightly, and I got so close to the screen that my nose almost touched it, and then his head gave a furtive glance to the camera, though I couldn't tell if he knew it was there.

I froze. My hand stilled on the trackpad as I stared at the screen.

Jeremy.

My chest tightened, and I replayed the segment just to make sure I wasn't seeing things. There he was, plain as day. Jeremy, someone who I had considered my best friend for nearly a decade, pinning a woman from my class to the wall, a woman who'd stayed behind to talk to him. What could she have been asking? For pointers? And he'd taken advantage of them being alone.

My blood ran ice cold. I rubbed a hand down my face, my heart pounding.

The realization hit like acid in my veins. Why the woman hadn't come forward about who was harassing her, why she'd been so afraid.

Because it was Jeremy.

He was my friend. Everyone knew he was my best friend. How could they feel safe

coming forward if they thought that I might try to protect him?

How long had he been doing this? How long had he been hiding this side of himself from me? Had I been so blinded by our history that I hadn't seen the truth staring me in the face?

I thought back to all the signs I missed: the way he'd asked about teaching, pretending to be concerned about Delia's safety, and that day we'd eaten together. I'd practically fucking sold her out to him. That day, he'd offered to speak to the woman who'd disclosed. I'd thought it was weird, but typically weird the way Jeremy usually was – thinking his position as a therapist makes him uniquely qualified to talk to everyone – but I hadn't realized it was a veiled threat.

I slammed my fist on the desk, the sharp pain jolting through my knuckles grounding me. My laptop shifted, and I stared at the screen, at Jeremy's face frozen in time.

You son of a bitch. I'll fucking kill you.

For a moment, I didn't know what to do. Part of me wanted to drive to his office, grab him by the collar, and demand answers.

This was my fault. No matter what Jeremy had done, I had let him get this close to the safety and lives of tens of women in my care.

I sat there in the silence of my office, the footage still playing on a loop in the background. Jeremy's face stared back at me, a constant reminder of my betrayal.

No, not mine. His betrayal.

I knew I had to do something. I just wasn't sure I was ready for the fallout. No matter what, first things first, I needed to warn Delia. No woman whom he felt he was above

was safe, especially not her.

I imagined the way he'd looked at the bar, holding tightly to her wrist while her face contorted. The poor thing had been afraid, and I still hadn't seen it.

But first, I needed to open the other email.

forty-one

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Delia

About three weeks after I'd told Robert that I needed help with school, I had pretty much forgotten about it. I was curled up on my bed, my laptop open in front of me as I half-heartedly scrolled through my school emails.

I was trying to distract myself—anything to keep my mind off the spiraling mess that my life had become.

But no distraction ever lasted long.

I picked up the phone without checking the caller ID. "Hello?"

"Ms. Sturgess?" The voice on the other end was crisp and professional, immediately cutting through my foggy thoughts. "This is Alan Morris. I'm Robert Hastings' attorney. Do you have a moment?"

I sat up straighter, my heart thudding in my chest. I gripped the phone tighter as unease prickled at the back of my neck. "Yes! Yes, I have a moment. Thank you for getting in touch with me."

"Of course. Mr. Hastings made it extremely clear how important this is to him." Alan cleared his throat. "We've been investigating the issue with your missing practicum footage, your recorded hours for the counseling center."

I had a sinking feeling he was about to tell me that there was nothing to be done, that I'd have a new baby at home and another year of school to go, that my life was over.

But he surprised me instead by saying, “I apologize for the wait, but I needed to be completely sure before I told you that this was no accident. As I suspected, there is evidence that someone intentionally singled you out and destroyed those files.”

My heart dropped. I shot to my feet, pacing the small square footage of my room as something beyond panic, something bordering on mania, swelled inside me. “What do you mean intentionally?” I demanded. “But...why? I haven’t done any—”

“I really can’t speak to motive, Ms. Sturgess. In my line of work, people consistently surprise me with their reasoning,” Alan said carefully, “but there is surveillance footage that points to a culprit.”

“Footage,” I repeated blankly. Was he telling me he had video proof of someone doing this to me?

“Yes, footage. We obtained the video today. I’ve sent it to your email. You’ll see it shortly, and I would advise you to be cautious in the meantime. It may be someone you know or someone in a position of power in the clinic or at the university. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“You’re saying that someone close to me might hate me.”

“Well, I don’t know if anyone hates you, but certainly someone will go to extreme lengths to keep you from graduating, whatever their reason for that might be. And they might know you, yes.”

I sat completely still, listening to the ringing in my head. “Okay,” I said quietly, unsure of what else to possibly say.

“I’ll remain available if you have questions or need further assistance. Please check your email when you’re ready.”

I didn't even say goodbye. I just ended the call and stared blankly at my phone for a long moment, my mind racing.

Someone intentionally sabotaged me.

I grabbed my laptop and clicked over to my email, my hands trembling so badly that I had to re-enter my password twice. My inbox refreshed, and nothing. I checked my junk email, and there it was: a new message from Alan Morris with an attachment.

I hovered my cursor over the email for a long second, staring at the words like they might leap off the screen and strangle me. Part of me didn't want to open it. I didn't want to know. Because if it was someone I knew, someone with a position of power...

I swallowed hard and clicked.

A video loaded, agonizingly slow even though it was only a couple of minutes, footage from the office where I'd spent so much time logging hours, but it was completely empty.

And then I saw him.

Jeremy.

Jeremy moved toward the cabinet where the USB drives were kept. Jeremy looked through them and found the zipped bag with my name on the label. Jeremy took that bag over to the clinic's computer and inserted the USBs one by one.

It wasn't clear what he was doing, but it didn't take a genius to know what he was doing. He was deleting the last 192 hours of my sessions.

The air left my lungs in a sharp gasp, and I clapped my hand over my mouth. My vision blurred as I watched him on the screen.

I paused the video to catch my breath, feeling only my pulse pounding in my ears as I stared at the familiar shape of his face.

No. It couldn't be him. It just couldn't.



