



Skin Deep

Author: *Lauren Hawkeye*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: She's all wildness and freedom. His world is bound by rules and expectations. Now things are about to get hot-hot-hot in this wickedly sexy book from bestselling author Lauren Hawkeye.

In the pulsing throng of an Amsterdam nightclub, wealthy attorney Fred Vaughan experiences a bolt of raw lust for a wild blue-eyed stranger. Now, five years later, Fred finally knows the identity of his mysterious inked vixen. Amy Marchande owns a popular tattoo parlor in his family's exclusive shopping plaza...and, unfortunately, he's been tasked with kicking her gloriously sexy ass out. It takes about a minute before Amy's shock transforms into an insatiable need to have Fred's impossibly tall, lean, muscled body naked beneath her. It's only after their wicked little liaison that she learns that the Vaughans want her gone. Now it's time to show Mr. Vaughan—and his rich-as-hell family—that no one is the boss of Amy Marchande. Only, Fred has a tendency to tell Amy exactly what to do—and in a way that makes her ache with delicious want. But this wild-child tattoo artist doesn't belong in his polished, ultraconservative world. Because while ink is only skin-deep, Fred Vaughan might be the only one to pierce Amy's tough exterior...

Total Pages (Source): 39

PROLOGUE ONE

Five years ago

FRED VAUGHAN LOVED AMSTERDAM.

It was the last stop on the European trip he and his twin, Frank, had taken to celebrate the end of their undergraduate degrees. In the fall they would both be back at school—Frank for a master's in business, and he to law school—and the trip had been a graduation gift from their parents, albeit a begrudging one on his father's part. Frederick Vaughan Sr., had expected both of his sons to spend the summer working at Vaughan Enterprises, the massive development conglomerate that his own father had started, but he'd been overruled by his wife.

Fred was grateful. As a Vaughan, his future was set in stone, and he'd known that since childhood. He hadn't ever thought he'd minded, either, until he'd had his undergrad diploma in hand and realized that, after four years of killing himself studying while his peers partied, he was about to head right back into the grind. The weight of expectation had started to wrap thin tendrils around him, to tug at his limbs, his skin. Tendrils he thought he could break free of, but the more he pulled against them, the further into the morass he sank.

So really, he would have loved anywhere that wasn't school, or home. Anywhere he felt free. But...he really did love Amsterdam. He loved the history, so rich and old that it made the roots of Boston feel shallow. He loved the beaches and the confidence that the European women wore like a second skin.

He loved the culture, the clubs. And tonight, their last night there, he loved the throb of the dance music in his veins, the rumble of the bass beneath his feet. He loved the icy chill of the beer in his hand and the writhing mass of bodies on the dance floor. He wasn't much of a dancer himself, but he could watch the movement all night. The people. The connections—friends and love and, best of all, lust. People coming together for a moment or an hour or a night.

“You like to watch?”

The voice was husky, pitched lower than the din of the club. He looked down—he and Frank always had to look down, because they were each six feet four inches tall—and found himself on the receiving end of an assessing gaze from a pair of bright blue eyes. Those captivating eyes were set in a fairy-tale princess face, though he had the instant certainty that she wouldn't appreciate the comparison.

Caught by the question and the intensity of those eyes, he took a moment to reply, a single impression working its way through his brain to his mouth. “Is that a Boston accent I hear?”

“Ten points for the pretty boy.” She grinned up at him, a saucy curve of full lips painted bright pink, and his eyes tracked the movement. “You expected something else? You sound surprised.”

He had been, in fact, and by more than the surprise of finding someone from his faraway hometown here in Amsterdam. Though her face was delicate and feminine enough to have fit in among the pedigreed women he'd left back home in Boston, it was surrounded by long, wild black curls. A silver ring pierced her right eyebrow, and thick black eyeliner accentuated that deep blue of her gaze. In short, she looked wild. Untamed. Like she'd sprung from the earth right here in Amsterdam, a magical creature wrought from his wildest dreams.

Looking down into fierce eyes, he felt something stirring inside him. Some kind of primal need awakened, unspooling from a tight knot in his gut, answering her call.

“You’re staring,” She waved an arm in the air and leaned on the bar to catch the attention of the bartender, who came running the second he caught a glimpse of her lush cleavage. This gave Fred a moment to admire the tattoos that decorated her arms, which were bare, revealed by a simple white tank top. “Didn’t your mama ever tell you that’s rude?”

He’d never really liked tattoos before. No, that wasn’t entirely true—he’d never given them much thought, especially not as applied to women. He was pretty sure he didn’t know any women who had one.

“Is it rude if I’m admiring you?” He wasn’t sure where the words came from. He did well enough with women, but his brother was the player—a player he’d forgotten was standing right at his elbow.

“Smooth, Fred.” Frank grinned at him. Fred scowled as his brother stepped forward, drawing the attention of the ethereal creature in front of them. “Hi, I’m Frank. If you’re interested in the looks without the corny lines, I’m your man.”

This wasn’t a new scene—Frank had been cockblocking him since they’d both hit puberty—but this time Fred felt irritation flickering little fingers into his veins. He was the easygoing twin, and usually he just shrugged it off when his brother swiped a woman out from under his nose. There were plenty of fish in the sea, after all, and he attracted plenty of his own.

This woman, though? He was intrigued. He’d punch his own twin in the face before he let her go with Frank.

The woman had looked from Fred to Frank, her lips curving with amusement.

“Nice to meet you, Frank.” The woman smiled up at his twin, that sexy voice curving like smoke around her words. Fred puffed his chest out, about to tell his brother to beat it, but he quickly discovered that there was no need. “Wanna go away now and let me hit on your brother?”

Both twins choked out a startled laugh. Frank looked at Fred, and Fred had a tense moment in which he wondered if his twin was going to push his point. Instead, Frank shrugged before wandering off into the dancing throng of people.

“Are you always so...” He trailed off as he searched for the correct word. She grinned, the smile like lightning in a dark sky.

“Forward? Abrupt? Rude?” She accepted one of the shot glasses the bartender handed her. As she wrapped her fingers around the small glass, Fred noticed that she had a delicate black rose tattooed on the top of each of her four fingers, excluding her thumb.

“Assertive,” he countered. He had a sudden vision of that hand, those roses, wrapped around his cock. Heat licked up his spine when she handed him a matching shot glass.

“Generally, yes.” She studied the golden liquid in the shot glasses for a moment before shooting him a challenging glance. “Does that offend your delicate sensibilities? Are you one of those men who needs to be in charge?”

He thought about this for a moment. Thought about the men he knew back home. This woman’s overt confidence would rub them all the wrong way, he knew that without a doubt. Probably because they didn’t have much of their own. They were used to women with good family names, women who’d been raised to support the men in their lives. Women who didn’t challenge.

He'd never been overly interested in those women, at least not for longer than one night. Now, as if she'd just appeared, was a woman he found fascinating, and he wasn't interested in anything except being honest.

"I like being in charge." He tapped his shot glass against hers. "I like it even more when a woman knows exactly what she wants."

He watched as something sparked in her eyes, a deep blue glitter. He couldn't hear her sharp inhalation of breath, not over the thundering music, but he saw it. Watched the swells of her high, tight breasts press against the thin fabric of her top.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

She wasn't wearing a bra. Through the translucent fabric, he could make out the dusky circles of her areolas, the tight pucker of her nipples, which were hard—hard for him?

He could also see that some kind of jewelry adorned each of those taut buds. He'd never seen anything like it, not in real life, and he felt a sharp, physical ache with the need to touch.

Silently, they each tossed back their shots. Fred's eyes tracked the delicate lines of the woman's throat as she swallowed, then the path of her tongue as she swiped it over her lips to catch the last drop.

"What's your name?" He caught the shot glass from her hands, set it and his aside, using the gesture as an excuse to brush his fingers over hers. He tangled his own large hand in her small one, tugging her closer to him, close enough that the tips of those adorned breasts brushed against his wide chest. He felt fire in the wake of the touch.

"Why?" She rubbed her thumb over his knuckles, looking up at him from beneath long, tangled lashes.

"What do you mean, why?" He frowned. "You know mine."

"Yes." She nodded to punctuate her point. "But what does knowing your name is Fred tell me? Does it tell me what your favorite color is? Does it tell me how your skin smells? Does it tell me what you'll do when I touch you?"

With her free hand, she traced a finger down the center of his chest, awakening nerve

endings as she went. He caught it just before she reached his belt, holding it in place.

“Right now, my favorite color is pink. This pink, right here.” He lifted his other hand to cup her face, traced his thumb over those pillowy lips. “I’d love to find out what other shades of pink you have.”

He felt her exhalation, the damp heat fanning out over his thumb as she spoke. “Pretty words, Boston boy.”

“Here are a few more.” He leaned forward, felt the heat radiating outward from her body. “Come with me. Somewhere, anywhere. Let me find out.”

“Mmm. Tempting.” She looked up at him, considering, then shook her head. Before he could feel the punch of disappointment, she pivoted. “Dance with me.”

Fred did not dance.

He’d actually never willingly joined a dance floor, not once...well, not unless he counted that time he and Frank had sneaked their father’s whiskey into a flask for their cousin Sarah’s wedding, which had turned out about as expected.

Still, he let this woman—damn, but he wished he knew her name—lead him onto the dance floor. There, she turned in his arms, her back to his front, and cast an utterly bewitching glance over her shoulder. Enticing him.

Daring him.

When she released his hand, he placed it on her shoulder, tracing the strong curve. He slid it down, following the graceful line of her arm, the swell of her hip, then back up. He grazed the bottom of her tank, then tucked his hand inside, his palm flat on her stomach. Her skin was soft, hot as silk as she pressed into the touch.

It was impossible to stay still with this woman rocking gently back against him, with the sea of people around them swaying. The music vibrated along his skin, through his body, driving the thoughts right out of his mind. Leaving room for him to just experience the moment.

She pressed that tight little body back against him, swaying sinuously. She was tall enough that his pelvis was flush with the curves of her ass, and he felt himself harden as a result of her movements. He felt rather than heard her purr with approval as she noticed, pressing herself back against his growing erection.

He wanted her like he'd never wanted a woman before. Dipping his head, he inhaled the aroma of her hair, something sweet and green and fresh, before pressing his lips to her temple.

Her skin was hot beneath his kiss.

“Come with me.” He nipped at the top of her ear, his teeth grazing the pink shell as he whispered hotly.

“Where would you take me?” Turning in his arms, she leaned forward and slowly, deliberately rubbed her breasts against his chest. His cock, already swollen, became rock-hard against the stiff denim of his jeans.

“Wherever you want to go.” He was serious. He and Frank had a room at a hotel nearby—his father had consented to this trip, but no way were his sons staying in some hostel like peons. He could take her there, but a woman might not want to go to a hotel alone with a strange man. A car, a tree in a park, right here, right now—it didn't matter to him, not as long as he could taste her.

She didn't reply. Instead, she sank her teeth into her lower lip and looked up at him through that wild tangle of her long lashes. With one hand, she hooked two fingers

into the waistband of his jeans, pulling him close, then closer still, flush against his body.

With the other she slowly, tantalizingly, brushed the tips of her fingers over the rigid length of his erection. Stars exploded in his vision, and he exhaled hard, his warm breath misting over the long coils of her black hair.

“Stop.” He caught her hand, stilled it. “This should be about you.”

“It is.” She arched an eyebrow, expression flirtatious. “This is what I want.”

Far be it from him to argue with a determined woman. A groan caught in his throat as she repeated the gesture, brushing her knuckles over his rigid length again, this time more firmly. Without even glancing around to see who was watching, she danced her fingers up, then worked them past the waistband of his jeans, rubbing her thumb over the head of his cock.

In the split second before his brain short-circuited, he thought that they couldn’t do this, not here in public. Then he realized that the only reason he cared was if she did, which she clearly did not.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

She swiped over the head of his cock again, sampling the bead of moisture there before working down farther. As she gripped him with a firm hand, he imagined those roses inked on her fingers, all brushing against the steel rod of his erection.

He couldn't hold back the growl when she closed her fist around him. Her fingers didn't quite reach—he was lucky enough to be big everywhere—so she clamped tightly around him, creating exquisite friction as she moved her hand up and down with a twist of her wrist.

People rocked in close around them. He didn't know if anyone could see what they were doing, and he didn't particularly care. Emboldened by this realization, he moved one of his hands to cup her breast. She pressed against him with a needy roll of her hips as he sampled the plump mound with his hand, stroking outward to the tip. There he toyed experimentally with the nipple, the bar running through it. He knew he didn't imagine the sharp jerk of response as he tugged on it gently, so he did it again, rolling the tip and the jewelry between his long fingers. In response she worked him faster, harder. He hadn't come from a hand job since he was a teenager, but as the pleasure from her hand coursed through him and his vision started to blur, he knew that he was about to make a mess of himself against the soft white skin of her palm, right here, right now.

It wasn't enough. He didn't want to come in her hand, but in the heated cradle between her long, slim thighs. He wanted her naked and spread before him as he sampled her wet heat. He wanted those pretty nipples, tight as rosebuds in his mouth.

Reaching down, he wrapped his hand around her wrist, slowly pulling her busy fingers out of his pants. Sliding his free hand around to the small of her back, he

tugged her against him, hard. His erection thickened even further when he felt her lush curves, right there against him.

When she looked up, sharp need in those blue eyes, he claimed her mouth in a kiss. He'd meant to go in gentle, but she gave way so enthusiastically, lips parting for his tongue, that he couldn't help but accept the gift she'd given. He sipped at her, explored, the kiss somehow as dirty as fucking, and when they broke apart a moment later, both gasping for breath, he couldn't think, only feel.

"Come with me," he said for the second time that night.

This time, she did.

PROLOGUE TWO

Five years ago

AMY MARCHANDE WAS on fire.

She wasn't sure what, exactly, had drawn her to the impossibly tall, lean man in the first place. He wasn't her type at all. She usually found herself drawn to men, and the occasional woman, much like herself—a little bit wild, rough around the edges.

There was nothing rough about this man—Fred, his brother had called him—no matter what image he thought he was projecting. Yeah, she'd caught that. She was an artist, after all, and she had spent a good chunk of her life observing—people, places and things. And before she'd even approached him, she'd noticed that he didn't quite blend in the way she was pretty sure he thought he did. His jeans, for instance—they were distressed, but in a way that suggested they'd come that way from the store, not from wear. His T-shirt was simple, but the fabric was thick, better quality than what could be found at a tourist shop. His sneakers, too, were a brand she knew was

expensive.

It was more than what he was wearing, too. There was something about his bearing, the way he carried himself, that spoke of confidence, the kind that came from an upbringing of privilege. This wasn't a man who'd ever wanted for anything, who'd ever found a hill that he couldn't climb. Normally that was a trait that got her back up, but for some reason it didn't with Fred. It was interesting. As was the gut punch of attraction she'd felt when she'd looked across the bar and had seen him standing there, watching the crowd. Observing, like she so often did.

In truth, she hadn't even noticed the twin, not until he'd introduced himself. It said something about chemistry, didn't it, that she'd had two identical men in front of her and only wanted the one?

She hadn't been surprised when he'd led her into the Hotel Paris, a deceptively casual-looking accommodation that she knew cost a lot of money. She'd seen that privilege already, after all. She'd fumbled for a moment in the vast expanse of the marble lobby, when she'd caught the eye of a woman dressed in sleek leather pants and a long trench coat, a wealthy woman who'd looked at her wild hair and tattoos with a sneer. Despite her genuine confidence and bravado, the barb had found purchase in her tender flesh, reminding her that she didn't belong here, that this wasn't her world.

Then Fred had run his hand down her arm possessively, and she remembered that she didn't have to belong here, not if she was only staying for a night. So she'd flashed the woman a cocky grin, then placed her hand on Fred's butt as they waited for the elevator. They'd kissed all the way up, slow and dirty. Now, as he tapped the key card on the lock to his room, she felt anticipation lick along her skin like a flame.

It didn't matter that he was clearly from one world, and she from another. What mattered was this, right here and now, in the moment.

“Lights on or off?” he asked as he guided her into the room, which was worlds apart from the hostel. The space was airy and clean, the kind of place that left little mints on your pillow before bed. She caught the upscale scent of lemongrass hanging in the air, and the slight musk of masculine sweat—of Fred.

She didn’t answer. Instead she kicked the door closed behind them, pressing until she heard it latch. She looked up, tracing his dim silhouette with her eyes, then tugged her shirt up and over her head, tossing it to the side.

“Jesus.” His voice was hoarse, and she felt his stare like a touch. “Where did you come from?”

“From your dreams.” She grinned, leaning back against the door as she slowly undid the zipper of her jeans, working them down her hips, then to the floor. She stepped out, then stood naked but for the scrap of red satin that made up her thong.

She was gratified by his hoarse intake of breath, but when she expected him to move closer, to cup her breasts in his hands, he did neither. Instead, he reached out for one of her hands, tangling their fingers together loosely and tugging her forward.

“Earlier tonight, you asked if I liked to watch.” His smile was just the slightest bit crooked, and she ignored the extra little thud of her heart when she acknowledged to herself how cute she found that. His next words, though, weren’t cute at all.

“I’d like to watch right now—to watch you come.”

She inhaled, her breath shaky. He had no idea how potent he was, this self-assured man with more depth than anyone expected him to have. She might even have been fooled herself, if she couldn’t see the gleam of ruthlessness that had come into his eyes in the last few minutes, the same one she’d seen when his twin had tried to claim her.

She had no doubt that most of the world had been lulled into thinking he was easygoing, but she'd uncovered his secret—once he set his mind on something, he would pursue it until he was triumphant. She was only too happy to give herself over to what she was pretty sure were going to be entirely capable hands.

Silently, she made her way to the bed. Arching her back to give him the best view, she knelt on the bed. Gathering her long black hair, she tied it into a knot to show off the arch of her spine, the muscles of her back. She intended to drop down to all fours, to crawl across the bed and tantalize him, but before she could, he was there, his fully clothed front to her naked back.

Saying nothing, he traced a single finger down her spine. The light touch reverberated outward, waking nerve endings she hadn't known were asleep. Leaning back, she savored the sensation of his hard chest pressed against her, then gasped when he slid both hands around to rest, palm down, on the flat expanse of her belly.

“What do you like?” He held her close as he stilled, so still that she could feel the thump of his heartbeat through his chest. She wiggled impatiently against him, but he remained frozen, holding her in place.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

“Less talking, more moving.” When he remained immovable, she huffed out a breath of impatience. “I like all kinds of things. Why? What do you like?”

A gasp escaped her as his hands moved to her hips, urging her to bend over. She did, stretching her arms out in front of her, her spine elongated with rear canted into the air. He bent over her, pinning her in place, and she savored the weight of him, pressing her down into the mattress.

“I like sex.” The wet heat of his voice fanned out over her ear, and she trembled. “That’s what I like.”

“Isn’t that a given?” She heard the quiver in her voice, fought to smooth it out. “I mean, isn’t that why we’re here?”

“Maybe I’m not making myself clear.” His voice was low, amused, shades darker than it had been before she’d been naked and beneath him. “When it comes to sex, I like everything.”

“Nobody likes everything.” Her voice was breathless, but there was no room for air, not when everything in her core had gathered low and tight. “What’s your favorite position? What’s your most wicked fantasy? What do you want me to do right now?”

She gasped when he slowly inched his hands up, smoothing over her flesh until they cupped her breasts. She pressed forward into the touch, aching for more.

“You’re being very specific.” His breath fanned over the top of her head. “I don’t know how to explain it further. Whatever your favorite position is? Right now, that’s

my favorite, too. Your most wicked fantasy? Also mine.”

Squeezing her breasts lightly, he flicked the tips between his forefingers and thumbs, the touch combined with her piercings sending shock waves of need through her.

“And what I want you to do right now?” He pressed a warm, openmouthed kiss to the base of her skull. Amy had never known that the shallow indent could be an erogenous zone. “I want you to tell me what you want.”

“I want...” The words, so vibrant in her head, choked when they hit her tongue.

What was wrong with her? She’d never had trouble telling her partners exactly what she did—and didn’t—want. Why couldn’t she spit it out right now?

Maybe...maybe because there was something happening here that she couldn’t put a name to. Something that went beyond a one-night stand.

“I want...” She tried again, then cleared her throat. She wasn’t going to let fear keep her from what she really wanted, right this moment. “I want...you.”

“Jesus.” Before she could say another word, inhale another breath, she found herself flat on her back. She cried out when he tugged her hips toward the edge of the mattress, then knelt on the floor between her spread legs. He made no secret of the intensity with which he studied her center, sending a warm flush over her skin.

His gaze tracked up over her stomach, her breasts, her neck and face to her eyes. When their eyes met, her pulse skittered. Her brain told her that whatever was about to happen was going to change her, but she couldn’t—wouldn’t—stop.