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Jeremy, the man who'd mentored me, who claimed to love me, who'd comforted me after our breakup, who still held such an important place in my life, was on the screen. I stared at the video, replaying the scene over and over again, my mind screaming at me to make sense of what I was seeing.

"Why?" I whispered to the empty room, my voice shaking.

A sick feeling curled in my stomach as the truth began to sink in. Jeremy had been the one to destroy my hours. My recorded sessions. He'd sabotaged me.

Why would he do that?

But I knew why. I raked my hands through my hair, my breaths coming in short gasps as panic clawed its way up my throat.

He'd comforted me about what had happened. He'd even promised to help me fix it. And then he'd tried to kiss me. The whole time, he was the one who did it.

He didn't know I was pregnant, but he must have known something was going on with me and Robert. That's how he'd been able to show up at Corinne's recital. He knew everything, and he wanted revenge.

My vision blurred with tears.

How could he do this to me? Even if he had felt betrayed, how could he have justified this to himself? He is a psychologist, a therapist for God's sake.

Anger simmered beneath my panic, bubbling to the surface in sharp, hot waves. As a knock on my front door interrupted my thoughts, I slammed the laptop shut and pushed it away from me as if it might burn me.

As though it already had.

forty-two

Robert

I had already known what I'd see before I opened the attachment on the second email. It couldn't have been clearer since I opened the video of Jeremy harassing that woman - he was involved in every part of our crumbling lives.

My lawyer was the best in the business, but he was methodical, slow in a way I hadn't been able to stand when the stakes had felt so high.

For Delia, everything had been on the line. I hadn't been able to shake the anger boiling inside me—someone had sabotaged her, and if I was right, it had been no coincidence.

The drive to Delia's place felt longer than it was with her not answering my calls. Every red light seemed to mock me as her voicemail plummeted me deeper into despair.

"FUCK!" I screamed, at the slow-moving car in front of me, slamming my fist on the steering wheel.

Jeremy's face burned into my mind. It had been so obvious. Of course it was him. I'd been so deep in thought about my own betrayal that I'd missed all of his betrayals along the way.

And now he'd committed the ultimate betrayal by hurting the mother of my future child. I thought about her struggling, thinking she'd lost those hours because of bad luck or some clerical error, never knowing it was sabotage. Never knowing it was Jeremy. He was right under our noses the whole time.

By the time I pulled up to Delia's off-campus house, I was running on pure adrenaline. I didn't even cut the engine before I was out of the car, striding up to her front door with purpose. One foot in front of the other.

The blinds were drawn, but a faint light glowed through the window. I knocked, hard and loud.

"Delia?" I called, trying to keep my voice calm even as my heart raced.

Nothing.

I knocked again, louder this time. "Delia, it's me. Open up."

Still nothing.

Something was wrong. I could feel it.

A chill ran down my spine, and I stepped back, scanning the front of the house. I heard something that only pricked my sixth sense further: a muffled shout.

"Delia?" My voice came out sharper now, panic lacing every word. I pounded on the door with my fist. "Delia!"

No response. Then another sound—something like a thud, followed by a faint, desperate yell.

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My instincts kicked in, and I stepped back, putting all my weight into my back leg, and then I slammed my foot into the door.

The door gave way, crashing open as I stumbled into the narrow entryway.

I could not believe what I was seeing!

Jeremy was on top of Delia, pinning her down against the floor of her living room. Her face was turned away from me, her arms struggling beneath his weight.

She let out a pained muffled cry, and something primal exploded inside me.

“Get off of her!” I roared, charging across the room.

Jeremy barely had time to turn his head before I hooked my arm around his neck and yanked him to the ground. I didn’t care if I hurt him. I didn’t care about anything except the way Delia’s face looked, frightened, flushed, vulnerable.

On my knees, I held Jeremy from behind, my elbow still hooked around his neck, and listened to the life drain from him, felt his body going limp.

No, he wasn’t getting out of this so easy. I wouldn’t let him.

I slammed Jeremy against the floor next to Delia as she scrambled to get out of the way on her hands and knees.

My hand tightened around his throat as pure rage coursed through me.

“Do you like that? Huh? Do you like someone bigger than you on top of you? Controlling you? Doesn’t feel good, does it?” I screamed in his face, droplets of spit flying through the air.

Jeremy clawed at my wrist, his strangled words gurgling out of him, “Wait—”

“Wait? Wait? I bet you’ve heard that a time or two,” I told him gravely.

His eyes widened, and he opened his mouth. “Shut up,” I told him, picking him up by the collar only to slam his head down on the ground.

“Robert, please, you’ll kill him!” Delia shouted, from across the room. She was on her knees, gripping onto a chair, breathing hard.

Jeremy shook his head against my assault, and he stared into my eyes as he whispered hoarsely, “Listen, I—”

“I said shut up.” My voice was deadly calm, and I saw the fear in his eyes as he realized I wasn’t bluffing. I pressed his neck harder against the ground until my fingertips touched the cold, hard floor.

All I had to do was use just a little more pressure, and his windpipe would crush, and he’d stop breathing. “You think you can touch her? Hurt her? Destroy everything she’s worked for? Because you’re jealous?”

“No,” he gasped.

“And those women? Those women who trusted you to protect them? And you called me pathetic?” I growled, my nose touching his.

Delia blurted, “Please, Robert! Please stop!”

I turned my head, my grip still tight on Jeremy's throat. Delia was standing up now, her face pale and streaked with tears.

"Call the police," I ordered her, without loosening my hold.

I looked down at Jeremy, at the blood in his face and the tears swimming in his eyes. The same eyes that had pretended to care about me, to care about Delia.

"Let them decide your fate. If they get here before you die, then I guess someone up there still cares about you because I don't."

forty-three

Delia

The flashing red and blue lights outside my window smeared across the walls like a chaotic watercolor. The muffled crackle of police radios echoed outside the front door, and the low murmur of voices felt like static in my ears.

"We're in here!" I cried out, from the living room, trembling.

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They filed in, and the next minutes were like a dream, something out of focus but sharp still, like handling a dull knife.