His hands clasped her on either side of her waist, then slid down. He traced the outsides of her thighs, down to her knees, then moved over and back up the inner

planes. When his fingers brushed her outer lips, she shivered, feeling the burn of his skin right through the satin.

He kept his eyes on her face as he lowered his mouth and pressed it to her mound, over her thong. She tensed, shifted her weight beneath him, desperate for more.

“I think what you want me to do right now is to kiss you right here. Over and over, until you come.” She felt his words as vibrations on her sensitized flesh. “That means it’s what I want, too.”

She wanted to reply, to say something that would break through some of the erotic and emotional tension in the room, but her throat was too dry to speak. Instead she nodded, the movement almost frantic.

She closed her eyes, letting her head fall back on the cool sheets as he hooked a finger in the skimpy strings on either side of her thong. She lifted her hips without being told, letting him tug the fabric over her hips and down. He took the time to rub each ankle, each foot as he unhooked them from the garment, finally tossing it to the floor.

She was naked now, completely so. She’d been naked with others before, but she’d never felt this exposed. When he started to trail a finger in looping lines over the flesh of her inner thigh, she knew that he was tracing the lines of the flowers inked there, a single thorny stem that branched out into two red roses in bloom.

Nobody had ever taken the time to admire her ink like this before, not beyond a question or comment or two. It did something to her, knowing he was taking the time to appreciate something that was so intrinsically part of her.

She just hoped he didn’t take the time to admire all her other tattoos, not right now. She had enough that it could take all night, and she was running out of patience fast.

Finally. Finally he lowered his head. She opened her eyes long enough to catch the greenfire in his eyes just before he placed his mouth on her naked skin.

She gasped as he kissed her, long and slow and wet. His fingers joined his mouth, holding her open so that he could swipe his tongue through her folds. He worked his way up one side, then down the other. Her fingers fisted in the sheets until finally he focused his attention on her clit. She gasped as he moved his tongue over the swollen nub, over and over until her body clenched with the sheer pleasure of it.

“You like that.” He hummed with approval, sending shivers through her sensitive flesh, then returned to the long, slow strokes of his tongue. Pleasure slid through her, slow and sinuous like sun on a warm day. She wanted to bask in it, but heat gathered quickly, low and tight in her core. How had he driven her to the edge so fast? It was like he already knew her body, every place to touch that made her gasp and sigh and pant.

“Good girl.” Pulling back for a moment, his face wet with her desire, he grinned up at her. “Give us what we both want.”

She made a small sound, deep in her throat, as he returned to his work, swirling his tongue around the center of her pleasure, over and over again. If anyone else had called her a good girl, especially when she’d given him the gift of her submission, she would have had her clothes on and been out the door in the next breath. But when Fred said it, she understood that he was actually demonstrating his appreciation for her giving in to the moment. For her submission, though she felt as though she should chafe at the word.

Fred growled. Grabbing her hips, he yanked her even closer to the edge of the bed. Hooking her legs over his broad shoulders, he licked harder, faster, and within moments she was panting, riding that wicked edge of release. It sliced through her like a razor, leaving her gutted and exposed.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

Her thighs trembled as he caught her behind each knee, lowering her pelvis gently back to the mattress. Scrambling up the bed on shaky limbs, she settled back on her elbows as he got to his feet.

“Is it my turn to watch now?” Her voice felt as though it was coming from someone else entirely, someone who hadn’t just had the biggest orgasm of her life.

“If that’s what you want.” His smile was wicked as he moved to stand at the end of the bed. Grabbing at the back of the neck of his T-shirt he slowly, slowly pulled it up and off. When he tossed it to the ground, a sound of pure appreciation purred from her lips.

“Wow.” Her mouth went dry, and she swallowed painfully as she took in the view in front of her.

“See something you like?” He stood still, letting her drink in the sight. She’d been attracted to his lean frame from first sight, but she’d had no idea that his sweater had been hiding muscles like these. His shoulders were broad, his chest defined. Ripples of incredibly defined ab muscles led the way to a flat stomach that she wanted to lick.

The thing that really made her drool, though, was the smattering of hair on the tight, flat skin of his lower abdomen. His hipbones were sharply defined, like arrows, and wherever they led was a place she wanted to go.

As she watched, he undid the button at his waistband, giving her another inch. Then came the zipper, and the metallic rasp in the otherwise still air was the sexiest thing she’d ever heard, full of promise.

He worked his jeans down until they hung around his hips. Beneath he wore black boxer briefs, and his swollen cock pressed through the slit in the front.

“More.” She swallowed, transfixed by the sneak peek of that rigid flesh. “I want more.”

“Good girl,” he said for the second time that night, and again, she didn’t mind. In fact, when said in this man’s decadent voice, she fucking loved it. She was a good dirty girl, and she wanted to please him so that he would please her. “I like the way you’re looking at me.”

“I can’t help it.” She groaned when he slid his boxers down, too, working everything down to the ground, where he stepped out of his clothes and kicked them aside. “I want you.”

“What do you want, exactly?” Eyes still on her, he wrapped his large hand around his equally big erection. She thought she might self-combust when he slid his hand up and down, and then again, fisting himself just for her. “This? Is this what you want?”

“Yes.” The word came out on a hiss. She watched as he climbed onto the bed, kneeling overtop of her, one knee on either side of hers. He was still stroking himself, and now that he was closer, she could see the droplet of arousal, shiny against the stretched skin of the head of his cock. Before she knew what she was doing, she’d pushed herself to a sitting position and reached out for him. She ran a thumb through the dampness, then brought it to her lips. Salt and musk ran over her tongue as she licked the digit, smiling at the curse he muttered in return.

“You little witch.” He watched as she fisted her sweaty hands in the cool sheets, restless and desperate, watching as he retrieved a condom from the jeans he’d tossed to the floor. Tearing into the foil with his teeth, he removed the tube of latex. Pinching the tip, he placed the ring over the head of his cock, then rolled it down the

thick length. She thought she might stroke out from the sight, and from the fact that he hadn't even asked if she wanted him to use one—he just did it.

Bending at the waist, he prowled over her, forcing her to lie back, her head on the pillows. He braced himself above her, though she was caged in by the defined arms on either side of her head. She arched her hips up to meet his, and they both moaned at the delicious contact.

She expected him to slide inside her then—was desperate for him to do just that. What she was not prepared for was a kiss—and what a kiss it was. Tangling long fingers through the raven-dark ribbons of her dreads, he tugged gently as he took her mouth roughly, awakening nerve endings in both places. She gasped into his mouth as her tongue met his own, as he explored her lips, her teeth, like he might never get the chance to again.

He kissed her until something liquid and golden began to flow through her veins, an ambrosia that mixed with the need that was riding her to become the most exquisite kind of longing she'd ever experienced. She couldn't look away from those brilliant, bottle green eyes when they finally broke the kiss, breathing on her own a strange sensation after inhaling as one.

Reaching between them, he lined up his rigid shaft with her swollen heat, rubbing the tip back and forth through her wetness. One thrust of his hips and he was in, moving slowly but steadily forward until he'd hilted inside her.

“Jesus.” She rocked her hips up against him and had the pleasure of watching his eyes cross. “You’re big everywhere, aren’t you?”

He huffed out a laugh as he lowered his torso over hers. The friction of her pierced nipples against his chest sent a jolt through her system, and she arched up against him, seeking more. Bracing his weight on one arm, he used the other to cup one of

her aching breasts, his fingers toying with its tip. She could have stayed like that all night, the twin jolts of pleasure-pain working her to a frenzy, but he shifted inside her. She caught her breath at the new angle.

“That’s it,” he murmured as she reached up to clutch at his back, her fingers digging into the muscle until he hissed. The dark glittering of his eyes that accompanied the sound told her he liked it, so she did it again, raking her nails down his back as he started to move more insistently inside her. “Come for me.”

“I think it’s your turn.” Still, she clung to him as sensation started to tighten in her core once again. Releasing her breast, he worked his hands between her ass and the bed. He cupped the globes of flesh, pulling her so tightly against him that she gasped, then rolled. His cock inside her touched nerve endings she hadn’t even known she had as he settled on his back with her astride him. She felt his hot stare on her breasts like a touch as his hands found her hips.

Wrapping long fingers around each curve, he urged her to move, faster and then faster still. She did with quick movements of her hips that had her clit grazing the flat plane of his pelvis with each thrust.

Her pace quickly became erratic as sparks lit at the tips of her fingers, in her toes and in her center. They heated, bursting into flame as they moved inward, bathing her body with heat. When they reached her core, she shuddered as all the small flames combined to form one, a great fire that roared to life and swallowed her whole.

She shuddered through one orgasm, and when she would have slid off Fred, boneless from release, he found her clit with his thumb, circling quickly and wringing one more wave from her body. This time, as she clenched around him, slick and tight, he let go, too. His hands on her hips urged her on as he thrust up into her heat, a dozen thrusts made sloppy by the drive for release. He shouted as he came, and when she would have closed her eyes, he met her stare with his own. She couldn’t look away as

their bodies moved in sync, shuddering through the most intense joining she'd ever experienced.

They each stilled, still joined, skin damp with sweat. She still couldn't look away from him, bound by some invisible thread, the same one that had led her to see him across the club, to approach him, to come here to his hotel.

Since her first few relationships, she'd understood that what drew people to one another wasn't always equal. There were a million different shades of attraction, of like and love and lust. She didn't believe in soul mates, either, the notion that there was only one special person out there that could complete her. Instead she thought it likely that there was more than one person in the world who could brighten her life, even if it wasn't forever. She also understood, however, that that kind of connection, the bone-deep pull toward another human, was rare. Incredibly so.

And now here she was, in her early twenties in Amsterdam, on a trip that was supposed to be full of fun and exploration, and one of those bonds had sneaked up to slap her in the face.

She wanted it, craved it and wasn't even a little bit ready for it.

Finally closing her eyes, she broke the physical link, sliding off him to lie down on the bed. She listened to him rise, pad across the floor to dispose of the condom, sip from a bottle of water, then climb back into the bed with her. She kept her eyes averted as he lay on his side, pulling her in close to him, their chests touching.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

She wanted to run even as she craved the feel of his skin on hers.

Taking in the bursts of light and sound from the street that cut through the darkness of the room intermittently, she lay there with her pulse pounding. She could feel him watching her but kept her gaze focused on his chest. She didn't want to see her own spinning thoughts staring back at her from someone else's eyes.

That...what they'd just done...that was more than sex. That had been life-changing.

She didn't want her life changed.

"What do you want?" His breath was cool on her damp forehead.

She couldn't bring herself to reply, so she shook her head instead.

"I want something," he started, shifting closer on the bed. She could smell his skin, his sweat, the heady miasma of sex in the air. "I want to know your name. I want to know it more than anything in the world."

How was it possible that he didn't know her name? That he didn't know her birthday, or how many sisters she had? How could he not know all the things that outlined her life, when he'd just looked inside her, down to the rhythm of her heart inside her chest, and had seen everything that made her who she was?

If she gave him her name, it would take this to another level. One she wasn't ready for. Rather than replying, she gave a purposefully sleepy hum and pretended to fall asleep.

She lay still for a long time, savoring the sensation of his skin on hers. When his breathing deepened, the body against hers relaxing into sleep, she slipped out of the bed slowly, carefully, so that she didn't wake him up.

She shivered as she picked up the discarded items of her clothing, the night air cool on skin that had so recently been hot and flushed from sex. She dressed quickly, but after she'd tugged on her boots, she indulged in one final look.

Awake, Fred was a force of nature, charisma coming off him in waves, charming those who came close enough to be tugged inward by his magnetic pull. Asleep, she could focus on the sheer physical perfection of him. That impossibly tall body, leanly muscled, that she'd quivered beneath. The aristocratic planes of his face, the fan of eyelashes on his cheeks, darker than the auburn of his hair. Redheads—gingers—were often the target of jokes in Europe, but as far as Amy was concerned, he couldn't have had any other coloring and been nearly as appealing.

She hadn't bothered donning her ruined thong when she dressed again, and it dangled from her finger as she took one last, lingering glance. If this had been anyone else, any other night of fun sex, she would have left it behind, a sexy little memento to fuel the fantasies of both parties for months to come. She considered this for a moment, then tucked it into her pocket.

Best not to leave any trace. Not this time.

It was time to go. With her hand on the doorknob, though, she paused and turned back. She argued with herself for a long moment, then gave in to her own rampant curiosity. With a quick glance at the bed, she hurried to his suitcase. Her fingers found the luggage tag quickly, even in the dark, and she waited for one of the lights from outside to break through the room so that she could see.

Fred Vaughan. Street address in a fancy part of Boston that she'd never even been to.

She'd already known he was from one of those families, the ones that bled blue beneath pampered skin, but seeing it confirmed gave her a little clutch around her heart.

Even if she wanted what had just happened to change her life—and she didn't—this would never work. Not outside the bedroom, no matter how earth-shattering it had been.

Dropping the tag, she swallowed thickly, then hurried back to the door. This time she didn't allow herself a look back at the man sleeping in the bed behind her, instead opening the door as quietly as she could before slipping through and jogging back to the elevator.

If her heart hurt a little as she left behind a connection she'd never encountered before? Well, that was nobody's fault but her own.

CHAPTER ONE

FRED VAUGHAN HAD walked by Four Sisters Ink a million times, but until now, he'd never been inside. He didn't relish his errand today, and the letter felt hot against the skin of his palm. To his way of thinking, the tenant the letter was intended for didn't deserve it, but he'd drawn the short stick, so here he was.

Despite the letter, he wasn't actually sure what he was about to encounter. He'd never been in one, but when he thought tattoo parlor, his brain conjured images of walls covered in graffiti, chairs with naked people getting skulls and broken hearts etched indelibly on their skin. Blaring metal music, drugs and alcohol. Looking down at his seven-hundred-dollar Italian leather shoes, he acknowledged that he was likely going to stick out from the moment he walked in. Rather than the expected metal music, though, soft bells chimed overhead as he entered, brushing the top of his head since he'd forgotten to duck. He paused just inside the door, blinking, as he tried to make

expectation merge with reality.

This—the interior of Four Sisters Ink—was a surprise. A shock.

He was familiar with the basic blueprint—every space in the plaza offered similar bones. Four walls, a soaring ceiling, laminate flooring that mimicked hardwood remarkably well and would hold up to traffic far better. Since its opening, he'd been impressed with the way each business had taken the basic space and made it into its own, but this...this struck him as something special.

Each of the four walls was a different soothing color—ivory, soft pink, mauve, creamy orchid. The shifting palette of colors added visual interest yet was simple enough to not take away from the gallery walls. Each wall was hung, floor to ceiling, with elegantly arranged art. With that many frames, he expected them to be plastic, purchased in bulk from some big box store, but when he looked closer, he noted that each slender square was wood, the grain visible through a walnut stain.

Again, he was surprised, and also a little bit impressed, something that wasn't all that easy to do. Not as a member of his family.

Taking a few steps farther inside, he squinted, examining the walls, and saw that the pieces were grouped by type—something he thought was oil paint, watercolor, pastel and ink. Displaying them in homogenous groups was eye-catching in a subtle yet deliberate way, much like the different-colored walls.

Whoever owned Four Sisters Ink knew what she was doing.

Charcoal, dove gray and cream paper lanterns were clustered overhead, with small white fairy lights snaking around them. The fairy lights should have looked cheap, like the interior of a college dorm room, but they were charming instead. A massive bamboo room divider cut the room in half, adding to the bohemian vibe, and the

whole place smelled like a spa, some kind of diffuser puffing away in a corner to cover up the very faint scent of rubbing alcohol that he could still detect. The music was quiet but energetic, and after he cocked his head to listen, he recognized an '80s classic by Rick Astley, which shouldn't have worked with the serene space but somehow did.

Against his better judgment, he was impressed. He didn't want to be impressed. It wouldn't help what he was here to do.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

“Be with you in a moment!” The female voice was low and husky. Something in it caught his attention, snagged at his memory. Turning toward the back of the shop, he watched the hints of movement behind the latticed room divider. He took a step back, looking around the room at the range of art, which suddenly seemed familiar, too.

This couldn’t possibly be what his brain was suddenly insistent that it was. But then the woman came around the corner—a woman he’d never forget.

She blinked, and he saw what he was feeling reflected back at him from her face—for a moment, at least. Then her expression shuttered, and he was left reeling.

“You’re Amy Marchande?” He winced as he spoke—he sounded like an idiot. But his mind was whirling, past and present colliding in neon color...at least, until she spoke again.

“What are you doing here?” She frowned, crossing her arms over her chest. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, taking a moment to look at her—just to look.

Her shop might look more like a spa than a tattoo parlor, but she fit his image of a stereotypical tattoo artist perfectly. She was tall and slender, with a slim waist and hips and breasts that he knew damn well fit perfectly in his palms. Her skin, naturally a pale white, was covered in ink, most of it black and white, with the exception of some watercolor flowers. More ink than he remembered.

The biggest difference from past to present was her hair. Last time he’d seen her, she’d worn it in inky-black curls that reached her waist. Now it was a golden color

that he suspected was natural, loose curls that barely reached her chin, as though she was growing it out.

As he stared, he noticed two more things. One, she wasn't wearing a bra beneath her thin white cotton tank top. And two, she still had barbells pierced through her nipples. He had a bright flash of memory, of one of those decorations caught in his teeth as she writhed on top of him, and perspiration broke out along his hairline.

"Why are you here?" She arched a thin, groomed eyebrow. Her smirk told him she'd noticed his perusal of her body. He also noticed that she didn't give him one in return. "How are you here? Five years is a bit long to wait before you start stalking somebody."

Seeing her again was a vibrant, memory-drenched blow to his solar plexus. Seeing him again, though? She didn't seem fazed at all. Irritated, if anything.

"Uh..." For a moment he was tongue-tied, swallowing against a suddenly dry mouth. He didn't know what to do with himself, and that was unusual for him.

He couldn't say that he cared for it, either.

"I'm assuming this isn't a social call?" She cast him that challenging little curve of her lips again, the one that made him want to give her mouth something better to do.

"What do you mean?" He smiled at her assuredly, the same smile he used in the courtroom. As he did, he slipped the warning letter from Vaughan Enterprises into the inner pocket of his suit jacket. He hadn't felt great about delivering it before he'd walked in, and he'd be damned if he was going to be the one to give the bad news to the one woman he hadn't been able to get out of his mind since their one night together, five years ago.

He needed to think about this.

“It means that I highly doubt you’re here for anything I have to offer.” She laced her hands behind her back, then stretched, and it was difficult to keep his mind on the conversation, rather than her breasts and their naughty adornments.

“Why would you assume that?” He frowned, vaguely insulted. “Maybe I am here for a tattoo. Why else would I be here?”

She frowned slightly, and it was his turn to smirk—he’d stumped her. Then she shrugged and pointed at one of her walls with a graceful arm.

“That’s the inspiration wall.” She smiled benignly as she called his bluff. “Those are ink renderings of the best of the tattoos that I’ve done. Pick out a few you like and we’ll work out a design for you.”

“Ah...” He felt his eyes widen as he stumbled over his words. Damn it.

“Unless you already know what you want?” She cocked her head, studying him, clearly amused. She was enjoying this.

“Oh, I know what I want.” He slid his hands into the pockets of his suit pants, then fixed his gaze on her. The cocky set of her lips faded, and unless he was very much mistaken, she exhaled slowly.

“Well, then.” She ran a tongue over those full lips, and he was again transported back in time. He remembered looking down at her as those petal-inked curves wrapped around his cock. “Why wait? Let’s get you in the chair and get started.”

“Don’t you already have someone back there?” He looked past Amy to the room divider, saw the movements of someone still back there.

“Oh, Sallie’s done for today.” Her smile was a swallowed-the-canary smirk. “Lucky for you.”

“You know, I need to think about my, ah, design a bit more.” He nodded, punctuating his words. Gone was the collected lawyer, the reserved man with roots dating back to the Mayflower, just at being around her. How was it that she could still do that?

“Sure you will.” She continued to watch him with that unnerving stare, and he felt himself respond, something sparking along his skin. He met her gaze, his own green eyes looking into her blue ones—a deep navy blue, startlingly dark against her porcelain skin.

He sucked in a breath. As he did, he thought he saw her do the same, and he understood. He hadn’t seen her—hadn’t touched her—in years, but that animal attraction they’d experienced on their first and only night together had transcended time. He wanted her again—still.

“I’ll be back,” he repeated firmly, and he knew that his meaning was clear. He’d be back not for a tattoo, but for her.

Thoroughly unsettled, he turned on his heel, heading for the door. His entire world had been turned upside down in the space of ten minutes, and he needed to go think on how the hell he was going to manage this.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

“Hey.” Her voice stopped him with one foot out the door. Melodious brass bells tinkled over his head as he paused, looking back at where she still stood. “The only thing you wanted that night was to know my name. I guess now you do.”

“That wasn’t the only thing I wanted.” He felt the satisfaction of watching her flush, a cloud of pink infusing that porcelain skin. A tendril of triumph snaked through him, letting him edge closer to the control he craved. He scrambled his way back onto solid ground. He winked at her, then exited Four Sisters Ink. Once outside, he exhaled a deep breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

He’d gone to serve Four Sisters Ink with an official warning from Vaughan Enterprises Retail Plaza. Other vendors had circulated a petition protesting the presence of a tattoo shop among the luxury stores and upscale restaurants. As the in-house lawyer, it was up to him to inform the proprietor.

That the proprietor was the woman he’d had an epic, nameless (on her side, at least), European one-night stand with years ago? A night he’d never been able to get out of his mind?

Fate was a cruel bitch. And he was absolutely, completely, one hundred percent fucked.

CHAPTER TWO

AMY SAT ON the wicker bench that she’d placed outside the entrance to her shop on the day she’d opened. In her hand was a cold bottle of beer that she’d taken from the minifridge in her back room. Open alcohol wasn’t allowed in the open-air plaza,

not outside the restaurants, but it was after hours, twilight settling in. Also, she just didn't really care.

The slight buzz allowed her to let go of the tension that had been riding her since her surprise visitor earlier. Her feelings were still a hot tangle, and she didn't know how she would even begin to sort through the snarl.

Fred freaking Vaughan. She'd started her business five years ago out of a cramped room in Boston's Jamaica Plain. She'd sought out a new location because she'd wanted to have a space to display her paper and canvas artwork as well as the designs that she inked onto skin. The fancy seaside shopping plaza had been an unlikely location for a tattoo shop, but she'd known what she wanted and had moved in six months ago. It had been a gamble, but it had paid off in spades. Her clientele now ranged from serious ink junkies to celebrities who booked their time with her months in advance. Her neighbors in the luxury plaza didn't love her presence there, but that wasn't her problem.

What was her problem, though? The fact that she apparently leased her space from the one man she'd never been able to get out of her mind.

Vaughan Enterprises. Fred Vaughan. She'd never put that together, but why would she have? Vaughan was a common enough name, and their tryst had occurred an ocean away. The chance that they'd come back into one another's lives was infinitesimally small.

And yet, there he'd been, standing in the entrance to her shop, as commanding as if he owned the place. Which, she supposed, he kinda did.

She'd looked up Vaughan Enterprises after he'd left. It was a family empire that had existed for three generations. They owned retail spaces, mostly malls and shopping plazas, all over the Eastern Seaboard. Fred Vaughan and his twin, Frank, were

members of the youngest generation—Fred a high-powered in-house lawyer, and his identical twin some kind of acquisitions wizard.

She'd met them both that long-past night in Europe. It had amazed her that she could be faced with mirror-image faces, matching lean and lanky bodies, and only feel a gut punch of attraction to one.

Sipping her beer, she let her mind wander back to that night, something she rarely allowed herself. She'd been in Amsterdam on a sponsored, six-month tattoo internship. Sponsored was a loose term, too—she'd had an online flirtation with the sponsoring artist. He'd invited her to visit, to learn under him in more ways than one. He'd been far more interesting online than in person, however, so she'd broken off the romantic part of their arrangement after a month. She'd stayed on with the artistic side, learning from someone who might have been a crappy lover but was indeed a talented artist.

She'd been poor as hell, living in a hostel down the street from the shop some nights, sleeping on her tattoo chair others. Poor didn't mean miserable, though—she'd loved Amsterdam, the freedom of it, the fact that no one looked at her strangely for being a white girl with dreaded hair, or for having more skin that was inked than not. Nobody cared if she went home with boys or with girls or with both. She'd had the time of her life, exploring who she really was.

This was why she'd been so surprised to find herself in one of her favorite bars, part of a group of people that included, for that evening at least, two American travelers...one of whom caught her eye the way none of the free-spirited locals or Zen backpackers already had. She remembered sidling over to the pair, who were attracting no end of attention with their six-foot-four-inch heights and dark red hair, but there had really only been one for her.

There had only been Fred.

Footsteps sounded, pulling her back from her reminiscing. She took another large gulp of beer before sitting up straight on the bench, anticipation coursing through her veins.

A large herd of men in suits tended to strut by her shop about an hour after the plaza closed for the evening. Her space was near the entrance/exit that was closest to the executive parking lot, and she imagined that they were returning to their leased Mustangs, ready to jet off for dinner with pedigreed fiancées or clandestine town house meetings with mistresses. None of her business, and she'd never before cared.

Not until this afternoon, when it had occurred to her that Fred might be one of these suits. Though if he'd walked past her before, she wasn't sure how she hadn't noticed him.

She cocked her head to listen, her heart in her throat. One set of footprints approached—just one. She held her breath as Fred Vaughan came into view—he was unaccompanied.

Somehow, she'd known he would come. And she'd known he would be alone.

“Open alcohol on plaza premises is a seventy-five-dollar fine.” He stopped in front of her, hands in the pockets of his suit pants. At five foot ten, she was a tall woman, but being seated while she looked up at his impressive height made her feel like a dainty fucking flower.

“You going to report me?” Lifting her beer to her lips, she took a large, deliberate swallow. He watched her, and she looked at him, letting her stare rake over him the way she hadn't earlier.

In her memory, he wore worn jeans and a T-shirt an outfit that had let him blend in well enough with everyone else. Now, he was wearing a suit that fit him so well she

was certain it was custom-made. And she couldn't deny that he wore the hell out of it.

Her mouth went dry, so she took another sip of her drink. She was surprised—shocked, even—when he reached out and tugged the beer bottle out of her hand.

“Cockblocking my good time.” She shook her head in mock exasperation. “Figures.”

Rather than pitching it in the nearby trash can, as she expected him to, he merely arched an eyebrow and took a drink himself. She found herself transfixed to see his lips press against the glass where hers had just been. The way the muscles of his throat moved as he swallowed made her mouth water.

Shit. She was in so, so much trouble.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

“If I remember correctly, I didn’t block your good time.” He handed the bottle back to her, and her skin sizzled when his long fingers brushed against hers. “I made it even better.”

Shit.

“You weren’t here earlier because you want a tattoo,” she blurted out, caught off guard by the punch of unadulterated lust. “I call bullshit.”

“You got me.” The hand that had been holding her beer reached up, loosening the knot of his tie. He followed up the movement by unbuttoning the top two buttons of his dress shirt, and Amy fought back a whimper.

What the hell was it about him? She’d been with men. She’d been with women. She’d had some good sex and some great sex.

So what was it about this particular man? She wanted him now like she’d wanted him five years ago. And she’d never been particularly good at denying herself the things that she wanted.

“Why were you here, then?” She stood up, trying to gain more control over the situation. Since he still had six inches on her, all it did was bring her right into his kinesphere.

It still made her shiver.

“Five years ago, you kept your name a secret from me.” He spoke in slow, measured

words, stare on her face. “No matter how much I begged. I think it’s my turn to keep a secret.”

“The difference being that I won’t beg.” Amy heard the breathlessness in her own words, felt promise shiver up her spine as his light green eyes darkened to the color of sea glass. He reached out with one of those massive palms of his, traced a finger along the curve of her jaw.

“I think your memory is failing you.” His finger moved over her chin, up to press against her lips. Her tongue darted out, swiping over it, tasting the salt of his skin. It made need tighten in her core. “I’ve made you beg before. And I promise you, I can make it happen again.”

CHAPTER THREE

AMY SET HER beer down on the bench, then took his hand and led him inside Four Sisters. He sniffed for the spa-like scent he’d detected earlier. The diffuser-type thing still puffed away in the corner, but she’d changed the scent to something smokier. Something that made him think of sex.

Who was he kidding? Just being in the same room as her made him think of sex.

His back was to the door. When she turned back to slide the dead bolt on the door home, her chest brushed against him. He thought of those damn barbells in her nipples and was hard in an instant, a fact he couldn’t have hidden and didn’t want to, the way his pelvis was flush against the flat planes of her stomach.

“Well, well.” Her voice was soft and rough, reminding him of the mountains he’d trekked on the same trip where he’d met her. “Looks like I might not be the one doing the begging after all.”

“To hell with that.” Bending his knees, he cupped the curves of her delectable ass in his hands. She cried out when he lifted her right off her feet. Her legs twined around his waist as he carried her forward through her shop. She groaned, rocking her lithe body against his, and he swore under his breath when he felt her molten core make contact with his rock-solid length.

He carried her past the bamboo room divider, then deposited her in her tattoo chair. It was black leather with a headrest and was already reclined—it couldn’t have been more perfect. She landed on her knees, reaching up for him, tugging on the knot of his tie until it came loose. He let it fall to the floor as she reached for the zipper of his suit pants. His eyes crossed when her nimble fingers brushed against the head of his cock.

“Liked that, did you?” Her voice was a self-satisfied hum as she reached into his trousers and wrapped around his erection. “Jesus.”

“You can call me that any time you want.” He huffed out a breath as she explored his length, working gently up and down.

“I’d say you have a big head.” She circled a thumb over his tip, caught the droplet of moisture beading there. “But is it a big head if it’s justified?”

“Fuck.” He halted his movements for a moment to let her play. Arousal built at the base of his spine as she danced those elegant fingers over his shaft. Finally he could take it no more and moved back, out of her reach.

“You’re playing with fire,” he warned her as he undid the buttons of his work shirt. He felt her avid gaze as he worked it over his wide shoulders, then let it fall to the floor. With her eyes on him, he lowered his pants, his underwear until they were around his hips, then wrapped his own hand around the base of his cock. “Undress for me. Now.”

“Bossy as ever, aren’t you?” Her words were a challenge, but her movements weren’t. Still on her knees, she fisted her hands in the hem of her tank top, then lifted it up and over her head, tossing it across the room. He groaned as her breasts filled his vision, those magnificent, adorned breasts that had haunted both his dreams and his nightmares.

“I want to come on those fantastic tits,” he promised her, running his hand up and then down his erection. Her avid gaze followed the movements as she cupped her own breasts in her hands, squeezing them together.

“Do it.” Her voice was breathless and she climbed from the chair, setting her feet on the floor. In one quick movement, she’d worked her torn jeans down over her hips, all the way down the floor. She stepped out, then stood before him, blissfully naked, her decorated skin open to his gaze.

The piercings through her nipples were something he remembered, but there was a hoop in her navel that was new. He watched her run her hands over her torso, tugged on the barbells, and knew that he wasn’t going to last long. Not when the object of every fantasy he’d had for the past five years was here in front of him, tantalizing him in the flesh.

Without speaking, he closed the space between them. Rather than pushing her down into the chair, he sat down himself. Reaching for her slim waist, he tugged her toward him, arranging her knees on either side of his.

“Next time,” he promised as he lay back, tugging her astride him until she balanced on her knees, which rested on either side of his hips. “Right now I need you to ride me. Ride my cock until you scream.”

She gasped, fire sparking in her blue eyes. Sliding up his body, she took him in her hand, then pressed the head of his arousal against her wet slit. She was wet and hot

and he couldn't help himself—he arched his hips upward, his swollen head working its way inside her far enough to make her gasp at the intrusion.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

“Fuck.” Her voice was a moan. Her head lolled back as she clenched around him. She was tight, even tighter than he remembered, so he dug his fingers into the flesh of her hips and willed himself to be patient.

She shocked the hell out of him when she pressed herself downward. She took three-quarters of his length in with one movement, sending stars spinning in his vision. She bore down, beads of sweat breaking out along her forehead, but seemed stuck until he slid a hand between them, rubbing his large thumb over the center of her pleasure.

She cried out, melting around him, and he seated himself inside her. They froze for a moment, his green eyes looking into her blue, as though neither could believe that this was finally happening, after so many years and so many dirty, filthy dreams.

She seemed at a loss for words, and he understood that this wasn't usual for her. He loved that, loved being the one to make this incredibly strong, mouthy woman lose control.

Circling his thumb over her clit, he watched her eyes blur, then took over all control.

“Move.” He surged upward into her and savored the vibration of her gasp. “Move on me.”

He expected her to argue, to open that sassy mouth. A delicious thrill skirted down his spine when she did nothing of the sort, instead doing what he'd ordered and feeding into his arousal.

He worked her clit with his thumb until he felt her tighten around him, her knees

digging into his sides, her heat holding him tight. He moved faster, harder, and when she clenched around him and cried out, satisfaction that he'd brought her pleasure brought his own arousal soaring sky-high.

Before she could regain her senses, he slid his hands up to her waist and over her rib cage to cup her breasts. Fuck, but he'd dreamed of these fantastic tits of hers. Never in his life had he considered himself even the least bit wild—the Vaughan family didn't do wild—but something about those heavy mounds of flesh, with the silver barbells piercing her taut nipples—it turned him on like nothing he'd ever experienced before.

He couldn't help himself. Catching the adornments in his fingers, he tugged on them and watched her eyes cross as the pleasure-pain swept over her. She shuddered, and he rolled her nipples in his fingers. Without warning, she cried out again, the cleft between her legs contracting and squeezing his cock so tightly that he couldn't hold out anymore.

His orgasm started at the base of his spine, spreading outward until his entire body was caught in the throes of pleasure. He rode the waves with his stare fastened on hers, the two of them shuddering as they came together, each of them ratcheting the other higher with just the memories and fantasies that hovered in the thick, sex-smelling air between them.

Earlier that afternoon, he'd left Four Sisters Ink knowing that he was in trouble.

Now, as he urged the woman of his dreams to ride the last waves of her own pleasure on his cock, milking his own orgasm from his flesh...

He was pretty sure that his life was about to change forever.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHE REMEMBERED NOW.

She remembered why she'd run away from Fred that night so many years ago. She'd gone into the encounter thinking of sex as something fun, a physical release. Sex with Fred, however, had cracked open her rib cage and given him access to her trembling heart. If he'd taken that heart and squeezed it in a fist, she might have been able to tuck her emotions away again, but instead he'd cupped it tenderly, as though it was meant to be treasured.

It had scared the hell out of her and had sent her running away before he could do so much as cajole her name out of her, let alone a phone number. She hadn't thought she'd ever see him again, yet here he was.

Cracking her wide-open yet again. Nope, nope, nope.

"That was fun." She slid down off him, not an easy task given the sheer size of him. He propped himself up on his elbows, watching as she gathered her tank top and jeans and started to dress herself, movements brisk. "I've got work to do now, though."

She wasn't looking directly at him—that was rather like looking straight at the sun—but she watched his brow furrow in her peripheral vision. He moved slowly, languidly, as though he was feeling as sleepy and sated as she was.

Turning her head slightly, she watched as he hiked his pants back up to his waist, securing them with a fancy-looking leather belt. His stomach was flat, striped with more abs than a man who wore a suit for a living should have. His chest was also hard, dusted with reddish-gold hair, and the sheer size of everything about him made her mouth water all over again. It also had anxiety coiling in her stomach.

It might have been five years since that first encounter, but she didn't feel any more

ready for these feelings than she had back then. So even though she knew it wasn't great manners to kick him out right after sex—a reverse wham, bam, thank you ma'am—she needed some space, and she needed it now.

She opened her mouth to tell him he needed to go, but before she could get out a word, he closed the space between them. With two fingers underneath her chin, he claimed her mouth once again in a kiss, hot and wet and nearly as dirty as sex. Her brain short-circuited, so that when he stepped back, she could only blink up at him with dazed eyes.

“I'll see you soon.” It wasn't a question but a statement. He cast her that devastating grin that had once brought her to her knees, then turned on his heel and left her shop. The bells hanging in the doorway tinkled merrily as his head brushed the top of them—good Lord, he was tall.

And then he was gone. Her breath exhaled on a whoosh, and her knees suddenly felt like they could no longer support her. She sank down into her tattoo chair, rising again when something crinkled under her weight.

It was a sealed white envelope, the kind with the little plastic window in the front. Beneath that plastic was her name and the name of her shop, in official type.

She knew the envelope hadn't been there before Fred, so he must have left it, which seemed odd. Still, it had her name on it, so she shrugged and slit the paper open.

It was a letter printed on official Vaughan Enterprises letterhead, and signed, Fred Vaughan—In-House Counsel. She scanned the contents once, then returned to the beginning and read it again more slowly as her teeth started to grind together in irritation. By the time she pulled out her phone to FaceTime her sister Meg, she was ready to breathe fire.

“Uh-oh.” Meg’s face morphed from a happy smile to instant concern when she saw Amy’s expression. “What’s wrong?”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

“What would you do if you slept with someone and then found a letter from him kicking you out of your business location?”

“Shut up.” Meg’s gasp was all Amy needed to hear. “Is he still breathing?”

“I didn’t find it until after he left.” Amy frowned. “I don’t think he meant to leave it.”

“Hold up.” Meg put her phone down for a moment, and Amy heard the low rumble of her sister’s boyfriend John’s voice. When Meg reappeared, her cheeks were flushed. “Okay, what am I missing?”

“It seems that the mall I leased my space from is owned by the family of a guy I had a one-night stand when I was in Europe.” Pushing off from the chair, Amy started to pace. “I had no idea until he came in today. When I recognized him, he said he wanted a tattoo, but I’m guessing he was here to give me this letter.”

“Why the hell would he be kicking you out?” Meg’s brow furrowed. “You’re booked solid. You bring people in.”

“Seems the other retailers don’t like my aesthetic.” Amy smiled without mirth. “They signed a petition.”

Meg swore, the colorful word echoing Amy’s own thoughts. Fred didn’t owe her anything, but to find out that he’d had this letter in his pocket when he’d pulled her astride him?

Not. Cool.

“What are you going to do?” Meg sank her teeth into her lower lip as she thought.

“TPing his office seems a bit juvenile, but it might be satisfying.” Amy smirked when her oldest sister snorted.

“Getting him drunk and tattooing a penis on his forehead is probably illegal, huh?” Meg rolled her eyes. “All the fun things are.”

“I think I need... I need some kind of event. Something that will bring in people, a lot of people, as a reminder of what I bring to this place.” Amy pursed her lips as she concentrated. “But also something that gets under his skin. Which shouldn’t be hard. He’s one of those uptight suits. No offense to John.”

“Mmm, those uptight suits are always the best in bed.” Meg sighed dreamily, stopping when she caught Amy’s pointed glare. “Sorry, kiddo. Thinking cap on. Um...if this was my catering company, I’d probably set something up outside the front door. Like a party, maybe. And advertise to draw people in.”

“A party,” Amy repeated as the idea took root in her mind. “I think you’re on to something. I have to think a bit. But I know one thing for sure.”

“What’s that?” On the screen, her sister bit into a cookie, reminding Amy that she hadn’t eaten since breakfast herself. She ignored the rumbles of her stomach, though, chasing the tendril of the idea before it floated away.

“He’s not going to be able to pretend that this letter doesn’t exist anymore.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“I STILL DON’T understand why you deleted that waitress’s number, man.” Andy, one of the new interns at Vaughan Enterprises, shook his head as he and Fred made

their way from the parking lot and into the plaza. “She was so hot.”

“I wasn’t interested,” Fred repeated, his teeth grinding together of their own accord. His father, Fred Sr., had tasked Fred with taking his new intern out for lunch to welcome him to the office. Fred hadn’t been thrilled, because the new guy grated on his nerves, but hey, it was part of his job.

If Andy—or was it Randy?—didn’t shut up about the waitress, or about hot chicks in general, though, Fred might just have to give in to the urge to dump the fresh grad into the nearby fountain.

“If you didn’t want her, you could have at least given her number to me,” Andy-Randy grumbled, flicking his thumb and forefinger together to the beat of music that was steadily growing louder as they walked. Fred recognized the song as Tiffany—it was going to be stuck in his head all day now. “I could have shown her a good time.”

“Are you serious?” Fred stopped in his tracks, looking down at the younger man and not bothering to hide the disgust on his face. “If she’d wanted you to have her number, then she would have given it to you. What is wrong with you?”

Andy-Randy rolled his eyes, then jerked his chin toward the first row of shops. “Hey, what’s going on over there?”

Fred followed the direction of his gaze. A long line of people snaked around a corner, some dancing to the music that was now loud and clear. He mentally ran through the list of nearby shops to think who could possibly have generated so much traffic. Not the luggage place, or the one that sold imported perfume and gave him a headache. The cupcakes at the bakery were actually pretty gross, so probably not them, either. Which left...

Amy. It left Amy.

Memories of the night before flooded his mind. The way she'd climbed astride him and taken what she wanted from him was the sexiest thing he'd experienced since...well, since her.

He wasn't overly bothered by the way she'd kicked him out immediately after, either. He'd felt it, too—that click between them. He'd felt it five years ago, just a flicker—a spark. Last night that spark had ignited, and he knew he wasn't the only one who'd felt it.

She'd needed some space, and he'd given it to her. But he'd be damned if he was going to let her push him away entirely. Anticipation quickened his steps—every cell in his body perked up at the thought of seeing her.