I tried to focus on the officer in front of me, but my mind felt like it was wading through molasses. “Miss Sturgess, can you repeat that? What time did Mr...?”

“Cross,” I said, blinking, surprised at myself.

“What time did Mr. Cross enter your home?”

I blinked, forcing myself to look up at the cop. “I...I don’t know exactly. Maybe ten minutes before Robert got here? I don’t know.” My voice sounded thin, shaky, like it belonged to someone else. “He was angry. He’s my practicum supervisor, and I used to work at his clinic. And... we used to date. He found out that I’d put in a request for a change of supervisor and that it was approved. He came to convince me to stay, and I...said no.”

Robert’s hand was on my back, making soothing circles. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jeremy slumped against the wall, his hands cuffed behind his back, his head hanging low. I couldn’t even look at him. I didn’t want to.

Robert’s face was hard, his jaw tight, and every muscle in his body looked coiled like a spring ready to snap. He hadn’t taken his eyes off me, not once, as if he were afraid I might disappear the second he looked away.

“And what time was that?” the officer prompted.

“I...” My words faltered, my heart suddenly pounding. I felt the warmth spreading between my legs, and when I looked down at my jeans, my stomach dropped.

Blood.

It wasn't a lot yet, but it was there, dark, unmistakable, and seeping into the denim. My breath hitched, my vision blurring with panic as I looked up at Robert.

“What? What is it?” he asked me, his face alert suddenly.

“Robert,” I whispered, my voice shaking. “I'm bleeding.”

His expression shattered into something raw and feral. For a second, no one moved, the air thick and stifling. Then he barked, “She's done answering questions. We'll give a full statement later.”

He turned to me with a face of determination and held my cheeks. Tears wobbled in my eyes as a fear I'd never felt before, not even with Jeremy on top of me, entered my body. All this, and I might lose my baby. I was only three months pregnant. I hadn't even had my first ultrasound yet. I hadn't felt the baby kick yet. I might never get to experience the rest of this pregnancy. It was too much to take.

“I know, baby. I know,” Robert said, as if answering my thoughts, his voice softening just for me. “I've got you. I'm taking you to the hospital right now. Everything's going to be okay.”

He started to scoop me into his arms, but one of the officers stepped in front of him. “We just need to finish taking her state—”

Robert shot him a glare so sharp it could've cut steel. “She's pregnant, and she's bleeding. I don't care about the statement right now. I have to take care of her and my



baby.”

The officer hesitated, clearly torn between protocol and the urgency of the situation, but then he nodded. “Okay. Hold on. Let me radio for an escort. You’ll get there faster that way.”

I clung to Robert, my head resting against his chest as he carried me outside. The cold night air hit me like a slap, but Robert’s warmth surrounded me. I could hear the steady thrum of his heartbeat, faster than normal but still steady. I focused on that sound, grounding myself in him.

“It’s going to be okay,” he whispered again, his voice rough as he pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “You and the baby—you’re both going to be fine. I promise.”

The baby.

The words echoed in my mind like a lifeline and a curse all at once.

What if something happens to the baby? I didn’t let myself finish the thought.

A police officer pushed Jeremy roughly into the back of his cruiser and slapped the hood. “We’ll escort you straight there,” he said. “Lights and sirens the whole way.”

Robert helped me into our car, his hand immediately finding mine, and said, “Buckle up. We’re going fast.”

The car jolted forward, the wail of sirens ahead of us screaming through the quiet night. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block it all out—the lights, the noise, the fear clawing at my chest.

“Breathe, Delia,” Robert said softly, his voice steady in the chaos. “Just keep

breathing. We're almost there."

"I'm so scared," I choked out, my voice barely audible.

"I know," he murmured, lifting my hand to his lips and pressing a kiss to my knuckles. "But you're strong. Stronger than you know."

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His words wrapped around me like a shield, holding the fear at bay just enough for me to focus on the here and now. I opened my eyes, turning to look at him. In the dim glow of the cruiser's interior lights, I could see the fear etched into his face, too, but he was holding it back, for me.

“Robert,” I whispered, my throat tight. “What if...”

“Don’t,” he said firmly, cutting me off before I could finish. “Don’t go there, Delia. You’re okay. The baby is okay. I’m not letting anything happen to you.”

I nodded weakly, tears still slipping down my face. He held my gaze, his green eyes fierce with determination.

I knew he had me, in a way no one had before – really, truly had me.

forty-four

Robert

The waiting room smelled like antiseptic, a sterile, artificial clean that only made me more on edge. I paced the narrow space outside the exam room, hands clenched into fists at my sides. Every step I took felt heavy, like I was walking through wet cement, dragging the weight of my fears with me.

Delia was in there with the nurse, and they’d told me to wait outside while they checked her in and prepped for the ultrasound. I wanted to be in there, needed to be in there, but they’d given me no choice.

I felt like I was suffocating.

The exam room door opened, and a nurse stepped out, looking at me with calm professionalism. I immediately stopped pacing, my eyes locking on her.

“She’s asking for you, Mr. Hastings. You can come in now,” the nurse said gently.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry, and nodded, following her to the room.

When I stepped inside, the first thing I saw was Delia lying on the exam table, her head turned to look at me. She looked small, fragile, and so incredibly brave at the same time. A hospital gown hung loosely around her, and her hands rested over her stomach protectively.

“Hey,” she said softly, her voice thin but steady.

I forced my feet to move, closing the distance between us and taking her hand in mine. Her skin felt clammy, and I rubbed my thumb over her knuckles, trying to ground both of us. “Hey,” I murmured back, my voice rough. “How are you holding up?”

She gave me a weak smile, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m okay. They’re about to do the ultrasound.”

I looked up at the nurse, who stood beside the machine, adjusting the settings. Her face was calm. Too calm. I wanted to shake her, to scream, ‘Don’t you get it? Don’t you see?’, but her calm was so pervasive that I followed suit.

“Is everything...is she okay?” I asked, my voice betraying the anxiety I was trying so hard to keep in check.

The nurse offered me a reassuring smile. “We’re going to take a look now. Let’s focus on the ultrasound, and I’ll explain as we go.”