When they rounded the corner, he saw that the lineup indeed started at Four Sisters Ink. Amy was up to something. What was going on?

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

With Andy-Randy stuck to his side like a thorn, Fred inched his way toward the front of the line, looking for her. As he neared the front of the line, he noticed that everyone was glued to their phone. Not unusual, but he managed to catch a glimpse over a burly man's shoulder and saw what everyone was flipping through—black-and-white tattoo designs.

The anticipation he'd felt at the opportunity to see Amy was instantly tempered with the sudden flare of impending doom. He was pretty sure that, whatever she was up to, he wasn't going to like it. Trying to hide his wince, he inched forward through the thick throng of people until he saw what everyone was there for—her.

Even with the sudden caution signs blaring in his head, he couldn't help the knee-jerk punch of lust he felt just from looking at her. Today Amy wore a sorry excuse for shorts, the ripped and faded denim not leaving much to the imagination. With it she'd paired a pale pink tank top like the white one she'd had on yesterday and, even from here, he could tell that she was once again not wearing a bra.

He could have groaned out loud at the memory of those silver bars in his mouth, but he thought that was probably frowned upon in public. Or maybe not, because the young dude laid out in the chair she'd inexplicably dragged out front of her shop was clearly ignoring the view. His attention bounced between her gorgeous face, accentuated today with a slash of cherry-red lipstick, and the view he was getting through the front of her shirt as Amy inked something onto his chest. Before he could help himself, Fred had closed the rest of the distance between himself and Amy, leaving Andy-Randy behind.

“What's going on here?” He positioned himself between the crowd and Amy. With

his hands, he gestured to her entire sidewalk setup, but he was looking at Amy's lascivious would-be suitor.

"Back of the line, dude." The kid was maybe twenty-two, a hipster wearing skinny jeans and thick, plastic-rimmed glasses. Propping himself up on his elbows, he glared up at Fred, hyped up on the righteous indignation he'd probably picked up at his latest Save the Whales protest.

Arching an eyebrow, Fred looked down at the kid from his full height, smirking as the kid slowly melted back down into the chair. Pivoting, he turned his attention back to Amy...only to find that she hadn't even looked up from her work.

"Amy. What is this?" He was genuinely confused. She has a perfectly nice shop right behind her, so why on earth was she tattooing someone in the middle of the promenade? "Why are all these people here?"

"It's called an event, Mr. Vaughan." Finally, finally she looked up at him, her lips curved into a mocking smile. "It's a tattoo clinic. I posted ten simple designs on Instagram yesterday for a set price. Anyone who preordered one online can come in today and get it done, no matter how long I'm here."

"But...why?" He looked from her to the empty shop behind her, then back.

"I was curious." She looked up at him, and there was something in those deep blue eyes that he couldn't quite identify. "I wanted to see just how many people I could bring in on a whim. Wanted to make sure that I wasn't being a deadbeat tenant—you know, one who can't pull anyone in here to shop."

She jerked her chin across the way to the luxury luggage store to make her point. It was empty of customers, with a bored salesclerk perched on a sleek leather trunk as she tapped away on her phone.

A trickle of unease worked its way through Fred's gut at her words, which seemed like they were directly addressing...something. Slowly, he slid his hand into the pocket inside his suit jacket, feeling for the crinkle of the paper letter he'd been dragging his feet on delivering to her.

Shit. It wasn't there. Had she seen it? Was that what this was about?

He looked down at her, into those blue eyes that seemed to mock him for a long moment. Her expression revealed nothing, and after a minute he told himself that he was paranoid. This woman wasn't one who stood quietly by when she was upset. If she'd read the letter, she would have marched up to his office and slapped it on his desk.

Wouldn't she?

"Something on your mind?" She cocked her head as she looked up at him. That saucy smile made him want to run his thumb over the pillowy curves. "Ready for that tattoo, perhaps?"

"What time will you be done?" He took a step forward, deliberately moving into her space. He watched her chest quiver as she inhaled a quick breath, and he ached to place his mouth on hers...or elsewhere.

"Why do you ask?" Without looking at the young guy in her chair, she patted him on the shoulder to let him know he was done, then stood to face Fred. "Is this where you tell me that staying open after hours is against regulations?"

"It is against regulations," he said quietly, reaching out a single finger to trace over the line of her cheekbone. "But I suspect that you already know that."

"I might." Her look was full of challenge, and it called to him.

“Have dinner with me.” He made his words a challenge, too, knowing that if he showed just how much he wanted her—not even the sex, but just to be around her, absorbing her—she’d say no. A challenge, though? He was pretty sure she’d rise to that.

“Dinner?” Reaching for a bottle of water, she lifted it to her lips, and he found himself transfixed at the sight of a water droplet that missed her mouth. “Why would I want to have dinner with you?”

“Are you really going to play this game, Amy?” Lowering his hand, he swiped it through that drop of water, then lifted it to his lips. “You want me. I want you. We both need to eat. What are you afraid of?”

She narrowed her eyes as she finished the bottle of water, then stepped back. She cast a look at the long line of waiting people, as if considering, before turning back to him.

“I don’t know when I’ll be done.” He might have been hearing things, but he was pretty sure he heard a wisp of disappointment in her voice, though she covered it well. “I could be up all night.”

“That’s okay,” he replied, stepping away. Andy-Randy had finally found him and stood off to the side, watching the give and take with confusion on his face. Fred, though? His thoughts were perfectly clear.

“I’m pretty sure you’ll be worth waiting for.”

CHAPTER SIX

AMY’S ARMS ACHED as she hauled her chair back into her shop. Her wrists were sore, too, her hands numb from the vibration of the needles all day long. She usually

worked a full day, but those appointments were for bigger pieces of work. They were longer, with breaks built in.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

Today she'd inked images onto small swaths of skin, all of it detail work. It had been a damn successful day, even more than she'd anticipated when she'd thought up the promo. The success, and sizable chunk of change now in her pocket, had been secondary benefits, though. And the fact that she'd demonstrated, quite nicely, just how many people she could draw into the plaza at the snap of her fingers wasn't too shabby, either.

But at its core? The idea for the tattoo clinic had been conceived mostly to irritate Fred. To get under his skin. To kick back, a bit, at the fact that he'd been carrying that stupid letter around and she had no idea what he was planning to do with it.

“What are you afraid of?”

She could hear Fred's words, echoing in her head. Getting under her skin.

She wondered what he would say if she told him the simple truth—that she was afraid of getting hurt. Maybe it was because her father had died when she was young, or maybe the fear had come from watching her sisters get their hearts broken. Rational or not, the panic existed, urging her to keep people at a distance that she filled with sarcasm and flirtation.

The chair was the last piece of equipment in her cleanup. Placing her hands at the small of her back, she arched her spine to relieve the pressure of a day spent hunched over on her stool.

“I've been told I give excellent back rubs.”

Amy jumped, clapping a hand to her chest at the sound of Fred's velvety voice in the darkness of her shop. Her front door had still been propped open, so she hadn't heard the usual chime of the bells that she'd strung overhead. She watched, more closely than she would have admitted, as he sauntered into her space, his long body silhouetted by the faint glow of the moon outside.

"What are you doing here?" She frowned, irritated that he'd caught her off guard.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten our date." He moved close enough that she could see the smirk on his lips, even in the dim light. She could also smell the musk of his skin, the end-of-day remnants of his pricey-smelling cologne.

"It's not a date. It's dinner," she replied archly, crossing her arms over her chest. "And it's two in the morning. I had no idea you'd actually stick around that long."

"Then you underestimate me," he said, reaching for where her battered gray leather jacket hung on the wall. Pulling it from its hook, he held it out for her to slide her arms into. Part of her wanted to refuse, just to be difficult, but the rest of her went ahead and did it before she could think it through. "I'm a man of my word."

After helping her into the jacket, he ran his thumbs up the nape of her neck, massaging away her stiffness with small circular movements. She moaned and leaned back into the touch for an instant before abruptly pulling away.

She wasn't into lying to herself, so there was no point in trying to convince herself that there wasn't anything here between them. An electric chemistry that made her want to close the door to her shop and drag him astride her tattoo chair again.

As she adjusted her jacket, though, she felt the crinkle of the letter, tucked into one of the inner pockets. The reminder was enough to have her get a vise-tight grip on her hormones.

They might have great sex, but Amy wasn't into lying, wasn't into pretenses. And Fred had succumbed to their chemistry and had sex with her knowing full well what this letter said, and that he was supposed to give it to her—she assumed, anyway. It was all the more reason to keep herself walled off.

Why, then, did she find herself closing up her shop for the night—morning—and following him?

“This way.” His fingers found an inch of her spine between her shoulder blades and pressed lightly, guiding her farther into the plaza, rather than toward the parking lot, as she'd expected. She felt the heat of the touch even through the thick leather of her jacket.

“Hate to break it to you, but nothing's going to be open in here.” She cast him a sidelong glance. “Shops close at nine, restaurants at midnight. Plaza rules, remember?”

“Rules that you broke today. On purpose.” He returned her look. She drew herself up straight, prepared to argue, but the look on his face...he didn't seem mad. He didn't seem anything, really, except interested.

Interested in her.

“Whatever.” Original, Amy. She barely hid her wince. “Still, we're not going to find any food in here right now, and I'm hungry.”

“You did warn me you might be late.” He moved the fingers that had been resting on her upper back, sliding them slowly down her spine, leaving a trail of heat in their wake. He guided her around a corner in the promenade, toward the massive fountain that marked the center of the plaza. “So I worked with it.”

“Oh.” Amy’s breath left her on a whoosh as she took in the scene in front of her. The fountain was usually off at night—at least, she assumed it was, because she’d watched it go still right around midnight one night. Right now, though, it was in full flow, the streams of water jumping and dancing and scenting the air with chlorine.

On the wide marble ledge that ran along the edge of the fountain was a red-and-white-checkered cloth—a picnic blanket. There was a basket, too, a wicker one from which emanated the delicious scents of butter and garlic. There was even a bottle of wine, already open to the air, and two glasses balancing on slender stems.

“I...” Nobody had ever done something like this for her before. Ever. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“I know that.” He cast her a sidelong grin before indicating the place where she should sit. “I wanted to.”

“Why?” She wanted—really wanted—to dive into the basket and pull out a big chunk of what she was pretty sure was warm, melty garlic bread, but she refrained. “I mean, yeah, we’re good in bed. Or the chair, I guess. But I haven’t been very nice to you.”

As though he could read her thoughts, he pulled the foil-wrapped loaf of bread from the basket, peeling back the aluminum and handing her the first slice. She held it in her hands but didn’t bite into it, her eyes instead fixed on him.

“Why don’t we just enjoy this meal? This moment?” He smiled at her, but she noticed that it didn’t completely light up his eyes. “How many fountain-side Italian feasts have you had, after all?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

“Oh, a dozen, at least.” She offered him a wry smile before closing her eyes, biting into the garlic bread and groaning. When she opened them again, Fred was looking at her with intention written on his face that made her mouth go dry.

“Make that sound again and we’re going to do some inappropriate things right here, right now, while Phyllis the security guard could happen along any minute.” The amusement curling up the corners of his lips told her that he might not mind that overly much. She wouldn’t, either, truth be told—she’d always had an exhibitionist streak. But she also knew better than to combine sex with the romance on display here.

She didn’t want the feelings that might come along for the ride.

“Guess we need a distraction, then, because if the rest of the meal is this good, I make no promises.” She bit into the bread again but this time kept her eyes open and took her time.

“A distraction. Right.” Fred swallowed thickly, running a hand through that thick, dark red hair until it stood up on end. “Oh! I forgot the last component to our picnic.”

“Last component?” She cocked her head, questioning, as he pulled out his cell and a portable Bluetooth speaker. A moment later, music wafted from the small device, and Amy dropped her bread right into the fountain water.

“‘Ordinary World’? Duran Duran?” Her mouth was dry. “This is my favorite song. My absolute favorite song. How on earth did you know?”

“I didn’t know it was your favorite.” He grinned, and it was the sexiest freaking thing she’d ever seen. “But I noticed that you’re always playing ’80s music. I, ah, made a playlist. To go with the picnic.”

She couldn’t do anything but stare. Romance wasn’t something that usually came her way. Lots of men—and women—wanted a wild night or two with a woman covered in tattoos and piercings and confidence. They never thought, though, that she might want—need, even—something more.

She didn’t often think that she did. And now it was being given to her by the man hiding something from her.

As Fred handed her a second hunk of bread to replace the one now floating in the middle of the fountain, she wondered what the hell she was supposed to do with that.

Maybe...maybe she should give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he’d never intended to give her that letter. Or maybe his family had told him to, but he didn’t want to, because it was her. He hadn’t mentioned it, after all, not even when she’d deliberately poked at him this afternoon.

Maybe...maybe she could let down her guard, just a little bit. They had chemistry. Maybe they could have more, even just for a little while.

“How’s your dinner?” Fred gestured to the paper carton of fettucine alfredo that was good enough to make Amy’s toes curl. “I wasn’t sure what you liked to eat, but this is from Luigi’s. I have lunch there sometimes, and I just can’t understand why they’re not ever busy.”

“That’s the one by the north entrance?” Amy twirled her fork in the rich noodles. Fred nodded. “They’re not busier because they just rely on traffic to the plaza.”

“What do you mean?” Fred furrowed his brow and stilled, a forkful of spaghetti noodles frozen in midair. “The plaza does heavy marketing itself, to get people in the door. That’s why it costs more to lease a retail space here.”

“As someone who pays that higher monthly lease, I’m well aware,” Amy replied dryly. “But a smart business owner uses that as just a base. If every shop in the plaza promoted themselves even a little bit, this place would see double the traffic at least. It doesn’t take much. Social media posts about new items in stock, or contests, or special events. Every little effort to get people through the door helps out every other vendor.”

“Events like the one you held today?” Something in his voice had Amy looking up sharply. His face revealed nothing, but something told her she wasn’t going to like whatever it was he said next.

“Exactly.” Slowly, aware of his eyes on her, she twirled another fork full of noodles and slid them into her mouth, chewed and swallowed. “All I did was send out a newsletter to my mailing list and make a couple of social media posts. It took hardly any effort, but look how many people were here.”

“There were a lot of people, and that’s great.” She heard the but before it came out of his mouth. “But I guess I’m wondering why you had it in the promenade, instead of inside your shop?”

Amy was rarely embarrassed, and she rarely second-guessed her decisions. Hearing Fred ask her this simple question in a quiet, level voice, however, made her squirm a bit on the marble bench. She was pretty sure that because I wanted to annoy the hell out of you wasn’t the right answer.

“Why not?” She shrugged to avoid the question, then set her carton of pasta down, fork sticking out. “Thank you so much for dinner. I’m so full.”

“Look, I get that you don’t like to play by the rules. It’s one of things that fascinated me about you since the first time I saw you.” Fred yanked on his tie to loosen it. “But sometimes you need to think about how what you’re doing affects others.”

“Excuse me?” Amy froze midreach for her wineglass. His words had been mild, but they stung regardless. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Amy—” he sighed, loosening the tie entirely and pulling it up, over his head and off “—come on. Can’t you see why your neighboring stores might not have liked what you did today?”

“You mean by getting some foot traffic into their boring storefronts?” Her cheeks flushed. “They’re welcome.”

“Right. But you were still the star of the show. The one getting all the attention...while they were the ones following the rules.” He pinned her with a stare. “And you know...if it happened over and over again, they might start to resent it. They might want to do something about it.”

Amy slowly touched a hand to her side and felt the paper envelope crinkle again beneath her touch. So that’s why this lovely little missive had come to exist. Heat blazed along her skin as emotions tangled in her gut—a touch of embarrassment, incredulity and, under it all, a snaking tendril of hurt.

Fred had no way of knowing this yet, but when she got hurt, she kicked back.

“What are you saying here?” She uncrossed her legs and straightened her spine. “I assume there’s a point to the lecture?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

“It’s not a lecture.” Wasn’t it? Amy wasn’t sure how else she was supposed to take it. “Just...maybe you should cool it a little. Keep your head down for a bit.”

“I see.” Her temper snapped like a rubber band stretched to its breaking point. “And is this advice coming from Fred Vaughan, Esquire, part of the mighty Vaughan Enterprises? Or is it coming from the man I’ve fucked twice who thinks that there’s more between us than sex?”

Something flashed in his eyes, so quickly she would have missed it if she hadn’t been looking at him so closely. The open man who had so far focused solely on her in their interactions let a new layer slip over his face. She wasn’t entirely sure what to make of the steel that made its presence known in the rigid length of his spine, in the posture wearing that expensive suit, and in the lean planes of his face.

She’d gotten what she wanted, finally—she’d worked her way beneath his skin. Rather than satisfaction, though, she was hurt.

How had she let pasta and Duran Duran lure her into opening up, even just a bit? This man might enjoy the chemistry between them, but at his core, he was yet another man who looked at her and saw a fun fling, not someone worthy of anything more. Which was what she usually wanted too, so why was this bothering her?

The silence had stretched out, thinned, when he finally answered her question. “Can you separate one from the other, when both are who you are?”

“Right.” She closed her eyes for a moment, drew in a deep breath, then swallowed down the hurt. Standing abruptly, she pulled the offending letter out of her inner

pocket, enjoying the slight widening of his eyes when he saw what she had in her hands. “Look, you must be a fairly intelligent guy to have gotten through law school, and you seem like you can at least muddle your way through a social interaction, so I’m going to just give you a little reminder of something that someone as smart as you should already know.”

Tugging up the sleeves of her jacket, envelope still in hand, she ran her hands down her forearms, drawing attention to her sleeves of inked art.

“I’m not the kind of person who is interested in cooling it. I’m not interested in keeping my head down.” She ran a hand through her chin-length blond curls as a reminder that they’d been unruly black curls when they’d first met. “I am who I am. And I’m not going to change.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“You should try being open like that.” She slapped the now-wrinkled envelope against his chest, where he caught it with one of his massive hands. She tried not to think of the way those hands felt on her body. “We’re done here.”

Spinning on her heel, she turned and stalked away. If her heart cracked a little bit when he didn’t follow...well, nobody knew it but her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“THIS IS THE fourth night in a row that you’ve worked late.”

Fred blinked wearily as his twin appeared in the doorway to his office, propping himself up against the door frame. He blinked again when he saw two of Frank, and again to clear the image.

He'd been staring at his computer all day, and his eyes were shot. He could probably use reading glasses, but that was a problem for another day. For now, he sank back in the chair that was both ergonomic and hideously expensive. This motif was repeated throughout his office, which had been designed for function, and also to not-so-subtly showcase the Vaughan family's wealth. "We can't both be Dad's favorite," he commented. "Some of us have to work for a living."

"I call bullshit." Barging in, Frank flopped himself down in one of the chairs across the desk from Fred. "You've proven yourself to Dad—to this company—a million times over. You don't need to work so hard."

Frank wasn't wrong—he had proven himself to his family, over and over again. What his twin was leaving out, however, was the fact that past efforts didn't count for much in this family. He was only as good as his latest business triumph. Another man might have gotten frustrated by the never-ending weight of expectation that forever draped over his shoulders like a lead blanket, but not Fred...or Frank, for that matter. They'd been raised on a steady diet of family obligation, sprinkled heavily with guilt.

Family came first. Always.

"I'm almost done for the night." Lies. He planned to push himself for at least another hour, after which he would finally head home, hopefully too exhausted to think about Amy's face when she'd handed him the letter he'd been ordered to give to her. Or to dream about her astride him, his cock sunk deep into the heat between her legs as she rode them both to release.

"You haven't just been staying late at work." Frank fixed him with a narrow-eyed stare that Fred was only too familiar with, the assessing gaze of someone who had known him since they'd shared a womb. "You've eaten lunch at your desk every day this week instead of coming out with everyone. You've gone home right after work. And don't think I didn't notice that you sent me those contracts at two o'clock this

morning.”

“Don’t you have anyone better to stalk?” Fred arched an eyebrow at his brother. “Go follow Randy or Andy or whatever the hell his name is around for a while. Something tells me he’d enjoy it.”

“All work and no play makes Fred a dull boy.” From his pocket, Frank pulled a silver-plated flask. Unscrewing the lid, he took a large gulp of the contents, then slid it across the desk with a whiff of whiskey.

“I can’t believe those words just came out of your mouth.” Fred rolled his eyes. “Just like I can’t believe you carry this around in your pocket all day. Who are you, Don Draper?”

“Just drink it,” Frank ordered. He slapped a hand on Fred’s desk, the sound reverberating through the quiet of the otherwise empty office. Fred glared at him but lifted the flask to his lips. The whiskey burned his lips but numbed his throat, and he relaxed for the first time since he’d last seen Amy.

He took another sip for good measure, and his brother nodded with approval.

“Now that you’ve unclenched, are you going to tell me what’s got your panties in a twist?” Frank took the flask back when Fred handed it to him, draining the last sip.