I nodded stiffly, unable to say more. My throat felt like sandpaper as I gripped Delia’s hand tighter. She didn’t complain. If anything, she squeezed back.

“Okay, Delia,” the nurse said softly, spreading the cold gel onto her stomach. Delia flinched slightly, and I hated that I couldn’t do anything to shield her from even this small discomfort. “This might feel a little cool, but it’ll help us get a clear picture.”

I stood there, frozen, as the nurse moved the wand over her stomach. The machine hummed softly, the screen flickering to life, and I felt like I couldn’t breathe. My entire world narrowed to the sound of that machine, the quiet clicks, and the rhythmic hum of the monitor.

“Come on,” I whispered under my breath, so low I didn’t think anyone could hear me. “Come on, come on...”

The seconds felt like hours. I stared at the screen, trying to make sense of the shadows and shapes, but it was all a blur of gray. Delia didn’t say anything, but when I glanced at her, I could see her staring at the screen with the same hunger for answers that I had.

And then, the nurse’s expression softened, and she tilted the monitor slightly so we could see better. “There they are,” she said gently, pointing to two distinct shapes on the screen.

They... Two shapes?

I blinked, not sure I’d heard her right. “What did you say?”

“They’re just fine,” the nurse said, her voice calm and steady. “See here? And here?” She pointed again, tracing the faint flickers on the screen. “Those are your babies. Do you hear their heartbeats?”

“Bab..ies?” Delia whispered, emphasizing the plurality, her voice barely audible.

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My head snapped down to look at her, my heart thundering in my chest. She stared at the screen, her eyes wide, her mouth slightly open. She sat up, folding her gown slightly over the gel. “Did you just say...babies?”

The nurse nodded, smiling now, slight confusion on her face. “Did you not know? You’re having twins.”

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak. I just stared at the screen, the reality of what she’d said crashing into me like a tidal wave.

Twins.

I felt like someone had knocked the wind out of me, but at the same time, I couldn’t look away from the screen. Two shapes. Two tiny heartbeats. Two. Alive. Real.

“They’re okay?” Delia asked suddenly, her voice tight with emotion. “So it wasn’t a miscarriage? The blood, there was more than I thought there was. And I’d just been pushed to the ground. I thought...” She was winding in and out of thought, convincing herself there was a problem when we could see clearly on the screen that there wasn’t. I squeezed her hand.

The nurse nodded again, her voice soothing. “It was just spotting, nothing to be alarmed about. Very normal in twin pregnancies, and especially in times of stress. But both heartbeats are strong, and everything looks good.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding, my chest heaving as relief flooded through me. My knees felt weak, and I had to steady myself against the edge of the

bed.

“They’re okay,” I said softly, more to myself than anyone else. I turned to Delia, my hand still gripping hers tightly. “They’re okay, Delia.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and she nodded, letting out a shaky breath. “They’re okay.”

We stared at each other for a moment, the weight of everything settling between us. The fear, the relief, the overwhelming shock of what we’d just learned—it was all there, written in her teary eyes and in the way my own chest ached.

The nurse cut through the moment to ask, “Do you want to know the sexes?”

Delia and I looked at each other, and I gave a tiny shrug of one shoulder. She shrugged back and then looked at the nurse. “Lay it on us.”

“Baby boy here, and here...if we can just get baby number two to move their legs...oh, there we go. You’re lucky. One of each.”

“Twins,” Delia whispered.

“Twins,” I repeated, shaking my head slightly in disbelief. “A boy and a girl.”

A small, watery smile tugged at the corners of Delia’s lips, lips I’d cursed and kissed and everything in-between. She let out a cackle of disbelief. “A boy and a girl! I hope you’re ready for this.”

I huffed out a quiet laugh, running a hand through her hair, twisting the ends. “I hope we’re ready for this.”

Her smile widened just a little, and she reached for my hand, saying, “We’ve got this.



All five of us.”

She said five. She remembered my daughter. I squeezed her hand gently.

“All five of us.”

forty-five

Delia

I was six months pregnant, and somehow, Robert had managed to convince me to fly in his private plane across the world to Venice. As far as early graduation presents go, a trip to Italy was hard to beat.

After eating my weight in cheese, we strolled along the river, my hand in Robert’s. I watched as gondoliers strode across the water, their oars as tall as them as they stewarded from the ends.

Robert jerked his head toward the river and rubbed the back of my hand with his thumb. “What do you think?”

I laughed and buried my face into his chest. His other hand sprang up to pet my hair. He looked down at me with a childlike playfulness and kissed my forehead.

“I’m six months pregnant,” I reminded him, looking down at my significant baby bump to emphasize my point.

Robert smiled and caressed my stomach with both hands, cupping the top and whispering, “That you are.” Then he looked at me and asked, “What, you think there’s a weight limit?”

“If there is, I don’t want to find out the hard way,” I teased, getting up on my tiptoes to kiss his lips. He kissed me back intensely, and I couldn’t help but smile against his mouth.

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Robert suddenly turned away in the middle of the kiss, and my lips smacked against his stubbled cheek as he pointed out over the water. “Look, that one has six grown adults on it. Do you think you weigh as much as five adults right now?”

I shrugged. “I feel like it some days.”

Chuckling, he took my hand in his and pulled me toward a nearby dock, waving broadly at a man already waiting for his next rider. They nodded at each other as Robert pushed folded money into the man’s hand.

Robert got in first and turned to offer me his hand. I hesitated, and he looked at me with such sincerity as he said, “I won’t let you fall,” that I couldn’t deny him.

I slipped my fingers against his palm and set my other hand on his shoulder. I tried to lower myself in, and Robert abandoned holding my hand and grabbed me by the waist, effortlessly pulling me in next to him.

“Are you ready, lovebirds?” the man asked us, in a thick Italian accent. I nestled into Robert’s arm and nodded. Robert said, “Ready,” in a soft voice.

The soft lap of water against the gondola’s hull filled the air as we glided through the narrow canals of Venice. The gondolier hummed a faint tune, his oar slicing through the water with steady strokes, while the glow of twinkling lights and flower petals scattered from nearby balconies created a magical atmosphere. I soaked in the beauty around us, but Robert seemed distracted.

We approached a narrow but tall, arched bridge adorned with string lights that

shimmered in the rippling water below. The gondola slowed, the gondolier maneuvering us gently to a stop beneath the bridge. I stared in awe at the picturesque scene, sitting up as best I could to reach up and try to touch them. The gondolier took my hand and helped me stand so I could reach higher, informing me, “The Bridge of Sighs.”

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured, a smile tugging at my lips.

“Sì, your lover ask for lights, so we...give lights. They look...” he seemed to struggle for words, shrugging and landing on “bellissima.”

“Did you plan this?” I asked, turning back to Robert to find him kneeling next to me in the narrow space.

My eyebrows knit together as he took my hands from below, a small velvet box with a gold clasp appearing in his other hand. My heart stumbled in my chest as the realization hit. “Delia,” Robert said, his voice a little unsteady.

My free hand flew to cover my mouth. I could feel my grin pulling at the edges of my lips. “You mean this trip wasn’t a graduation present?” I asked with a shaky voice, a laugh bubbling inside me.

He looked up at me, his green eyes steady but filled with a vulnerability I’d only seen a few times before. One salt-and-pepper curl hung over his eyes, and he knocked it out of the way with the back of his wrist. His smile was thin, but his green eyes blazed with affection as he said, “The gondolas in Seattle were where I realized you and I could really...we could really do this. And I thought maybe that the gondolas in Italy could be where you realize it, too.”

I didn’t know what to say. I focused on not losing my footing as the gondola bounced lightly on the water. “Delia,” he said again, his voice low but strong, “I love you. I’ve

loved you since the moment you crashed into my life and turned everything upside down.”

Tears threatened to spill over my cheeks. “Stop, are you serious?”

He grinned, but his Adam’s apple wobbled as he tried to tamp down his emotion. “I’m serious. Before you came along, my family was incomplete, but I couldn’t see it yet. I thought Corinne and I were fine on our own, but man, there was a Delia-sized hole. I didn’t have any idea what I was about to go through with you to get here, and I’m glad I didn’t because experiencing it only made this connection all the more special. Those were some of the worst times of my life, but I still felt like I was on a cloud the whole time because I was with you. You’ve given me hope again, you’ve given me purpose, and you’re giving me a family. And—”

I couldn’t stop the tears that spilled down my cheeks as he continued. I hugged him tightly, my knees coming down to the wooden floor and my arms circling around his shoulders, my bulging stomach pressing against him. He rubbed my back before getting back into position, leaning away from me. I bent down slightly to kiss him, whispering, “Yes.”

With his thumbs, Robert wiped away my tears, saying, “Aw, baby, I love that you’re ready. But you’re getting a proposal. You’re not getting out of this one.”

I laughed, a bubbly laugh that gurgled out of me through tears. I wiped my nose and looked up at the underside of the bridge, the lights casting a golden glow. “Okay, get on with it then.”

“Once, I looked at you and told you that I knew you were young and you might not want the same things as me. When I said it, it crushed me to think of a life in which that was true, in which you didn’t want to marry me or be a bonus mom to Corinne and do life with me. I wanted so badly to do your laundry. That’s when I knew it was

over for me, that you had me around your finger, when I was literally dreaming—dreaming, Delia—of washing and folding your jeans.”

I laughed out loud, and he gave me that patented smirk, the dimples in his cheeks deepening before disappearing again behind a serious expression. “I know I’m not perfect, and I’ll never claim to be. But I promise you that I will love you, protect you, and stand by you for the rest of my life. Now, will you marry me?”

He opened the box to reveal a white gold ring with a huge oval diamond in the middle, set with smaller diamonds around it and along the band. It was the most gorgeous thing I’d ever seen in my life, glinting in the faint Venetian light.

I clapped my hand over my mouth, nodding furiously as I tried to find my voice. “Yes,” I choked out. “Yes, of course I will!”

Robert smiled, a smile so genuine and full of relief that it made my chest ache, and then he slid the ring onto my finger.

I pulled him up to me, and he wrapped me in his arms, kissing me like it was just us in the whole world, even as the gondolier cheered and people gathered on the bridge above erupted into applause.

forty-six

Robert

Walking up to the front door with Delia by my side, my heart was thudding harder than I cared to admit. Not because I was unsure—far from it—but because Corinne’s opinion mattered more to me than anything. She’d been through so much, and she’d already navigated so many big feelings when it came to Delia that I wasn’t sure how she’d take the news.

Delia gave my hand a squeeze, her other hand resting lightly on her growing belly. “You know, you look pretty nervous to face an eleven-year-old for a former Navy SEAL,” she teased.

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“First of all, it's not just any eleven-year-old. It's Corinne. She's scarier than any enemy,” I corrected her, and she tossed her head back, laughing as we made our way up to the front door. “And second of all, she's almost twelve, which means one year closer to becoming a teenager. I don't even wanna go there right now.”

She rolled her eyes with a playful grin, but I caught the nervous glint in her brown eyes. “She's going to be happy,” Delia said, more to herself than to me. “Right?”

“Of course she is,” I said firmly, squeezing her hand. “She loves you. And she's been talking about being a big sister ever since you showed her how exciting it could be to plan a baby's room. Then when she found out it was twins, I thought she might explode. This is just the cherry on top.”

Before Delia could respond, the door flew open. Corinne stood there, her brown eyes sparkling with excitement. She was wearing one of her favorite T-shirts—the one with faded green stripes on it—and a pair of mismatched socks. Her wild red curls were barely tamed by the bright orange headband she wore.

“You're here!” she exclaimed, bouncing on her toes. “I've been waiting forever!” She turned and shouted to Lizzy, “They're here, they're here!”

“I know!” Lizzy shouted back, from somewhere in the back of the house. “I'm the one who told you!”

“Forever, huh?” I said with a grin, picking her up. “We've only been gone a weekend.”