“That’s misogynistic,” Fred said, and Frank snorted in response.

“Fine. Will you share with me, dear brother, the reason your non-gender-specific underwear is coiled so tightly it is causing you to act so uptight?” Settling back in the chair, he pinned Fred with a stare, waiting for an answer to his question.

Fred hadn’t spoken to anyone about Amy, not since she’d come back into his life—or

rather, he'd gone tromping into hers. Now, though, his tongue had been loosened by two shots of whiskey. Digging his fingers into the knot at his neck, he loosened his tie and undid the top two buttons of his shirt, then pushed back from his desk.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:41 am

“Do you remember our trip to Europe after we got our undergrads?” Closing his eyes, he let the images wash over him, the lights and languages, textures and tastes.

“In a hazy sort of way.” Frank grinned, but the smile quickly slipped off his face. “The girl. The one in Amsterdam.”

“How the hell did you zero in on that so fast?” Fred furrowed his brow at his twin. “She wasn’t the only girl on that trip.”

“She’s the only one who sent you into a funk that lasted six months.” Frank looked at him, assessing. “Wanna tell me how the hell some strange girl from Amsterdam has managed to make you depressed again five years later?”

“I’m not depressed,” Fred said as his brother eyed him skeptically. “I’m not. It’s just...it’s complicated.”

“I’m waiting.” Frank reached reflexively for his flask, frowning when he shook it and found it empty. “Hold that thought. I’m going to go raid Dad’s stash. Be right back.”

Fred waited as his brother darted out of the room. He wasn’t depressed that Amy was probably never going to speak to him again. He wasn’t.

“Look what I found.” Frank burst back into the room, a bottle of amber liquid and two snifters in hand.

“Fifty-year Glenfiddich?” Fred shook his head. “That’s his closet stash. Dad will kill you if you drink that.”

“Please. He only drinks it because it fits his image.” Frank made a great showing of pulling out the cork stopper. “I’ll top it up with Maker’s Mark and he’ll never know the difference.”

Fred wasn’t so sure of that, but he said nothing as his brother poured generous splashes of the pricey whiskey into two snifters, then handed him one.

“Now talk.” Frank picked up his own snifter and settled back down in his chair. “Tell me what’s going on with this girl.”

“Remember that petition that was circulating among the vendors here?”

“The one to evict the tattoo shop girl?” Frank whistled through his teeth. “Yeah, I remember. Lots of oomph behind it. Too bad, really. She’s hot. Looks like she’d be a freak in bed.”

“Watch your mouth,” Fred snapped, slamming his snifter on the desk with a loud thump. Frank blinked, forehead furrowed as he worked it through.

“Holy shit. Amsterdam girl and tattoo shop girl are the same person.” Frank’s eyes went wide. “Please tell me she recognized you.”

“Her name is Amy.” Fred sipped his drink. “And yes, she recognized me, you know, when I went to deliver that eviction notice.”

“Shit.” Frank sucked a breath in through his teeth. “Awkward.”

“You’re telling me.” Fred sat back, traced a finger over the rim of his glass. “I was so shocked I didn’t give it to her.”

“Fred.” His twin sat up straight at that bit of news. “That’s not cool. The tenant has to

be notified or we can't legally rent that space to anyone else."

"I'm a lawyer, Frank. I'm well aware," Fred snapped, scrubbing a hand over his face. "There's more."

"Oh, I bet there is." His twin raised his brows, settling in for the story. "And I bet it has to do with the two of you naked."

"Sucker's bet." Fred smiled grimly. "And it was every bit as good as it was that night in Amsterdam."

Fred and his brother had never had that telepathic connection so many sets of twins had reported, but they still knew each other better than anyone else on the face of the planet. Therefore he wasn't surprised that Frank picked up on what he hadn't said.

"You like her." Frank watched his twin, assessing. "That's a plot twist."

"Indeed." Fred grimaced. "Especially when she found the letter anyway."

"Wait a minute. You slept with her before she got the letter?" Frank pinned Fred with a withering stare. "Dick move, bro. Even I know that."

"I know that now," Fred snapped in return. "I just...she blindsided me. I lose my mind when I'm with her. Which isn't an excuse, I just... I messed up. And now she's not talking to me and I don't know what to do."

"Well, that's easy." Frank swigged the remaining liquid in his glass, then stole his brother's and polished that off, too.

"Is it?" Fred wasn't surprised that he'd fucked up. But Frank had always been the Superman to Fred's Clark Kent, so he felt a small bud of hope that his brother knew

how to get him out of this. “Well? Tell me.”

“You’re going to forget about her.” Frank stood.

“What? Why?” Fred stared up at his brother, who stood just a smidge shorter than Fred’s own six foot four. “Surely you’ve got better advice than that.”

“You’ve already fucked it up. You said so yourself,” Frank reminded him. Fred narrowed his eyes and contemplated bringing up that hair’s width difference in their height, just to poke at his brother.

“No need to rub it in.”

“My point is, maybe she’ll forgive you. Maybe, if you work hard enough.” Frank’s face was set in serious lines. “But I mean...where do you see this going?”

“I...what?” Fred sputtered, taken aback by the question. “I’ve slept with her twice. I’m not—We’re not—I don’t know if that’s where this is going.”

Didn’t he, though? Wasn’t that the very reason he’d been so down the last few days? In the years since that magical night with her in Amsterdam, he’d almost—almost—managed to convince himself that he’d imagined the heady connection between himself and his gorgeous, tattooed siren. All it had taken was one glance at her again, though, and there it had been, heady and unlike anything he’d felt before or since.

“I swear, watching you work this out is like watching a rat on a wheel.” Frank shook his head. “Listen to me. Maybe there would be something there, if you managed to unfuck yourself. But just fast-forward with me for a minute. Where do you see this in

six months? In a year? Is she the girl you're going to marry? If not, is it really worth the effort right now?

Panic thickened his throat, making it hard to swallow. Married? He barely knew her.

He could see where his brother was going with this, though. His mother and father hadn't been an arranged marriage, not in the strictest sense of the term, but they'd been firmly pushed in each other's direction. Both from wealthy, aristocratic families, their families had been very enthusiastic about the match.

It hadn't been vocalized in so many words. But Fred and Frank had always been very aware that someday they would be expected to do the same.

He was entranced by Amy. Wanted her with a thirst that hadn't even come close to being quenched.

But...could he really see himself bringing her to his parents' house for dinner? He could just picture his mother, sitting there in her silk blouse or cashmere sweater set, arching an incredulous eyebrow at Amy's full sleeves of ink. Or his father barely waiting until she was out the door before making a dirty joke about the nipple adornments that Amy did absolutely nothing to hide.

His thoughts must have shown on his face, because Frank hummed in his throat, apparently pleased that his warning had come across. Lifting the bottle of hideously expensive scotch, he poured another generous measure into each of their glasses, lifting his and holding it out for a toast.

Fred did not feel like toasting, but more than that, he did not feel like explaining why he didn't feel like it. Half-heartedly, he lifted his glass, braced himself for the impact as his brother banged his own into it.

“To common sense,” he started before tossing back half the contents in his glass. “And to getting you laid. Let’s go.”

“What? No.” Fred shook his head as Frank slammed his laptop closed. He was not in the mood to go anywhere except his condo, where he would order in some Thai food and then go to bed. He planted his feet when his brother rounded the desk, hauling him up and out of the chair. “I’m not going anywhere except home.”

“No way, bro. You’re coming out with me. Now.” Frank clapped him on the shoulders before handing him his suit jacket. “Listen to your big brother Frankie. The best medicine for getting over one woman is getting under another one. Come on. We’ll order a car and go find you someone with big eyes and long legs.”

Fred stiffened, his thoughts mutinous. He’d already found someone like that, with blue eyes that saw right through him and legs that felt amazing wrapped around his face. He didn’t want some nameless, faceless woman in his bed.

He wanted Amy.

He said nothing, though, instead following his brother as Frank turned off the lights and locked up the office. Said nothing as he climbed into the town car Frank had ordered, and followed him into some new club where the waitresses wore next to nothing and the music was so loud he could taste it in his throat.

He’d thought a night out might help lift his mood. Might take his mind off the woman he’d messed things up with.

Instead, all he could think about was what he could do to make things right.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“HOT GUY. TWO O’CLOCK,” Meg yelled over the din of the dim, crowded bar. The place was, frankly, a dive, scarred tables crowded cheek to cheek on sticky floors. When Amy didn’t respond, her oldest sister grabbed her face, a palm on each cheek, and turned her head in the direction she’d indicated.

“Dude. Personal space.” With a shake of her head, Amy flicked her sister’s hands off. When Meg did it again, Amy glared. “Would you stop?”

“Seriously. You’ll like this one.” Meg smiled so beseechingly that Amy sighed, turning in the direction her sister wanted her to look, then cast Meg some serious side eye.

“That’s John.” She rolled her eyes when Meg merely grinned, waving at her fiancé from across the bar. “Very funny.”

“I was trying to make you smile.” Meg nudged Amy’s untouched bottle of beer across the table. “Since you won’t tell me what’s going on.”

“Nothing’s going on.” To prove her point, Amy lifted her beer and took a healthy swallow. “See? Party on, and all that jazz.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

“You’ve been scowling for days.” Meg rolled her eyes. “I used to change your diapers, kid. Come on. Fess up.”

“It’s just work stuff.” Amy smiled stiffly and made a big show out of shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly. “Not a big deal.”

“If you say so,” Meg replied dubiously before waving at John once again. “What is taking him so long?”

Amy peeled a thin strip off the label on her beer bottle as Meg waved like an air traffic controller to get her fiancé to come back to the table. She hadn’t lied to Meg; it was a work issue that had her down. At least that’s what she kept telling herself.

She actually didn’t care that much about what the other vendors in the shopping plaza thought about her. She may not have looked like a stereotypical businessperson, but she was shrewd. She knew her value as a business, and she didn’t give a flying fruitcake about that petition. If she was evicted for not fitting in, which was obtusespeak for being covered in tattoos, then she’d go to the media and raise holy hell.

What she did care about, even though she really didn’t want to? The fact that Fred had been the one in charge of delivering her that eviction notice. No, not even that...the fact that he’d hidden it from her. If he’d told her up front, she was pretty sure that they would have wound up in bed together anyway—that was how strong the pull between them was. But he hadn’t, and it had...well, it had hurt her feelings.

She never got hurt feelings. She and Fred had a history, however. Even though it had

only been one night, it had held meaning for her.

Apparently it hadn't meant nearly as much to him, yet she couldn't bring herself to shake it off and move on. Which was why she was sitting in a bar she didn't want to be in, with a sister who was torturing her for being moody.

As her sister's fiancé finally made his way over to the table, she sneaked a look at her phone to check the time, wondering how quickly she could make an excuse and go home.

"Lucky us, getting the prettiest women in the club." John grinned while he juggled the drinks in his arms. He set a fresh bottle of beer in front of Amy, and she barely held back the wince as she tacked another half hour onto her time estimate.

John slid into the seat nearest Meg and greeted his fiancée with a hand threaded through her hair and a deep kiss.

"Don't mind me," Amy said dryly. The couple continued greeting each other as though she wasn't even there. Focusing her attention on her phone, she started a new game of Candy Crush, wondering if the couple's utter absorption in each other meant she could subtract that half hour back off the time estimate.

A few more minutes of the smooching, and she was done. Meg and John broke apart as she slid out of the booth and got to her feet, stuffing her phone in her pocket.

"Don't leave before you say hi to Theo," John requested, lifting her bottle of beer and frowning when he found it full.

"Theo's here?" Amy looked out across the bar, craning her neck until she saw him. Her sister Jo's live-in boyfriend, and the man she considered the closest thing to an actual brother, was leaning against the bar, holding court in a group conversation.

“He’ll be over in a sec,” John added as he ran a hand down Meg’s bare arm. “He ran into some guys he was friends with in college.”

“Maybe you’ll wipe that scowl off your face and find one to converse with,” Meg suggested pointedly. “Some company might brighten your current dour outlook on life.”

“Maybe any man I’d be interested in talking to will appreciate my scowl,” Amy replied brightly. Brushing her blond curls out of her face—she should really consider going back to dreads—she leaned back into the booth to grab her small purse. When she straightened back up again, Theo was crossing the room toward their table, and he wasn’t alone.

Amy sucked in a deep breath when she saw the men who accompanied Theo. Incredibly tall, well over six feet, with coppery hair and a lanky build.

No. No way.

Then the men were at the table. Theo gathered her in a familiar hug as she frantically tried to compose herself, looking upward into the face of the cause of her angst.

Their eyes met, and damn it, there was that little tug in her gut. Her body didn’t seem to care that she was upset with him.

“Jo, this is Fred Vaughan.” Theo released her and gestured toward his friend. “I just put two and two together, but his family owns the shopping plaza where your shop is. Small world!”

“Right.” Her brain was telling her to play it cool, but the rest of her wasn’t listening. She narrowed her eyes at Fred and crossed her arms over her chest. “What are you doing here?”

“Frank dragged me out for a drink.” He slid his hands into his pockets. He didn’t look all that thrilled to see her, either, which had her temper sparking. What had she done, besides giving him crazy good sex?

“Fred and his brother are friends from college.” Theo clapped the taller man on the back, grinning widely. Amy could tell that Jo’s fiancé had clearly had a drink or three already. “Haven’t seen them in years. How cool is this?”

“Uh-huh.” Amy could feel Meg’s eyes on her, assessing, and struggled not to grind her teeth together. “Where’s Jo?”

Her sister Jo had a limited tolerance for the bar scene. A limited tolerance for people, really. If she was here, then they could escape together.

“She’s working. On deadline.” Theo grinned sheepishly—his significant other worked for him. “Before you get pissed, she’s the one imposing the all-nighter, not me. Says she won’t have anyone accusing her of sleeping with the boss to get ahead.”

“Speaking of getting ahead...” She deliberately turned toward Meg and John, putting her back to Fred as she spoke. “I have a full slate tomorrow. I should get going.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

“Fine.” Meg heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Don’t think you’re coming to family dinner tomorrow night with this attitude, though.”

“Whatever.” Amy rolled her eyes at her sister. “Have fun.”

Then she was off, striding into the crowd of the bar without a second glance at Fred. Her spine stiffened when she heard him call after her, his deep voice carrying over the roar of the crowd.

He caught up to her quickly with his long stride, and she paused when she felt his hand on her shoulder. She should have turned around, but she didn’t trust herself to remain strong while looking at him, so she remained as she was, facing away.

“Don’t touch me,” she snapped as he came up close behind her. He dropped his hand from her shoulder, but she could feel the heat of his body, radiating off his lean frame to warm the skin of her back. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Well, I have something to say to you,” he replied. If his voice had held anger, she could have pushed away, leaving him standing there alone. She didn’t hear any anger, though, just regret, so she remained where she was, silent and still.

“I need to apologize,” he continued, dipping his head so that he could place his lips by her ear.

“You think?” she retorted. It took every ounce of willpower that she possessed not to shiver in response to the fan of his breath over the lobe of her ear.

“You have every right to be pissed at me. I fucked up, big-time.” He moved in closer so that he could keep speaking over a sudden rise in the noise level. She wanted to moan softly when she felt his hips bump against hers from behind. “Please hear me out. I had no way of knowing that you were Amy Marchande when I walked into your shop with that letter. You never told me your name.”

“You shouldn’t have been delivering that letter to begin with, to anyone.” She spat out the words. “I signed that lease. I pay up every single month. Even if there was a petition against me, you and your brother and whoever the hell else you work with should have shut it down right there.”

“I agree with you,” he replied mildly, but she could tell she’d struck a nerve. “But I’m not the one in charge. I just happened to draw the short straw.”

“And then you walked in, saw someone you might like to fuck again, and decided to tuck it away for another day.” Her spine stiffened as she clung to her righteous anger. “Gee, I wonder why I’m upset?”

“Don’t twist this around.” His hands found her hips, tugging her back against him, and she fought to remain stiff, not to let her body yield to his. “It wasn’t like that at all, and you damn well know it. Please let me say I’m sorry.”

“Fine.” The word burst out of her like a plea, but whether it was for him to let her go or to hold her closer, she had no idea. “Apology accepted. Now, I’m going home to bed.”

His fingers clenched on her hips, and she struggled to reach for her self-control as she added, “Alone.”

“Let me make it up to you,” he murmured in her ear. This time his lips touched the seashell curve, and this time she couldn’t hold back her shudder. “Please.”

“What did you have in mind?” This, this she could handle—flirtation. Lust. “Keep in mind how much you owe me.”

He huffed out a laugh, a low sound that did something funny to her insides, then used the hands on her hips to guide her in a half circle. She arched into his touch as he gave her a gentle push back in the direction of their table.

“We’re going to go sit down again.” His voice was dark, delicious. “Right at that little table, right beside one another.”

“Oh?” Her voice was faint; she didn’t know how he could still hear her over the music and the crowd. “And what will we do then?”

He laughed again, sounding nothing like the careful lover she remembered from Amsterdam, or the frenzied one she’d ridden in her shop.

“Then we’re going to do whatever I want.” This was a man in control, so completely unexpected and yet so completely right that the possibilities made her legs quiver. He nudged her forward, and she took a step, her senses suddenly on fire. “Now go.”

Swallowing thickly, she did as she was told—in truth, she couldn’t imagine refusing. Hyperaware of Fred at her back, she made her way back to the table. When Meg, John, Theo and Fred’s twin looked up at them questioningly, she forced her face into a smile, certain that she looked more than a little crazy.

“I think I’m going to stay,” she said brightly, reaching for the bottle of beer that was still sitting on the table. “I got a second wind!”

“Great,” Meg replied slowly, scrutinizing Amy’s flushed cheeks. “We were just about to get up and dance.”

“I’m right behind you!” Squeezing into the booth, Amy hip-checked Theo. Grumbling, he shifted over, making space for her and Fred to sit. Amy clasped her beer like she was clutching a life preserver, waving it in the air for everyone to see. “You guys are three drinks in, though. Let me just catch up and I’ll be right there!”

Meg, John and Theo were all regarding her as though she’d grown a third head, and she didn’t blame them. She sounded practically perky, not a look she usually wore. Fred’s twin, however—was she remembering right that his name was Frank?—was watching her intently, curiosity written all over his face.

He might have been Fred’s brother, but the expression made her want to sock him in the nose. It was one she was well familiar with, the look a man gave her when he was thinking about taking a walk on the wild side.

She wasn’t here to be any man’s tattooed little experiment. If they didn’t want her for who she was, then they didn’t get any of her, at all.

She willed Frank to head off to the dance floor with the others. He did not; rather, he sat sipping his beer and looking from her to Fred as though there was a puzzle there that he had to solve.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

“Dude, what?” Fred reached across the table with his long arm, socking his brother in the bicep. “Stop being a creeper.”

“Sorry.” To his credit, Frank shook his head, as though jerking himself out of a trance. Draining his drink, he set the empty bottle on the table and stood. “Another round?”

“No, thank you,” Amy and Fred both replied at the same time. Frank furrowed his brow again slightly, as if he couldn’t understand what he was seeing, before making his way back to the bar.

“I don’t think your brother approves of you hanging around me.” Amy turned to Fred with a slight smirk. Here, again, was familiar territory. “Maybe he thinks I’ll be a bad influence on you.”

“Doesn’t matter what he thinks,” Fred said as he placed his hand on Amy’s knee under the table, giving it a gentle squeeze. “What matters is that you do what I tell you to, right now.”

“Oh?” She arched an eyebrow, prepared to tease back, instead losing her breath when he moved his hand steadily up her thigh. Excitement surged through her, gasoline that had been lit on fire. She followed his thought process and understood what he was about to do.

“Drink your beer.” He sounded calm while she felt anything but. “Now.”

Hand shaking, she picked up the beer. It had gone warm, but she took a sip anyway,

not tasting anything because all her attention was focused on Fred's hand and the way it was moving up her thigh with excruciating slowness.

She was wearing tiny cutoffs, the denim so well-worn that it was torn in places and soft as butter in others. Those were layered with a pair of lacy boy shorts, and neither provided the slightest bit of resistance as Fred's questing fingers found the crease where her pelvis met her thigh.

She sucked in a breath, fingers tightening on the bottle. Exhaling slowly, she fought to keep her expression neutral as he tucked one large finger beneath the hem of the shorts, toying with the elastic lace that lay beneath.

"Careful," he whispered, picking up his own drink. "Wouldn't want anyone to look at you and know how wet you are."

"I'm not wet," she retorted. She sank back against the faux leather cushion of the booth back when he delved farther, moving his questing fingers closer to her core by tucking them beneath the lace of her underpants as well. "Shit."

"Don't ever think you can lie to me." His words were cocky, even as she was desperate for him to look at her. He refused, casting his stare steadfastly on the empty table in front of them. "If I slide my fingers inside you, am I going to find you wet?"