Corinne wriggled to get out of my arms, my baby no longer a baby, and I set her down on her feet. “Did you bring me anything?” she asked suddenly, her hands on her hips and her eyes narrowed.

“What did I tell you?” I asked, turning to Delia with a smirk. “She only loves me for my presents.”

“Well, I’m sure that’s not the only reason, but it doesn’t hurt,” Delia responded, coyly presenting the paper bag of presents we’d brought back.

As Corinne reached out, Delia pulled back slightly, looking into her eyes seriously. “Be careful with it.” Corinne nodded, and Delia acquiesced.

Corinne went into present-opening mode, a mode in which my little angel turned feral, as she pulled out the item, throwing the bag on the ground and ripping the paper off her gift.

Lizzy, who stood leaning against the doorway, made a move to grab the bag. I shook my head at her, and she relaxed back against the doorway with a slight smile.

When Corinne had completely unearthed the gift, a snow globe with a scene of the rivers and gondolas in Venice, she gasped at it. “Shake it,” Delia prodded, and when Corinne did, she gasped again.

“Wow, thank you,” she breathed, watching the little fake snowflakes fall on top of the little pretend river.

I knelt in front of her, taking her small hands in mine. “Corinne, I got Delia a present, too, on the trip.”

“You did? Can I see?”

“Mhm.” Delia showed her her left hand, and Lizzy gasped from the doorway.

My eyes darted to her, and I smiled before looking back at Corinne, who seemed to be soaking it in, holding Delia’s hand tightly and twisting it left and right.

Delia let her manhandle her hand, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of appreciation for the gentility she reserved for my daughter. “Wow, it’s really sparkly.”

“Do you know what that is, Corinne?” I asked, still kneeling beside her.

Her head turned to me to show she was listening, but her eyes stayed glued on the ring, watching it sparkle in the light. “It’s an engagement ring. I asked Delia to marry me.”

Her eyes widened so much I thought they might pop out of her head. “Youwhat?!”

“And,” I added with a smile, “she said yes.”

For a moment, she just stared at me like she was trying to process what I’d said.

Then, with a squeal so loud it probably rattled the windows, she launched herself at Delia, throwing her arms around her neck. “Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh!Yes!”

Delia laughed, hugging her back tightly. “I’m glad you’re okay with it.”

“Okay with it? Are you kidding?” Corinne pulled back, her hands still on Delia’s forearms, and her face lit up with pure joy. “This is the best thing ever! I’ve been waiting for you guys to get married forever! Now, I get amom!”

She turned to me, her excitement bubbling over. “Does this mean I get to call her Mom now?”

My throat tightened at the longing in her voice and in her words ? the secret desires she'd kept to herself.

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I glanced at Delia, and I could see that her eyes were blurred with tears. She was looking at Corinne with such ferocity, and with a tentative grin, she said, “You can call me whatever you want. It’s not up to me or your dad.”

Corinne, ever empathetic, saw the change in Delia’s demeanor and the tears in her eyes and put her tiny fingers on Delia’s cheeks. “Is it okay, though? If I call you Mom?”

Delia’s own eyes were misty as she cupped Corinne’s cheek. “Of course you can, Corinne. I’d be honored.”

Corinne threw her arms around Delia again, her little body shaking with happiness.

“This is the best day of my whole life!” she declared. Then she pulled back and looked between us. “Wait. When’s the wedding? Can I help plan it? Can I be the flower girl?”

“Whoa, slow down,” I said with a laugh. “We haven’t figured all that out yet. But yes, you can help. And yes, you can be the flower girl.”

She grinned, clearly pleased. Then her face lit up with another idea. “And I can help pick the cake! And the dress! Oh, and we should have balloons! Lots of balloons!”

Delia laughed, brushing a strand of hair out of Corinne’s face. “I think you’re going to be the best wedding planner ever.”

Corinne nodded, satisfied. Then she threw herself at me, hugging me tightly.

“I’m so happy, Dad,” she said, her voice muffled against my shirt. “I always wanted a mom. And now I get the best one.”

I held her close, my heart full to bursting. “I’m glad, sweetheart. I’m so glad.”

As Corinne pulled back to excitedly start planning the wedding out loud, I glanced at Delia. She was watching Corinne with a soft, teary smile, her hand resting on her belly. I reached over and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

This was my family—messy, loud, and bursting with love. And I couldn’t wait to see what the future held for us.

forty-seven

Delia

The auditorium buzzed with the quiet hum of families, faculty, and fellow graduates. The echoes of clapping hands, muffled voices, and an occasional cheer floated through the large room. I stood in line backstage, my cap feeling heavy on my head and my gown far too stifling for the nerves thrumming in my chest.

I couldn’t believe I’d made it. After all the late nights, the lost hours, and the countless times I thought I’d have to give up, I was finally here. Graduating. On time.

The journey hadn’t been easy, far from it. Robert’s PTSD had gotten worse, then better, with some intensive therapy.

Jeremy had been convicted of assault as well as criminal sabotage. However, he only got a few months of community service and a fine in the low thousands, though he did, thankfully, have to give up his position. His license was also suspended, resulting in his moving back home to live with his parents, last I’d heard from Linda.

Everything had gotten worse before it had gotten better.

Between losing my hours, almost being derailed by Jeremy, and everything with Robert and the pregnancy, I felt like I'd fought for this moment like my life depended on it. Maybe, in a way, it did.

I looked down at my belly, my hand instinctively settling on the unmistakable curve of twins that had been gestating for eight months. They were huge, and I'd taken to talking to them in my quiet moments, whispering promises to them: that I'd make something of myself, that I'd give them a life worth living. And now, here I was, finally keeping that first promise.

“Delia Sturgess, Master of Science in Counseling Psychology.”

The applause was deafening to me, somehow louder than it had been for anyone else. I knew it was all in my head, but in that moment, I didn't care.

When I reached the center of the stage, I shook the dean's hand and turned to face the crowd.

My eyes instinctively sought out my family. My brother Tyler was the first face I saw, grinning like an idiot and whistling far too loudly. My mother sat next to him, clapping daintily, but I could see the pride in her eyes. For once, she wasn't criticizing me or offering 'advice' I hadn't asked for. She was just...happy.

Kassandra was next to her, a happy grin spread across her face, her silky brown hair in demure braids, wearing a white dress to be 'on theme.' I loved her for it. God knows I'd look ridiculous in white right now.

And then there were Robert and Corinne. He was standing, towering over the seated crowd, his hands clapping steadily, his gaze locked on me with a mixture of pride and

something softer that was only for me.

Beside him, Corinne sat with a bouquet of flowers almost bigger than she was, her smile wide and bright as she waved at me.

I waved back, my movement so wide that my whole body moved back and forth. That was my family.

My family. How I loved the sound of that.

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I walked offstage as the cheers faded, feeling like my heart might burst. I'd done it. I'd really done it.

It took three hours to hear my name being called, but once the names started rolling, it was all over so quickly.

I hugged some of my peers, students I hadn't gotten very close to with my busy schedule, and I burst out of the double doors.

My eyes scanned the crowd of families that framed the exit until I saw Tyler. I ran over to him, my hand clasped on top of my cap.

"Delia, you're a rockstar!" he said with a grin. "I'm so proud of you, kid. I couldn't have done this."

"You could have," I hugged him.

My mother stepped up next, taking both my hands in hers and pressing a kiss to my cheek. "You've done so well, sweetheart," she said. "Really, you've made us proud."

Her eyes flitted to the ring on my finger and widened, "And that rock..." She looked up at Robert and nodded her approval, winking at me.

I didn't know what to say to that. She'd spent so much of my life reminding me of what I hadn't accomplished that hearing her praise felt like I'd stepped into an alternate universe. But I took it for what it was and hugged her back.



Kassandra hugged me tightly, muttering into my ear, “Good job. Those kids won’t even know what a badass mom they have.”

Corinne held out the bouquet of flowers she’d been gripping all day. “These are for you!” she said proudly.

I laughed, crouching down carefully to take the flowers. “Thank you, Corinne. They’re perfect.”

She grinned and hugged me for a second.

I straightened and turned to Robert, wanting his praise the most.

“Congratulations,” he said, his voice soft in my ear as he kissed my cheek.

I turned to kiss his lips, and there was that look again, the one that melted my heart every time. “I knew you could do it,” he said, as our mouths crashed together.

“Thank you,” I whispered, and for a second, it felt like we were the only two people there. All I could focus on was Robert, his arms around me, his lips on mine, and the overwhelming feeling of being home.

And then, suddenly, something shifted.

I felt it—a sharp cramp in my abdomen. I froze, pulling back slightly as Robert frowned.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice instantly worried.

I pressed my hand to my belly, wincing as another cramp hit. “I think...” I whispered, looking up at him.

His eyes widened. “Delia, are you—”

My water broke on the dying grass beneath us.

“Delia, you peed!” Corinne screamed out, and I stared at the liquid gathering under my feet for a second before starting to laugh hysterically.

“Oh, God,” I laughed, staring down at the growing puddle forming around my feet. “The twins stole my thunder!”

“Fuck,” I heard Cassandra whisper. I looked over at her, and I could see her eyes sparkling. “Delia, you’re gonna get a hot girl summer after all.”

I couldn’t stop laughing, maybe out of shock, maybe at the absurdity of it all, or maybe Cassandra really was that funny. But Robert was in full problem-solving mode. He didn’t hesitate.

“Tyler! Get the car!” he barked, already scooping me into his arms as if I weighed nothing.

“Wait! I can walk!” I protested, but he wasn’t having it.

“Not a chance,” he growled, his jaw set as he carried me toward the parking lot. “You’re not doing this alone, Delia. Not now. Not ever.”

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I gripped his shirt, breathing through the cramps and excitement warring inside me.

The babies were coming.

As Robert carried me, I looked up at him, his face determined and protective. We were ready for this.

Well, sort of. No one was ever really ready.

Epilogue: Delia

A Year Later

The sun beamed down on us through a soft veil of clouds, clouds that seemed to keep the stifling heat at bay for my special day. It felt like the kind of day someone would write about in a fairy tale—clear, calm, and perfect.

I stood in front of the full-length mirror, adjusting the lace on my wedding dress as my heart thudded with a rhythm that felt entirely foreign.

Behind me, Cassandra fussed with my veil. “I swear, Delia, if you cry and mess up all the hard work I’ve done on your makeup, I’m making you do it over yourself.”

“I’m not crying,” I replied, but my voice betrayed me with its slight tremble. My reflection didn’t lie, either. My eyes glistened, ready to spill over at any second.

Kassandra snorted. “Uh-huh. Sure, you’re not. You look like a walking Hallmark

commercial. Honestly, I've never seen you this happy."

Her words made me pause. I stared at myself a little longer, taking it all in. The woman in the mirror didn't look like the version of me I'd seen just over a year ago.

Back then, I'd been lost, unsure of myself, carrying so much weight I didn't even know how to name it. Now, my skin glowed, my smile was easy, and my posture was upright.

I didn't look like I was bracing for the world to knock me down anymore.

"You're right," I whispered. "I don't think I've ever been this happy."

Kassandra grinned, satisfied. "Good. You deserve it. And you look stunning, by the way."

She stood back, admiring the dress one last time. It was soft ivory and classic silk with buttons that trickled down the bodice and sleeves, fitted just enough to show the curve of my waist. And my ass. That part was for Robert. I'd never felt more beautiful.

"I want to wear this everywhere. I wish I never had to take it off."

"The makeup looks good, too, right," Kassandra asked, with a wink, fishing for compliments.

"Oh, of course. The makeup is the star of the show. Thanks, Kassie," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Don't thank me," she shot back with a smirk. "Thank Robert. He's the one who insisted on the custom dress. Honestly, the man has better taste than I do, and that's

saying something.”

At the mention of Robert, my heart gave a little flutter. Robert. My fiancé, about to be my husband. The man who had saved me in more ways than I could count – figuratively and literally. The man who had somehow loved me through every messy piece of the past year.