"Why don't you try and see?" Her words were staccato, pushed from her torso as she panted for air. "Maybe I am. Maybe I'm not."

"I think you'd like it if I did. If I slid my fingers right up inside you." He rubbed his fingers over her outer folds to punctuate his words, and she struggled to withhold a moan. "I'm right, aren't I, you dirty girl? You'd get off from having my fingers inside you while we're sitting here, out in public where anyone can see."

“Fred. Jesus.” Amy willed herself not to prove his words true, but as she did, he worked his entire hand into the lace of her boy shorts. That massive hand of his cupped her mound, his thumb stroking over the slit that divided her labia, and it was all she could do to keep from sobbing out loud.

“Shh.” This time he leaned in against her, his shoulder bumping against hers companionably. “I know my touch makes you want to scream. But just look...your sister is here. Her fiancé. Theo, and my brother Frank. Do you really want them to see you whimpering from my touch? What would they think, seeing bossy little Amy Marchande melting from the touch of a man?”

“Oh, fuck you.” Amy leaned against him, hard, but didn’t dare to lift her eyes from the table, to glare at him for withholding what her body so desperately craved. She wanted to look him in the eyes, to lose herself in those pools of pale green and to ask where this thread of dominance came from when it hadn’t made an appearance before. She didn’t, because she was afraid—afraid of hearing him voice the answer to a question she hadn’t asked.

Every single sexual encounter she’d ever had, whether with men or women or beings who identified somewhere in between...with beings who identified as straight or gay or bi... She’d been the one who was in control. She’d always been in charge, the one who had led the encounter, dictating the content and the rules, defining the limits.

When she’d first seen Fred in that bar so many years ago, she’d known only that she wanted him. What had come after had seemed a natural consequence. She’d been the aggressor and had remained in control. Being a woman, of course she had recognized and cherished the fact that he had let her be so, even though his physical body was undeniably so much powerful than hers.

She hadn’t realized that she’d internalized that power dynamic until Fred stroked that single finger through her damp folds, searching for proof that she melted at his

command. She hadn't anticipated any commands from him at all, and that made her response even hotter.

"See something you like?" She recalled the words he'd once uttered, poised above her in a fancy hotel in a city she'd considered her own, and she melted around his questing fingers.

She'd never thought of Fred as dominant per se. Not since he'd told her that he was turned on by whatever made her melt.

He understood more about her than she'd ever imagined. She didn't consider herself submissive, per se...more that she was happy to assume the role if she happened upon a partner who was dominant.

She'd only slept with this particular man twice, in situations in which he hadn't commanded control, but now she understood. He didn't need to be dominant...unless his partner needed him to step into that role.

In another place, another time, she might have pretended that she was appalled at the bossiness of his words, his voice, his fingers.

Here and now, she felt stripped to the bone. No—to the marrow.

Never in her life had she ever imagined that she was submissive. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Right now, in this public situation in which he demanded her submission? In public, when his brother and her brothers-in-law and sister could return at any moment?

She'd never been so turned on. She'd never been so wet. She'd never imagined that she'd be tempted to flaunt her arousal; no—that she'd be proud of the feelings that

this man had coaxed out of her body with his words and his hands. Secretly.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

At the moment, as his strong fingers swiped through the slit that divided her lower lips? She didn't care who saw. She didn't care who knew how much she melted at the slightest pressure from this man, and only this one.

Fred's twin, Frank, had reached the bar, never out of Amy's sight. As her body yearned beneath Fred's expert ministrations, she again pondered the same question that had momentarily perplexed her a handful of years ago in Amsterdam.

Two men. Identical in every aspect that was naked to the visible eye. No discernible differences in grooming, in style, in demeanor.

Yet when she'd looked across that Euro club five years ago, she hadn't seen twins and chosen one of a pair. She'd only seen Fred.

Beneath the table, Fred slid two fingers inside her slick channel. He moved them in a circle, stretching her in the most delicious way. A whimper escaped her lips, and she felt sweat break out all over her skin as she rocked her hips forward, silently begging for more.

"I wonder if anyone in here is watching us." Fred leaned in closer. Wrapping his free arm around her torso so that she was tucked back against his chest, he bent to whisper directly into her ear. "You're so fucking gorgeous, I'm sure that someone is. And I wonder if they know what I'm doing to you? If they know that I have my fingers inside you, right this second."

"I don't care if they do." Her voice was rough and didn't even seem to belong to her. "Let them look."

“I like that answer, dirty girl.” Shifting in the booth, he worked his fingers in even farther. He scissored them inside her, and she felt herself contract around him. “I think that even if Frank came back to the table right now, you’d let me keep my hand buried between these pretty legs of yours. That’s how much you want what I can give you.”

Her breath escaped her lips on a gasp. He was absolutely right—she was too far gone to care who saw. At the same time, his words made her desperate to come before Frank—before anyone—came back.

The fact that they could, though? It was fucking hot.

“I can feel you getting wetter.” She could feel the heat of his skin against her back, sealing them together. Her body trembled so hard as he worked his fingers in even farther still that she was glad of the support. “Now let’s see if we can make you come before you have to explain your filthy behavior to anyone else.”

Before she could breathe, he slid his fingers in the rest of the way. They were thick and they were long, and when he rotated them inside her, it made her squirm in desperation for his cock. As she tried to rock subtly to enhance his movements, he rubbed his thumb over her clit. She jerked against him, teeth sinking into her tongue until she tasted blood.

“If we were alone right now, I bet you’d be screaming.” He nipped at her ear, circled his thumb around the bud of her clit, and she felt tension start to gather, low and tight in her belly.

“If we were alone right now, I’d be on top of you.” Her voice sounded like she hadn’t had a sip of water in years. “You wouldn’t be teasing me like this because you’d have your cock inside me.”

This time he was the one who hissed out a breath. She grinned triumphantly, sliding her hand over to his lap. Stroking the firm muscle of his truly impressive thighs, she finally cupped his cock with her palm. It was fully erect, thick and tempting as it pushed against the fabric of his suit pants, begging for release.

“Nope.” With a pained groan, he shifted so that she could no longer reach between his legs to stroke, to touch. “This is about you, and the orgasm you’re about to have.”

“Says you,” she challenged, heels drumming on the floor as every single muscle in her body tensed, straining toward release.

“You don’t have a choice.” He sounded mildly amused, as though she were nothing but a toy he was entertained with right this moment, but she heard the strain in his voice. This whole scene—his bossy hands, the public setting—it was really doing it for both of them. “Now come for me. Try not to be too loud when you do, unless you want every single person in this club to know that you just came all over my hand.”

“Oh God.” His words were the release valve, as though her body had needed his permission to let go. He rubbed his thumb right over the top of her clit as he spoke, providing the last bit of delicious friction that she’d needed to go over the edge. “Fred.”

“Good girl.” He continued to work on her, pulling a second wave out of her flesh on the heels of the first. “Give me one more.”

She shook as pleasure worked its way outward from her core like an earthquake from its epicenter. She was sweating and could feel that her skin had flushed a deep red. Her face was probably contorted, her mouth hanging open, and in that moment she just couldn’t have cared less. The only thing that existed in her world was the release Fred had just milked from her hot, slick channel with his clever fingers.

Spent, she melted against him, boneless. A small whimper escaped her as he removed his hand from its cozy space between her thighs, then smoothed her panties and shorts back into place. Tilting her head, she looked up at him, just in time to see him slide those fingers that had just been inside her into his mouth.

“Good Lord, Fred.” Reaching for her beer, she took a long swallow, needing to dampen her suddenly dry mouth. “That was...wow.”

“I know.” He smirked down at her, and she couldn’t help but laugh. Damn it. She liked him. This wasn’t news, exactly—why else would she have been so hurt by that damn letter—but right now she could no longer pretend.

“I didn’t know you had it in you,” she admitted, finishing off her beer. “But I have to say... I liked it.”

“Oh, Miss Marchande.” He leaned in, so close that she could feel the mist of his breath on her face. “I’ve got moves you’ve never seen.”

“That, my friend, is a quote from *Pretty Woman*.” She couldn’t hold back the grin as he shrugged, caught out.

“Made you smile, though. Definitely worth it.”

“Let’s go somewhere.” Shifting in her seat, she ran her tongue along her lips and watched his eyes track the motion. “It seems I have a favor to repay.”

She’d meant to ask him to come home with her. To let him see the way she lived—in the house she’d grown up in, where she still lived with Mamesie, two of her sisters and a brother-in-law. A house that was shabby and rundown and utterly unlike anything he’d likely experienced in his life.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

It would help put some distance back between them again, which would be good.

Right now, though, she didn't want that distance. She wanted to take him to a hotel room, strip them both naked and wring pleasure from their bodies until neither of them could see straight.

"Nope." Fred took a sip of his own drink as she cocked her head, certain she'd heard wrong.

"What do you mean, nope?" Quick as a snake, she rested her palm in the juncture of his thighs to prove her point. Her artist's fingers traced up and down the length of his cock, which was still swollen and needy. "I think your little friend here likes the idea."

"There's nothing little about my friend, and you know it." Fred arched an eyebrow, cast her a crooked grin that was so devastatingly sexy she almost straddled him in his seat, right there and then.

"Then why not?"

"We've tried doing things your way," he reminded her, tapping a finger on her lips. "That involved you sneaking out of a hotel room in Amsterdam without telling me your name. A quickie in your shop before you threw me out. And a temper tantrum exorcised in a public tattoo clinic that violated your lease agreement and could get you thrown out."

"It was a publicity stunt, not a temper tantrum." She sat up, straight and prim—her,

Amy Marchande, prim—as she refuted his latter claim. She couldn’t do the same for the two former.

“We just did a little test run, and you got wetter than you’ve ever been in your life when you let me take charge.” He tapped her on the lips again, and her tongue darted out to run over the tips. She tasted herself, salt and musk, and felt that slow burn between her legs ignite again.

“From here on out, we’re going to do things my way. And trust me—you’re going to like it.”

CHAPTER NINE

“YOU AND AMY looked pretty cozy last night.” Theo dropped two massive submarine sandwiches down on the small table in front of Fred before pulling out a chair and sitting down. Even though the small sandwich shop was only a five-minute drive from the plaza, Fred had never been inside. He could already tell he’d be back, and not just for the food, which his nose told him was going to be delicious. He was digging the understated décor, and by understated, he meant non-existent—a bare concrete floor, exposed studs in the walls, and a computer printout held up with masking tape pointing out the route to the washrooms.

“Is this where you pull some big-brother crap and warn me not to touch your sister?” Fred snorted as he peeled the wrapper off his sandwich. Lobster rolls—his favorite. “I’m still not completely understanding why you call the Marchande girls your sisters. Aren’t you living with one?”

“One question at a time.” Theo held up his index finger. “When I got back to the table last night, you and Amy looked sweaty and guilty. A year ago, I would have hauled you out of that booth and beat your ass for touching her.”

“You could have tried.” Fred grinned before taking a big bite of his sandwich, the salty flavors exploding on his tongue. “What changed?”

“Meg punched me in the solar plexus, if you must know.” Theo glowered. “When she was hooking up with John. Apparently women don’t like it when we tell them who they can sleep with.”

“That’s very evolved of you,” Fred replied dryly. “I don’t know her that well yet, but something tells me that if you tried to do the same thing to Amy, you’d wake up with the word dickhead tattooed on your forehead.”

“You’re not wrong.” Theo shuddered. “I remember once, back when we were kids. I was over at their house and we were all playing hide-and-seek. I thought it would be funny to hide all her Barbie dolls.”

“I’m guessing that didn’t go the way you thought it would?” Fred leaned back in his chair, taking a sip of his soft drink.

“She didn’t say anything right then, just crossed her arms and looked at me. Like a child of the corn, you know?” Theo snorted out a laugh. “I thought that would be the end of it. Then a week later, I woke up to a freak show in my own damn bedroom. She’d painted all those Barbies that I’d hidden to look like zombies, then hung them all over my room. It was the freakiest shit I’ve ever seen. When I got all self-righteous about it, she just laughed and laughed. Bet me ten bucks I’d never touch her dolls again.”

“Bet she was right.” Fred tried to hide his grin but couldn’t. “Damn, that’s...twisted. And brilliant, really.”

“You’ve just summed up Amy Marchande perfectly.” Theo picked up a napkin and wiped his hands.

“How did she get into your room at night, if you were all kids?” Fred swallowed the last bite of his sandwich, then eyed the deli counter, contemplating a second. “Do I want to know?”

“We moved in next door to the Marchandes when we were all kids.” Theo crumpled his empty sandwich wrapper into a ball. “We were all friends, though I was closest to Jo. She used to climb the tree outside my room and sneak in my window. That’s what Amy did, too.”

“And Jo is the one you’re now living with?” Fred furrowed his brow. “Isn’t that like dating your sister?”

“I’ve never thought of Jo like my sister.” Theo grinned, then pushed himself back from the table with a groan. “Man, I haven’t had a lobster roll in years. So good.”

“I’ll get another if you will.” Fred slurped the last of his drink.

“Can’t.” Theo shook his head.

“A moment on the lips, forever on the hips?” Fred smirked across the table at his friend, enjoying the conversation. He and Frank and Theo had been tight once upon a time, but they’d drifted. It was nice to catch up.

“Hardly.” Theo flexed a bicep that was pretty impressive for someone who worked at a desk. “Nah, there’s a big family dinner tonight. Meg’s cooking—that’s what she does, she’s a caterer—and she’s like a little Ukrainian baba about it. If you don’t stuff your face with three servings, her feelings get hurt.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

“Family dinner?” Fred sat up straight at the mention.

“Uh-huh.” Theo eyed him warily.

“Who will be there?” His voice was all innocence, but he pinned Theo with a charming smile.

“Weird question, bro, but I’ll indulge you. Meg and John—you met them last night. Me and Jo. Beth is the sister closest in age to Amy, and her fiancé, Ford. Then Amy, and the girls’ mom, Mamesie.” Theo arched an eyebrow. “Shall I have Meg fax over the menu for your approval as well?”

“Hey, do you remember that time you hooked up with Janice Richards?” Fred leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table as he smiled beatifically.

“Hard to forget a girl who throws all your clothing down the garbage chute post-hookup.”

“Who was it that came to your rescue? Bringing you some sweats so you didn’t have to do a naked walk of shame across campus?” Fred looked up expectantly. “Oh... I do believe that was me.”

“You want me to get you into the family dinner?” Theo furrowed his brow with confusion. “Why?”

“I...” The words stuck in his throat. “Look. I don’t know if there’s anything between Amy and me besides sex.”

“La, la, la.” Theo closed his eyes and waved his hands by his ears. “Not listening.”

“But I think there might be.” He swallowed the rest of the thought, which was a memory of that thread that had appeared between them the second they’d laid eyes on one another, linking them together. “I want to... I want to woo her.”

“You want to woo her?” Theo asked incredulously. “Are you a hundred years old? Who says woo anymore?”

“I do.” Fred drummed his fingers on the table with impatience.

“How does sneaking into a family dinner count as wooing?”

“I’m not sure she even knows it consciously, but she has this attitude like...she expects people to treat her a certain way, because of how she looks.” Almost like she was daring people to be jerks to her, just to prove her right. “I think that by giving her things that she doesn’t expect, I might catch her off guard enough to sneak past those barriers.”

“Interesting.” Theo narrowed his dark eyes, considering. “So you’re thinking you’ll give her a family dinner, maybe some flowers, some romance.”

“That’s the plan, yeah.” Fred swallowed, suddenly nervous. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s worth a shot.” Theo shrugged, then pulled out his phone. He dropped a pin, then sent Fred the location. “That’s where dinner is. And don’t get the flowers for Amy, get them for Mamesie.”

“Thanks for the tip.” The two men stood, clearing their table and tossing their garbage in the bin. As they headed for the door, Fred caught Theo sending him a pitying stare.

“What’s with the sad-sack face?”

“Think of it more as a show of solidarity.” Theo clapped him on the back as they headed outside. “Taking on one of the Marchande girls is not for the faint of heart.”

“Great pep talk, Coach.” Fred rolled his eyes. “Any other pearls of wisdom as we head into battle?”

“Yup.” Theo sent him a smirk. “May the odds be ever in your favor.”

CHAPTER TEN

“DON’T EAT THAT.” Meg smacked Amy’s hand away from the platter of bruschetta that was resting on the giant island in her industrial kitchen.

“Um, ow.” Amy rubbed the skin where her sister had slapped her, frowning. Warned away from the bruschetta, she reached instead for one of the deviled eggs.

Smack. “Don’t eat those, either.”

“I’m sorry,” she offered, voice dripping with sarcasm, “I thought that family dinner involved eating.”

“Don’t be dramatic.” Meg bustled over to the fridge and pulled out two more platters, wrapped in plastic. Balancing one on each hand, she brought them back to the island where Amy was leaning. Placing them on the stainless steel surface, she peeled away the plastic, revealing an assortment of chilled, marinated vegetables. “And don’t eat these, either.”

“Will I be fed at all this evening,” Amy wondered out loud, “or should I head down the street to Taco Bell?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

“Hello!” Beth swept into the large room, arms open and purple hair flying. Right behind her was her fiancé, Ford, who carried an expensive-looking bottle of wine that he handed to Meg. “Jo and Theo are just parking.”

Beth picked up a slice of bruschetta from the same platter that Amy had reached for. Amy waited for Meg to smack her hand, too, but nothing happened as Beth sank her teeth into the crusty, tomato and herb–topped bread.

“Yummy.” Beth gave Meg an approving nod.

“Try this one.” Meg sliced a chunk off a homemade loaf and topped it with something from a jar before handing it to Ford, who lifted it to his lips. “This one is eggplant.”

“Have I done something to piss you off lately?” Amy planted her hands on her hips. “Why do they get to eat and I don’t?”

“They’re choosing the appetizers for their wedding dinner.” Meg shared an exasperated glance with Beth. “I need to make sure they try everything so they can choose.”

“You’ve made enough food to feed an army,” Amy pointed out. “And don’t you want my input, too?”

“You? The woman who announced that just because all three of her sisters are heading to the altar didn’t mean she wanted to wallow in wedding details all the time?” Jo and Theo entered the kitchen, the door slamming behind them. They made

a beeline for the food as Jo spoke. “Oh, are these the appetizers for Beth and Ford?”

John entered the kitchen then, swinging by the island to grab Meg around the waist and press a kiss into her neck. The oven timer went off, and Meg looked over her shoulder at Amy. “Can you grab those from the oven for me, Ames?”

Grumbling to herself, Amy did as she was asked. She grabbed a purple hot mitt from the counter. She pulled the steaming baking sheet of savory pastries from the hot depths of the oven, then placed them on the stainless steel counter. Turning around again, she tugged the oven mitt back off.

The three couples were clustered around the island, two by two. All were talking excitedly and laughing as they sampled the various things that Meg had prepared. Nobody asked for her opinion, or even looked to include her in the conversation at all.

For the first time in her entire life, Amy felt like an outsider among her own family.

Stung, she tossed the oven mitt back onto the counter. Prickles gathered behind her eyes, at the top of her nose, so she silently slid from the room. Grabbing her messenger bag from where she’d hung it, she slipped out the front door, settling herself on the top tier of the concrete steps.

The early evening air was cool and helped the tears that had threatened to retreat. Amy wasn’t a big crier—she actually couldn’t remember the last time she’d given in to tears—and she was embarrassed that she almost had inside. Sucking in big breaths of the crisp Boston air, she willed herself to calm down.

She and her sisters were close. They always had been. She knew them all well enough to know that none of them meant to make her feel excluded. The fact remained that she did, and she was tempted to jog down the street, catch the next bus

and head on home. That way she wouldn't have to listen to hours of wedding babble that would inevitably make her feel even more left behind. Or the inevitable jokes about each of her three sisters tossing their bouquets straight to her, because there would be no one else.

If she did that, though, she'd have to explain herself when the rest of the crew got home—the perils of still living at home. Instead, she loosened the ties of her bag and tugged out her sketchbook, then rooted around the bottom of her bag for a pencil.

Drawing was the one thing that soothed her when all else had failed. When she drew, she became so utterly absorbed in what she was doing that the here and now—the anxiety and hurt—faded away and she could just be.

She hadn't been to Meg's workspace for a few weeks, and in that time, the bower of cherry trees in the park across the street had bloomed. With her pencil, she outlined the tree branches as they reached up toward the evening sky as if in prayer, then shaded in the trunks. She contemplated penciling in the blossoms, so fluffy and full of promise, but decided she didn't want the gray of the pencil lead to detract from the beauty of the blooms. Eyes still on the trees, she rummaged blindly through her bag for her pencil case, where she knew she had a pastel the exact lavender-pink shade of the silky petals.

Balancing the pastel in her fingers, she pressed it to the paper of her sketchpad, adding the blossoms with light, feathery strokes. Her fingers flew expertly across the page, ignoring the approaching footsteps until someone moved directly in front of her, blocking her light.