I thought about how far we’d come, from our rocky start to this day, where nothing felt uncertain anymore.

Kassandra checked her phone and said, “Okay, it’s almost time. Tyler’s probably pacing outside like a lunatic waiting to walk you down the aisle.”

My brother had been my rock through so much of my life, and I knew walking me down the aisle was as big for him as it was for me. I’d agonized over the decision to ask him, knowing that I had planned to ask my dad to come to the wedding.

At different times, I’d considered not asking my dad at all, then asking him to walk me down the aisle. Finally, when I’d made the decision to send him the invitation, I knew the truth of who deserved to hold my arm in that moment. When I asked Tyler, he’d told me, “I don’t care how old we are. You’ll always be my baby sister.”

A knock sounded at the door, and then my mother stepped in. Her expression softened the moment she saw me.

“Oh, Delia,” she breathed, bringing her hand up to her mouth as her eyes welled with tears. “You look beautiful.”

“Mom,” I said, moving toward her as she embraced me.

Her hug lingered longer than usual, and I could feel the unspoken words in her touch.

My mother had changed over the past year. She showed up more. She tried harder. She smiled more. And she loved my babies with a fierceness I hadn't expected from her.

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“I’m so proud of you,” she whispered in my ear. “I really am. Look at everything you’ve done. Your family. Your life.”

“Thank you,” I whispered back, tears finally breaking free and slipping down my cheeks.

When she pulled away, she gave me a soft smile. “And don’t cry. You’re going to ruin that makeup.”

I laughed, wiping my tears carefully as Cassandra threw up her hands in mock exasperation.

The music started not long after that. I stood at the entrance to the outdoor aisle, my hand in Tyler’s as the guests rose to their feet. I glanced at him, and he gave me a crooked smile.

“You ready?” he asked, his voice low and steady.

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Yeah. I’m ready.”

We stepped forward together, and as I looked out at the crowd gathered on the lush, green lawn, my heart swelled.

There were Robert’s friends - veterans from his volunteer groups, men and women who had become like family to him over the years at the courses he taught and the business he ran.

There were students and faculty from my graduate program, people who'd supported me through some of my darkest days.

There was my family: my mom, Tyler, even my father, who'd shown up for the first time in years. I wasn't sure how I felt about him being there, but for today, I let it be enough.

And at the end of the aisle, there were Robert and Corinne. I'd made her the ring bearer, and now she stood behind Robert, already twelve years old and in middle school, about to become a teenager, which seemed impossible. She held the hands of the twins proudly, taking her job seriously.

Beside her, Amara, named after the 'eternal love' that Robert and I shared, wriggled out of her grasp, but Corinne caught her by the hem of her dress, bringing uproarious laughter from the guests.

Ronan, our 'little seal', tried to help his twin in mischief, pulling at Corinne's death grasp until Kassandra came up and helped by pulling him away to stand back with her.

When we found Ronan's name, Robert and I had fallen all over ourselves laughing that he'd be our 'little seal' until Robert had looked at me seriously and said, "But he can never go into the military," and I had said, "Do you want to make a little seal of it?" offering him my pinkie finger.

Now, those moments seemed so far away. They weren't just sleepy lumps in my arms, gnawing at my nipples from time to time. They were toddling and chewing on things, constantly moving and somehow slippery, so wiggly they were like cats. Time was moving too fast.

Robert stood tall, his dark hair neatly combed, his green eyes locked onto mine with a look that made everything else fade away.



When we reached the altar, Tyler kissed my cheek and stepped back, leaving me with Robert.

“You’re breathtaking,” Robert whispered, his voice thick with emotion as he took my hands.

“You are,” I teased back, though my voice wavered.

The ceremony was a blur of emotions. I barely heard the officiant’s words, though I knew I’d remember the vows we shared forever.

“I promise to stand beside you, through everything life throws our way,” Robert said, his voice wavering. He looked at me with a fierceness that made my knees weak. “I promise to love you, protect you, and build a life with you. You and our children are my only priority, my first and last thought. I promise to see you in every choice I make and see your face in the love we have for our family. I’ve said it before, Delia, but my little family wasn’t complete yet, and I didn’t see that until you were there. So more than anything, I promise to always be grateful for all the ways you made our lives infinitely better just by being here and being you. Because you are enough.”

When it was my turn, I said, “I promise to love you for everything you are. I promise to love your strength and guard your weakness. I promise to be with you to steer the ship when it’s crashing, to guide us back on course. I promise to believe in us, to be on your team, even when life is hard, and to stand by your side as we grow. I promise to be the best mother I can be to your children, all of them.” I looked down at Corinne and winked. I was surprised to see that her brown eyes swam with tears. “I promise to love the parts of your daughter that are Quinn’s and to make sure you give yourself credit for the parts that are you – like her empathy. Most of all, I promise to be a safe space because you—” My voice cracked, and I took a moment to compose myself, closing my eyes and breathing, “You have given me a home in your heart that I didn’t know how desperately I was looking for.”

When the officiant pronounced us husband and wife, Robert kissed me with a tenderness that made my heart soar. He grabbed my hand and threw our arms up over our heads as Corinne did the same with the fat little hand of Amara and Cassandra with Ronan, pushing him delicately forward to stand with Corinne again.

The reception was lively and warm. The twins—now just over a year old—were passed around between my mom, Tyler, and Cassandra, all of whom fussed over them like they were the most precious beings on the planet.

I watched Robert twirl Corinne around the dance floor, her laughter ringing out like a bell as he smiled wider than I'd ever seen him.

"Happy?" Cassandra asked, handing me a glass of wine, which I happily drank, no longer pregnant or breastfeeding, free to celebrate with alcohol for the first time in almost two years. It felt like a small miracle in itself.

I looked out at my family, Robert, Corinne, our twins, and everyone who had come together to celebrate with us, and smiled.

My father caught my eye from across the room, where he chatted with my mom and poked the chubby cheeks of Ronan, and nodded. It was small, but it was something. It was more than I'd had in years.

"Yeah," I said softly. "I really am."

The End.