"Do you mind?" she asked irritably, expecting one of Meg's employees, or someone else who rented part of the industrial space. When a familiar hand moved into her line of sight, plucking the pastel from her fingers and nudging her hand to the side, her pulse quickened in her throat.

“Has anyone told you lately how good you are?” Amy looked up, unsurprised to find Fred standing in front of her. He was balanced on one of the lower steps, leaning on the wrought iron railing with his free hand tucked in his pocket.

“Not in the last hour or so.” Her throat went dry as she took him in. He was dressed down for the first time since he’d come back into her life, in jeans and a light sweater, with polished leather shoes. Her eye for detail told her that any one of those pieces had probably cost ten times what she’d spent on her entire outfit—a denim miniskirt and vintage concert tee she’d scored at a thrift store. Still, it suited him. In truth, it took her right back to the first time she’d ever seen him, in that dingy bar—the guy who’d tried to fit in but hadn’t quite been able to hide the layer of polish that came from his very pores.

“May I?” Rather than snatch the sketchpad from her lap, as people often felt was their right to do, he extended a hand in question. She looked at him silently for a moment, then placed it in his hand. He whistled softly as he looked from her quick sketch, then back to her face. “You did this just now? In a couple of minutes?”

“Well, yeah.” She shrugged under the weight of his admiration, not something she was used to. “It’s not something I’d hang in my gallery or anything. I was just blowing off some steam.”

“I love it.” He looked her in the eye, and she saw that his words were true. He ruffled the corners of the pad with her fingertips, as though itching to look at the rest of her work, and she snatched it back before he could.

She made a show of tearing the cherry tree piece from the perforated edge. She hoped it would distract him from the urge to see more work, because he’d only have to go back another ten or so pages to see sketches she’d done of him after she’d ridden him in her tattoo chair. She had no qualms about the fact that she’d drawn him in the nude—he had a fantastic body, after all.

What she didn't want him to see was the emotion that might have leaked from her fingers to the page. She wasn't ready to show that to anyone yet, not even herself.

Silently, she handed over the piece of paper on which she'd sketched the cherry tree. "You can have it if you want."

He was silent for a moment as he studied the paper. Finally, he dragged his stare back up to her face, then placed the paper back in her lap.

"Going to sign it for me?"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

The tension stretched out between them, thick and as delicious as it had been the night before. She could still feel the echoes of pleasure his fingers had pulled from between her legs.

And she was still more than a bit nervous about what he'd meant when he'd said that this time, they'd do things his way. It was in her nature to poke, though, so she went with her gut. Rather than scribble her name in the corner of the paper to sign it, she pressed it to her lips. A moment later she pulled away, a round, red-lipsticked kiss in place of a signature.

She looked at him as she handed it back and saw the same flicker of heat that had ignited low in her belly. She sucked in a deep breath, smelled expensive cologne and laundry detergent, and knew she was in trouble.

"What are you doing here?" She closed her sketchbook, tucking it back in her bag. Rubbing her hands over her skirt to rid them of the pastel dust, she finally noticed the market bag and bouquet that he'd set on the steps beside her when he'd approached. "What's this?"

"Bribery." He grinned sheepishly before swinging himself down to sit beside her. "I thought I'd bring out the big guns, since I might have guilt-tripped Theo into letting me crash your family dinner."

"Bribery?" Her brow furrowed as she grabbed the bag from him and riffled through it. She huffed out a breath when she felt its heft. Fingers crinkling cellophane, she removed a gift bag, whistling when she lifted it up to eye its contents. "If this is for Meg, you've got her number. If you're not careful, actually, she'll dump John and

marry you.”

“Pink salt, capers, kalamata olives, sun-dried tomatoes and a whole bunch of cheese.” Amy made a face, genuinely impressed. “Excellent choices for the food-loving chef. You’re observant.”

“I had some help,” he offered, shrugging off her compliment. “I, ah, asked my parents’ chef for some recommendations.”

“Your parents have a chef?” She wasn’t shocked by this—she’d grown up close to Theo, and when his Brazilian mother hadn’t been in the kitchen, they’d been known to hire the job out. Still, it was a little thorn on the stem of this moment, the reminder of just how different they were.

“Don’t do that,” he said, placing a hand on her knee. Warmth radiated out from the touch, and she wanted to nuzzle into his arms like a kitten, which was part of the problem. “Don’t pull away. Here, let me distract you.”

He thrust his other parcel into her face. The blossoms of the bouquet tickled her nose and she laughed.

“They’re beautiful,” she admitted, admiring the multicolored roses—she didn’t stop to count, but there had to be at least two dozen.

“Don’t get any ideas, now.” He bumped her shoulder with his own companionably. “Those are for your mom.”

He’d brought flowers for Mamesie? And had taken the time to select the perfect hostess gift for Meg? Against her better judgment, her heart did a funny little quiver in her chest as she realized the lengths he’d gone to here...just for her.

“She’ll love them.” She tried to keep her voice light. “Roses are her favorite.”

“How about you?” He took the bouquet back, sniffing at the flowers. “What’s your favorite?”

“I like roses, too.” She was a little disappointed, in the most irrational of ways, that the flowers weren’t for her after all. “Not red, though. There’s this orangey-pink color of them you see sometimes. Those are the ones I like.”

“Damn it. I was so close.” When he set Mamesie’s bouquet down, she saw that he’d had not one bundle of flowers, but two. The second was much smaller, a single rose with a spray of greenery, and this he handed over with another one of those sexy-as-sin smiles of his. “I guessed orange. Now I know.”

“I—what?” She looked from the blossom in her lap to Fred, then back to the flower. It was perfect, a true, sugary-soda orange, and smelled like nectarines. “This is for me?”

“Why do you look so surprised?” He reached out to toy with his fingers. “Haven’t you ever gotten flowers before?”

She hadn’t, but if she told him that, she’d be admitting the significance of this moment. Instead she pushed abruptly to her feet. Turning, she stood between his spread thighs, placing her hands on his shoulders for balance.

“I know you said we’re going to do things your way,” she started, arching an eyebrow, “but is it possible that your way might involve getting out of here?”

Placing his hands on her hips, he tugged her closer, then brushed his lips over the swells of her breasts, through the thin cotton of her T-shirt. She shivered as he dipped his thumbs beneath the waistband of her skirt and rubbed gently.

“Ever been on a bike?”

“Like...a community cruiser?” She was confused. “Not how I pictured you getting around.”

“Like a motorcycle, brat.” He ran those thumbs over her belly to meet in the middle, where he toyed with the button of her skirt. “Ever ridden one of those?”

“What kind of stereotypical tattoo shop owner would I be if I hadn’t?” She grinned at him, then gestured to her skirt. “I’m not exactly dressed for it, though. We might have to get up close and...personal.”

She yelped when he stood abruptly. Lifting her with him, he slung her over his shoulder and jogged down the steps.

“I’m counting on it.” She laughed like a loon as he carried her halfway down the block, leaving his packages behind on the front steps of Meg’s kitchen. When they reached his bike, he slid her slowly back down his body, and the journey down all those hard planes stole her breath.

Placing her back on her feet, he slid his hands up under the hem of her skirt to cup her ass. The street was quiet, though not deserted, but she didn’t care who saw as he massaged her skin, bared by a lacy thong.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

His eyes on her, and hers on him, she hiked her skirt up to her hips before straddling the bike. She could feel his stare like a touch as it raked over her bare legs from ankle to hip, a sexy smirk tugging at the corners of his lips.

“See something you like?” She deliberately echoed the words he’d once spoken to her, and his quick intake of breath told her he remembered. He closed the space between them, and she expected him to swing one of those long legs over the bike, to straddle it in front of her. Instead he opened a compartment and pulled out two helmets. Placing one on his head, he pulled out his phone, swiping and tapping, before dressing her in the matching one.

The one-hit wonder by ’80s music icon Tiffany flooded her ears through the helmet, and Amy laughed out loud with delight. She couldn’t see Fred’s mouth, but the crinkles around his eyes told her that he was smiling, too, as he climbed onto the bike in front of her. Reaching behind him, he took her hands and urged her to wrap her arms around his waist. She did, squeezing him tightly as he started the bike.

They were from different worlds. This could never last.

That didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy it while it did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“WANT ME TO take you home?” Fred used the speaker function so that Amy would be able to hear him inside her own helmet. She didn’t reply with words, but he could feel her shaking her head. Rather than stopping the bike to ask where she wanted to go, he took a chance and navigated them to his apartment building.

He parked the bike in the underground garage and cut the engine. He climbed off, removed his helmet, then took Amy's off for her. Her blond curls were slightly flattened, her cheeks red from the wind, her signature red lipstick long gone.

He thought she was beautiful.

"How was that?" He grinned at her as he helped her climb off the bike. Her arms were icy cold, and he ran his hands up and down them to help her warm them. "Everything you dreamed of?"

"Best thing I've ridden today." Deliberately, she adjusted her tiny skirt, but not before giving him a sneak peek of the pretty pink folds barely covered by that excuse for her underwear.

"Should I take that as a challenge?" He hooked a finger in the front of her T-shirt, tugging her against him. When she was close enough, he slid his palm down, through the valley between her breasts, over her flat belly and beneath the hem of her skirt. Tucking his hand between her legs, he nudged past her thong and slid two fingers inside, without resistance. "That's what I thought. You're fucking soaked."

"I can't imagine why." She widened her legs, whimpering when he pulled out, then thrust back in. "I just spent the last two hours riding a giant vibrator, pressed up against this."

She reached around his torso, hands stroking over the curves of his ass. The flash of her pretty pussy as she'd climbed off the bike had brought him to half-mast, and now, with her hands on him, and her liquid heat bathing his fingers, he felt his cock fill.

She moved her hands, heading for his erection like a homing beacon, but he caught her around the wrists. He walked backward, pulling her along with him toward the elevator.

“Is this your building?” Those big eyes of hers took in the sleek, modern lines of the elevator, as well as the fact that he didn’t have to press buttons for any floors, merely tap a key card for the elevator to start moving upward. He wasn’t nervous for her to see his place, not exactly, but...okay, yeah. He was apprehensive. He didn’t care about the wealth disparity between them at all, but he knew that insisting she not care, either, would just be a display of his privilege.

She was quiet as they rode up, and silent as the elevator opened right into his apartment. Each floor in this building only had one unit—his brother, Frank, lived two floors beneath him. He followed her out, heard the hiss of the doors closing behind them as they stepped into his place, and he looked over the hardwood and massive windows of his living room, tensely waiting for her reaction.

She wandered to the window, which was a floor-to-ceiling span of glass. He joined her, standing shoulder to shoulder as they looked out over the city of Boston at nighttime. She pressed the fingertips of one hand to the glass, as if testing its thickness.

“Nice view,” she commented, and the knot of nerves in his gut relaxed.

“It’s why I settled on this building.”

“Can I sit here and draw sometime?”

Her question surprised him.

“Of course.” He turned to her, but she was still looking out into the night. “Anytime.”

“Thanks.” Pressing her fingers to the glass again, she tapped, a bit harder than before.

“I bet this is pretty sturdy, huh?”

“Two sheets thick. Heat strengthened and shatterproof.” He cocked his head at the question. “Random curiosity?”

“Not at all.” Turning, she met his stare, then fisted her hands in the hem of her T-shirt. Before he could even suck in a breath, she’d pulled the shirt over her head and tossed it away. She did the same with her skirt, wiggling it down and stepping out. “I was wondering if it would hold up to you fucking me against it.”

“Jesus Christ, Amy.” Sweat broke out along his hairline as she ran her hands through her hair, tousling the curls. She stroked her own palms down her body, stroking the side of her neck, cupping her breasts, sliding her hands between her legs. He caught one of them, pressing her hand to his erection, already hard before they’d gotten into the elevator, swelling even more now with her standing in front of him, almost naked. “The things that come out of your mouth.”

“You don’t like the things that come out of my mouth?” Smiling wickedly, she dropped to her knees in front of him and reached for the buckle of his belt. “Maybe you’re more interested in putting something into it, instead.”

He looked down, watching her pretty blond head as she made quick work of his belt and the fastenings of his jeans. He helped her tug his jeans down around his hips and pulled off his own sweater. When she rose halfway, placing her hands on his hips for balance, he slid both hands into her hair, tugging gently.

She gasped, then licked her lips. Their eyes met, and he felt a surge of power—not power over her, but power that she was choosing to give him the gift of herself. It made him want to give her what she wanted, everything she wanted, so he tugged on her hair again, not as gently this time, and savored the resultant gasp.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

The connection stretched between them as always, velvety and full of promise, but this time it held a whisper of darkness. Something about seeing Amy here, on her knees before him... He'd touched her eagerly, and he'd touched her carefully. Right now? He wanted to give in to the restless storm brewing between them, to combine his thunder with her lightning.

The navy glitter in her eyes told him she wanted that, too.

With his free hand, he grasped the full length of his erection. He stroked his hand up the shaft, slid over the head and back, a handful of times as Amy watched with greedy eyes. With the hand tangled in her hair, he guided her head until her lips touched the swollen tip of his cock.

"I'm not going to be able to keep things gentle this time," he told her, his voice dark, so rough he almost couldn't recognize it. "If anything is too much, just say so. Or if you can't, just do something three times. Got it? Blink, or hit me, or whatever. Three times, and I'll stop. Okay?"

"Okay." Her breath warmed his shaft, damp and warm. Anticipation was a drug, sliding through his veins and making him high. "But I'll tell you now... I won't."

Before he could speak, she parted her lips and took him into her mouth. Her tongue explored the weight of his arousal, stroking the underside of his shaft with practiced motions that made him see stars. She kept her eyes open, watching him as she worked on him with her warm, wet mouth.

Following an instinct he hadn't known he had, he sank the hand that had been holding

his shaft into her tousled blond curls as well. He saw her eyes widen when he used his grip, which was still gentle enough, to hold her in place.

She hummed around him, the vibration working through his flesh, and his fingers flexed against the flaxen silk of her hair, working her forward on his cock. When he would have eased off, she placed her palms on his thighs to steady herself, the tips of her fingers digging into the muscle while her blue gaze brightened.

She'd liked that, having that bit of control taken away from her. And if it was what she wanted, then he wanted to give it to her.

"You were right," he started, using his grip to pull her back slightly, then move her forward again, taking charge of her movements on his cock. "I do like it when you put things into your mouth."

She swallowed around him, and he groaned. She liked that, too, that bit of dirty talk, so he closed his eyes for a moment, then let what he was thinking, feeling, spill off his tongue without censure.

"I wonder if you like it as much as I do," he pondered out loud as vibrant colors swirled behind his closed eyelids. She moaned around him, and he parted his lashes to look at her again. "Your skin is flushed such a pretty pink from sucking me, I think you do. But I wonder if I can make you like it even more."

Bending slightly from the waist, he cupped a gorgeous breast in each hand, felt the sensation of another of her inarticulate cries muffled by his cock in her mouth. Squeezing softly, he stroked his thumbs over the tips of her nipples, felt her body jerk in response.

"I've been fascinated by these little bits of jewelry since the first time I saw you, standing there in that bar, your shirt so sheer that I could see them, plain as day." Her

sucking faltered, and he stopped in his ministrations until she understood her error and resumed. “But we’re always in a hurry, aren’t we? I’ve never had nearly enough time to play with these gorgeous tits as I’d like to.”

She whimpered when he released her, but he only did so long enough to wet his fingers in his mouth. He returned his hands to those soft, creamy mounds, this time catching each nipple between a thumb and forefinger, rolling and teasing to see what elicited a response.

The rosy peaks were already puckered from his touch, but when he gave a light tug to each silver bar, Amy’s body bucked, as though he had stroked a finger right over her clit. Fascinated, he did it again and felt her nipples contract and harden, crinkled beneath his fingers.

First the gentle hair pull, now the pinches on her breasts. It seemed that Amy liked a bit of pain with her sex, or at least that she wanted it right now. Fred had never really been into pain play, not anything beyond a bout of rough sex, but something about these responses from this woman reached inside him and turned his blood to lava.

Catching the silver bars in his fingers, he pulled again, and again she moaned and writhed with a whole-body response. He did it again, adding a twist, and her lips parted, his swollen cock falling from her tongue as she panted, hands digging into his muscles.

“Fuck, yes. Fred.” Her spine arched as she tried to press herself more firmly into his touch, her entire body begging for more. “More.”

He did, adding a squeeze to the soft, fleshy mounds as well, and she closed her eyes. Again moving on instinct, as though he’d been possessed by a darker self with more taboo desires, he took his hands from her breasts and caught her chin in one hand.

“Did I say you could stop sucking me?” His whole body stilled, a stark contrast to the quivering of the woman on her knees. He caught a flicker of apprehension in her eyes, but it was twined with debauched delight.

They were on.

“No.” She exhaled the word, her smoky voice like a siren’s. “You should probably punish me.”

Punish her?

He should have been revolted. Turned off. Instead he saw that this was what she wanted, what her body craved, and he knew he’d do anything to give it to her. He didn’t care what her kinks were, so long as she let him give her what she needed.

“Damn straight, I should.” He cocked his head as he took in the eagerness in her body. “I want you to sit on your heels, hands in your lap. Do not move.”

She hummed under her breath, a soft sound of satisfaction. It was physically painful for him to move away from her, but he needed something from his bedroom for what he had planned next.

In his bedroom, he pulled a bottle of lube from his bedside drawer, and a silver strip of condoms as well. These items in hand, he returned to the living room and found Amy exactly as he’d left her, but for one difference—her busy fingers were buried between her thighs, one hand stroking in and out, and the other circling her clit.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Bending, he caught her by the wrists, forced her to stop touching herself. She laughed, a breathy sound meant to bait him. When she saw the answering smirk on his own face, the amusement faded from hers, replaced with that hint of anxiety again, as well as an undeniable streak of need.

“If you need something to occupy your hands, then I have just the job.” He let the corner of his mouth curl up just slightly and heard her needy sigh. “But I have to get you ready first.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

Pulling open the lid to the bottle of lube, he poured a generous pool into the palm of one hand. Setting the bottle down, he rubbed his hands together, warming the liquid before again cupping her breasts.

“Fuck,” Amy hissed as he massaged the cream-colored mounds. She pushed into his touch when he glanced his fingers over the turgid tips, but he focused his attention on making her breasts, and the crevice in between them, deliciously slick.

“Lie down.” He traced a single finger over one silver bar before picking up the bottle of lube again. She did as he said, propping herself up on her elbows to watch as he took another generous palmful of the lubricant, this time applying it to his swollen length.

“I love your cock.” Her voice was rough, as though she hadn’t spoken in a week. He felt himself thicken at the words, but otherwise ignored them, instead straddling her hips.

“Doesn’t matter if you love it or not,” he informed her, sliding his hand up and down his engorged shaft, feeling the pleasure sparking along the nerves left in the wake of the touch. “You’re going to do what I want with it, anyway.”

“Yes,” she replied on a hiss, dropping to a fully supine position on the carpet. Bending her knees, opening wide, she cupped her breasts in her own hands, panting with excitement. “Is this what you had in mind?”

“I guess we’ll see.” He smirked again before ranging himself over her body. He longed to use her parted thighs to cradle his pelvis, to slide himself home and fill her

over and over and over again.

Instead he moved farther up her body. Bracing his weight with an arm on either side of her head, he slid the tip of his erection between her breasts, his eyes almost crossing from the pleasure.

“Can you reach your nipples?” He slid forward just a bit, savoring the sensation of her snug flesh around him. She nodded, breathless, and he worked forward the rest of the way. “Good. Play with them while I fuck your tits.”

Another harsh sound from her, and then she did as he asked. Her artist’s palms cupped her breasts, holding them together as he worked his cock back and forth in the slippery space between them. At the same time, she used her talented fingers to pluck at her nipples, much harder than he would have dared.

He could sense her arousal reaching a fever pitch. Her hips bucked beneath him, and she craned her neck so that she could swipe a warm tongue over the swollen head of his erection as he thrust. Swearing, he pulled out of the warm hollow, the sudden cool air on his engorged shaft making him crazy. She cried out as he flipped her over to her belly, using bossy hands to pull her hips up while she remained bent over.

“You keep trying to take control,” he chastised her, placing a hand on the small of her back, pinning her in place. He was in his role now, the one she’d wanted him to take on, and enjoying every second of it. “Every time you do, it’s just going to postpone what you really want.”

“How do you know what I really want?” Her words were meant to taunt but quivered with arousal. With need.

“Because you told me.” With his free hand, he pulled back, then swatted her across one side of her ass. She gasped, that tight, delicious body jolting forward on the

carpet. Her pale skin reddened, and he knew he should feel bad about that, but truthfully...

Truthfully, seeing it glow scarlet, watching the mark from his hand on her skin? It did it for him, dug a hook into some primal part of himself and pulled it forward into the light.

His biggest kink was, and always would be, giving his partner—giving Amy—what she wanted.

But this?

This was really fucking hot.

Bending over her, he delivered a second swat, this time to the other cheek. Again she cried out, a wordless jumble of sound, and when he massaged the heated skin, she rubbed her thighs together as if searching for a friction that would give her some relief.

“Please.” She canted her behind in the air, the pretty pink peeking out from between her legs making his mouth go dry. He swatted her sharply again, then delivered a rapid succession of lighter blows that rained down over her flesh, which elicited a series of whimpers, gasps and moans. “Fred. I can’t wait any longer.”

“You’ll wait as long as I tell you to wait.” He swiped two questing fingers between her folds. She was soaked, hot and wet, and his cock ached to slide inside. Tamping down the urge, he worked those fingers into her slick channel. “Lucky for you, this is where I want to be. I want to be here so badly it hurts.”

Climbing to his feet, he worked his jeans the rest of the way off, taking his underwear with them. Tearing into one of the little foil packets he’d retrieved from his bedside

table, he rolled the ring of latex down his shaft, then turned his attention back to her.

His dick was already at attention, rigid and swollen with the need to be inside her. But as he looked at her there, on the floor of his apartment, he felt something flutter around his heart. She was beautiful, sure—the graceful arch of her spine, the riot of skulls and wildflowers inked into the smooth skin of her back, the heart shape of her ass—but it was more than that.

After a lifetime constrained in a little box made of the expectations of others, he was free to be who he wanted with this woman. More than that—she expected it from him. Demanded it.

He never wanted to let her go.

“Up.” He held out a hand to help her off the floor. She stood on shaky legs, and he spun her until they were face-to-face, where he could claim her mouth in a kiss. Dipping his head to hers, he coaxed his tongue between her lips as he lifted her off her feet. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her to the window. They both groaned at the friction of skin on skin as he set her back down on her feet, his cock pressing into the flat surface of her belly.

“Turn around.” His hands skimmed her body as she followed his order. A gasp escaped her lips at the discovery that she was an inch from the floor-to-ceiling window of glass, thirty floors above the streets of Boston. “Is this still what you want?”

“Yes.” She shivered.

“You’re not afraid of heights?” He spanned her waist, his grip promising to catch her if she fell. Rather than push back into his touch, she closed that last ribbon of space between herself and the window.

“No.” She settled her smooth cheek against the cool glass. “I love them.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

“Good.” Taking his cock in hand, he rubbed the tip through her wetness, then worked it up and down, through the crevice that divided her buttocks. Bending his knees slightly, he placed the head at her opening, working the tip into her swollen tissues. She squeezed around him, and he groaned.

He wanted to surge forward, to seat himself inside her, but forced himself to slow down and savor the moment. Dipping his head, he inhaled the spicy scent of her shampoo, then pressed a kiss to the top of her head. She sighed, a soft little sound of contentment that reached right through his rib cage and grabbed his heart in a tight fist. He needed to get closer to her; he wasn’t sure he could get close enough.

Pressing a palm to the window to brace himself, he began to move, filling her at a slow but steady pace. She gasped once he was sheathed inside her to the root, her greedy center clenching around him. Pleasure tightened in his core, and he pressed his forehead to the chilled glass, trying to get himself under control. He wanted this to last.

Amy had other ideas. Pressing her own hands to the glass, she arched back against him. Bending at the waist to allow him to slide in just a little bit farther, she gave a delicious little wiggle of her hips.

“In a hurry?” Fred’s voice was amused. “Got a hot date I don’t know about?”

“I’m so sorry,” she replied, her voice thick with arousal and dripping with saccharine sweetness, “but I thought you said you wanted to give me what I wanted. And what I want is to get fucked.”

Heat shot through him like he'd touched a live wire, a single sizzle from head to foot, and he growled. Clasp ing her by the hips, he dug the tips of his fingers into her soft flesh. "Then I'd suggest you hold on."

Using her as his anchor, he began to move. Slow, punishing thrusts at first, as deep inside her as he could go. They both made incoherent sounds every time his hips met the curves of her behind; both exhaled when he pulled back. The deep thrusts quickly gave way to shorter ones, harder ones. His pace quickened until he could hear their flesh slapping together, a sound that shouldn't have been erotic and yet was the dirtiest thing he'd ever heard.

"Fuck, yes." Her hands, damp with sweat, slipped on the glass. He wrapped his arms around her waist to anchor her, continuing to move inside her as his entire world narrowed to the place where her soft pink flesh squeezed around the steel rod of his erection. "Please, Fred. I can't wait any longer."

"Come for me." Dipping his head, he nipped at the delicate curve where her shoulder became her neck. She growled, a purely animal sound, so he did it again, this time giving her a sharp bite since he already knew she liked a bit of pain with her pleasure. Her pussy tightened around him, and her body stiffened, hot and tight beneath him. "Now. Come now."

He watched her shudder, felt the vibrations through his flesh, and then she screamed, the cry bouncing off the smooth glass. He moved through it all, her pleasure spurring on his own. His arousal starting to barrel through his body like a runaway train, and finally he could hold back no more. One thrust, two and three and four, and he poured himself inside her, pleasure causing stars to dance behind his eyes.

They were both out of breath, panting hard enough to create mist on the glass. Heat had sealed them together, and as they both laughingly tried to catch their breath, Fred realized that he could quite happily stay like this, right here with this woman, for the

rest of his life.

The realization should have been terrifying. It should have had him easing out of her body and running for the door, never mind the fact that this was his apartment. Instead, he found that it felt...well, it felt right.

He knew he had to pull out, but he resented it, even as the slow drag through her tissues sparked pleasure yet again. Carefully, he eased them to the ground, sitting with his legs apart, and Amy between them.

“Think anybody saw us?” Amy murmured, nestling back against him, her back to his front. They were looking out the window they’d just been pressed against, watching the bright lights of Boston at nighttime, twinkling thirty floors beneath him. “Whatever would your neighbors think?”

“They’d be jealous,” he replied with certainty. “They’d look at this incredibly hot woman, writhing on my dick, and wonder what I’d done to get so fucking lucky.”

She laughed, and he liked the husky sound. They were silent for a moment, and Fred held his breath. This was the point at which she usually withdrew, or ran, or otherwise broke their connection.

When she twisted around to give him a soft kiss, he found that he could exhale again. She wasn’t running. He could relax.

He wouldn’t, though. Not until he’d figured out a way to make her see how right this was, this thing between them. Not until he figured out a way to make her stay.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE NEXT DAY, Amy was sore. Deliciously so, her every movement a reminder of

the ways Fred had used her body—the ways they'd used each other.

Several times today, a dirty memory from the night before had flashed before her eyes, as vivid as a summer day. Her on her knees at his feet, his cock heavy on her tongue as he fucked her mouth with bossy thrusts of his hips. Her on hands and knees, face pressed to the plush carpet as he spanked her ass, leaving wicked heat in the wake of his blows. The strange, exciting sensation of cold, slick glass pressed to her breasts, her belly, her cheek as he claimed her from behind.

This morning, the searching tenderness in those green eyes of his when he'd pulled up in front of the house she'd grown up in, where she still lived. He might not have known what a big step that was for her, letting him see the old brown house that was so much shabbier than its newer, fancier neighbors, but she'd wanted to do it—wanted to give him a little piece of herself.

That alone told her how much trouble she was in. It was like she was on board a train that had been set into motion five years ago, one that kept going faster and faster and was bound to crash, to end in a giant, fiery explosion, but she couldn't get off—didn't want to get off—because the speed of the ride felt so damn good.

After sending her midmorning client out the door overjoyed with their new ink, she stretched to loosen her tight muscles as she stood behind her front counter, contemplating her lunch choices. She had no plans for that evening and found herself wondering what Fred was up to. Picking up her phone, she thought to send him a text asking just that, but stopped herself.

This—these floaty, good-sex feelings, the emotional buzz—this smacked of a relationship.

Was it a relationship?

If it was...would that be so bad?

The chiming of the bells hanging in her doorway took her attention from her phone. Her stomach clenched with excitement when she spotted the familiar ginger head brushing against the copper of the bells because of his height.

“I was just thinking of texting...” Her voice trailed off when the man stopped just inside the entrance of her shop, looking around. “You’re not Fred.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

“Guilty as charged.” The man held out his hands, palms facing her, with a self-deprecating smile. It was a familiar expression, one that she’d seen on Fred’s own lips, but while she found it sexy on her Vaughan twin, on this one it just seemed contrived. “I don’t think we’ve ever actually been formally introduced. I’m Frank.”

Closing the space between them, he offered her his hand. She shook it, though she arched an eyebrow as she did. “Trying to steal me away from your twin brother at a crappy club in Amsterdam doesn’t count as an intro in your world, then?”

He laughed, and she experienced a discordant moment. He looked so much like Fred that parts of her assumed he would sound like Fred, and he did a bit. The tone of his voice was a slightly higher pitch, though, and the inflections in his words a little different.

Given the thoughts she’d been having about this man’s identical twin all morning, this was just...weird.

“Did you do all this yourself?” Tucking his hands into the pockets of his suit pants, Frank rocked back on his heels, making a show of looking around her space.

“The art, you mean? Or the wall painting and light fixtures?” Her brow furrowed as she watched him. Why was he here?

“Both, I suppose.” Nodding, he cast her an approving glance. “Good job. It’s very different than I thought it would be. It’s really nice.”

That’s a hell of a backhanded compliment. It was on the tip of her tongue to say just

that, but something had her biting her tongue. She was pretty sure that something was Fred, and the fact that she didn't know where they stood exactly. Still, she wasn't pleased that Frank seemed oblivious to the fact that she didn't need or want his approval, and it made her tongue slightly sharper than it would be with the ordinary lookie-loo. "Can I help you with something? Would you like to see some designs?"

"Some tattoo designs?" He looked at her with amazement. "For me? Oh, I don't think so."

She caught what he wasn't saying—that tattoos weren't for people like him, they were for people like her. Her temper flared—she and all three of her sisters had more than their fair share of it—but the bells in her doorway jingled again, distracting her.

"Hello." The six-foot-four-inch man with auburn hair who entered her shop this time was the right one. As Fred approached the desk, she thought she could actually feel her body vibrate with excitement. He looked at Frank, then cast Amy a quizzical glance, to which she shrugged. "What are you doing here, Frank?"

"Just giving her a second chance to choose the right twin," Frank countered, grinning slickly at his brother. He winked at Amy and seemed a bit startled when she frowned in return.

"Good luck with that." Fred winked at Amy, too, and while she had not appreciated the gesture from Frank, from Fred it made butterflies flutter in her belly. She expected him to make some kind of bro-type comment, like the fact that he'd proven he was enough man for her, but when he continued, she realized that she was coloring her expectations with past experiences. "She's a woman who knows what she wants."

And there, right there, she knew that she was falling head over heels in love with him. Mouth suddenly dry, she groped blindly for the bottle of water she knew was sitting somewhere on her desk.

“Well, if there’s no hope, then...” Frank rolled his eyes at his twin, then nodded at Amy with a small smile. “I guess I’ll take my leave. Looking forward to speaking more with you later.”

What did that mean? She didn’t have time to ponder, because she was still grappling with the realization that she’d gone and fallen in love with the man standing in front of her. The one who was looking at her strangely as she stood there with crazy eyes, frantically flailing about for her water bottle.

“Are you okay?” He cocked his head, moved in closer. “You look...warm.”

“Water,” she croaked, gesturing to her desk. With deft movements he grabbed her water bottle—it had been literally right in front of her, because of course it had—unscrewing the cap before handing it to her. She took a long sip, both to quench her thirst and to give herself a moment in which to compose herself.

“Better?” He didn’t give her a moment. Instead, he nipped the bottle from her hand once she was done drinking, setting it back on the desk. He studied her with a small smile that made her knees quiver. “Hmm, I’m thirsty, too. Wanna share?”

Before she could suck in another breath, his lips were on hers, his tongue stealing away the droplets of moisture that remained. What started as a light, teasing kiss quickly deepened, pulling her under to a place she never wanted to surface from again.

“I like the way you say hello,” she gasped when he finally released her. He grinned, grabbing her around the waist and tugging her against him. He dipped his head to nibble at the lobe of her ear, and she felt dampness pool between her thighs. “Didn’t you get your fill last night?”

“Never.” He spoke with such certainty, looking into her eyes, that her heart skipped a

painful beat. She didn't know what to do with these feelings—didn't know if she was ready for them—so she tried to lighten the current passing between them.

“What are you doing tonight, then?” Sex, she thought. Bring it back to sex—back to familiar territory. Rising onto her toes, she rocked her hips against his, felt the first stirrings of his desire as she pressed a finger to his lips. She sucked in a quick breath when his tongue darted out for a taste. “Maybe you can fill me some more.”

“Dirty girl.” He sank his teeth into the tip of her finger, then licked again to soothe the sting. “That's why I stopped by, actually. To see if you had plans tonight.”

“I don't.” She let her finger slide from his lips, down his chin, his solid chest, down until she could hook it in the leather of his belt. She felt the flat plane of his belly quiver in response. “Unless you can think of something I should do?”

He hissed out a swear when her fingers dipped into the waistband of his dress pants, dancing over the head of his cock. He grabbed her by the hips, squeezed, pulled her tighter.

“I can think of lots of things you can do. Things that you will do,” he started, grinding his pelvis lightly against her. “But before that... I'm hoping I can convince you to join me for dinner.”

“I like to eat,” she replied lightly, rising on her toes to nip at the line of his jaw. “Bet you can think of something I'd really like to put in my mouth.”

“Woman.” With his grip on her hips, he pulled back, huffing out a pained laugh. “Stay with me here. I mean real dinner. With food. A nice meal. And...company.”

“Company?” She stilled her hands as she looked up at him. “Your company, I presume?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

“Mine,” he agreed, watching her carefully, “and my family’s.”

“What?” Startled, Amy pulled back from him completely. “Why on earth would you want me to have dinner with your family?”

She looked into his face, searching for a sign that he was kidding. He was not.

“I was under the impression that there’s something between us, here. Something bigger than I’ve ever felt before.” He narrowed his eyes. “I want my family to meet you.”

“Fred. You can’t be serious.” She shook her head as panic bubbled up in her gut.

“Of course I’m serious.” He seemed taken aback by her reaction, and frustration followed her panic. “Why would I joke about this?”

“Your family owns this mall,” she reminded him, planting her hands on her hips. “They’re the ones trying to kick me out.”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay.” Reaching out, he rubbed his hands up and down her upper arms. “That won’t come up tonight. You’ll be there strictly as my...my...”

“Your what?” Temper heated her words. She was getting whiplash from her own emotions. “The woman you were supposed to tell to shape up or ship out? The one you also happen to be fucking? Do they know that, by the way? Is that why Frank was in here? To keep an eye on me?”

“That’s not fair.” His voice was quiet. “I was a part of my family before I ever met you. Part of being a Vaughan means participating in the family business. Of course I said I’d deliver that letter. I had no idea I was supposed to deliver it to you.”

“Well, now you know.” She tapped a foot on the floor, trying to release some of her pent-up energy. “And I assume they do, too. What do you think will happen tonight? I show up to dinner, and they’re going to think I’m sleeping with you to keep my retail space. Or worse. They’ll think I’m a gold digger.”

“Amy.” His voice was filled with frustration. “I get that it’s not an ideal situation, but that’s part of the reason I want them to meet you, to spend some time with you. I know once they get to know you, they’ll see that that petition was ridiculous. That you should stay.”

“I’m not going to beg them.” A dart of hurt burrowed its way into her chest. “If they can’t see what I bring, then they don’t deserve to have me.”

“No one expects you to beg.” This time his voice dripped with frustration. “Give me a break here, would you? I want you to come to dinner so that my family can meet you, end of story. Come have a nice meal and let them meet the woman in my life. I’m sure they’re going to be as wowed by you as I am. And if that affects their thoughts on that petition, that’s just a bonus. Okay?”

Amy sucked a breath in through her nose, her temper still sharp. She was under no delusions here.

That petition was essentially a piece of paper that the other vendors of the plaza had signed to say that Amy didn’t fit in and they didn’t want her there. Not nice, but also not surprising—Amy had never fit in anywhere, and usually she was fine with that. What had surprised her about this whole nonsense was the fact that Vaughan Enterprises—the company made up of Fred’s family—had looked at what was

essentially an opinion and had acted on it. They'd issued her a warning telling her to conform, to toe the line, while ignoring the fact that she had just as much right to be there as anyone else. More, if they'd stopped to examine just what she brought to the table.

This meant that the company, and Fred's family, was very concerned with image. She looked down at her right hand, with the four roses tattooed along her knuckles, and knew that she did not fit their aesthetic. She never would.

She shouldn't go. It would only end in heartbreak.

"Please?" Closing the distance between them again, Fred squeezed her shoulders gently as he looked down at her beseechingly. "It would mean a lot to me. Okay?"

After a long pause, she nodded once, a jerk of her chin. The moment she did, she knew that she was going to regret it, but Fred's smile chased away the chill.

Fine. She'd go have dinner with his parents. But she wasn't going to pretend to be anyone but herself.

Four hours later, Amy drummed her fingers on the gold-flecked vinyl countertop in the bathroom she shared with Jo.

"Stop fidgeting," Meg insisted as she wound another lock of Amy's fine hair around the barrel of her curling iron. "You're going to get burned."

"Sorry." Amy slid her hands beneath her butt to keep them still. She was seated on the closed lid of the toilet as her eldest sister worked on her hair. "Better?"

"It would be better if you told me why you were so nervous." Finished with the curling iron, Meg set it on a silicone mat on the counter, then picked up an aerosol

can of hairspray. “Close your eyes.”

Amy did, waiting for Meg to finish spraying before she spoke again. “I’m not nervous.”

“Pants on fire,” Meg replied around the bobby pin in her mouth. “I just watched you brush your teeth for the third time because you forgot you’d already done it twice.”

Amy scowled as Meg ran her fingers through the curls she’d just created, then pinned a piece back with the bobby pin. “I’m not... It’s not that I’m scared to meet them, exactly.”

“Close your eyes.” Satisfied with the hair, Meg waved a mascara wand in the air. “What is it, then?”

“I already know there’s a really good chance that they’re not going to like me. I’m not their kind of person.” Amy held perfectly still, felt Meg brushing the liquid onto her eyelashes as she tried to put it into words. “That doesn’t bother me, much. It’s more that... shit. I don’t know how to say it.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

“It’s because you actually care about this guy.” Setting the mascara aside, Meg dusted powder over the apples of Amy’s cheeks. “And you’re afraid that he’s going to start seeing you through his family’s eyes.”

Amy opened her eyes, squinting narrowly up at her sister. “There’s a terrifying thought. Thank you ever so much for putting it into my head.”

“You’re welcome.” Meg smiled beatifically. “You’re done.”

Meg moved back, clapping her hands together to remove the remnants of face dust that clung. Amy craned her head around to the mirror to see. She frowned. “You didn’t do what I asked you to.”

She’d told Meg to...well, to tone her down a bit. Pink lipstick instead of her signature red. Easy on the eye makeup and the contouring.

Instead, her sister had taken her usual look and classed it up, for lack of a better word. Her lips were painted red, but it was a deep crimson rather than her usual scarlet. Her eyes had been accentuated with a set of smoky browns, her cheekbones emphasized with a tawny shade.

She looked like herself. And she looked like she could kick some ass.

“It works,” she told Meg, nodding with approval. “Even though you went off book.”

“You wanted me to go off book,” her sister replied with a shake of her head. “You wanted me to make you look like someone you’re not. Like someone you think these

people will be happy to meet.”

“That’s not true,” Amy replied, but even as she did, she knew it was a lie.

“It most certainly is.” With a wide smile, Meg handed Amy her bottle of signature perfume, indicating with a pinch of her fingers to go easy on it. “But that’s not who Fred invited to dinner. Family or not, I have to think he wants you to be you.”

“I guess we’ll see.” Sucking in a deep breath, Amy placed a hand on her stomach in an attempt to quiet the nerves rolling around in it. “Still totally not nervous.”

“Right.” Meg rolled her eyes as she handed Amy a small makeup bag that she’d stuffed with the essentials for touch-ups. “Look. I get that you care about this guy, and that changes things. Believe me, I understand.”

Meg had gone through her share of strife with her own love, John, so Amy knew this to be true.

“Here’s the thing, though. If he’s worth it, really worth it? He won’t expect you to change a thing. More than that? He’ll fight to keep you, just the way you are.”

“Right.” This wasn’t news—it was a truth Amy lived her life by. She’d never before cared enough, one way or another, if someone she’d been seeing came up lacking.

This time? If Fred proved himself unworthy tonight...she wasn’t sure she could recover.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“WOW.” THE LOOK on Fred’s face when he opened the front door to his parents’ house was worth every second that Amy had let Meg layer her face in makeup. He

looked her up and down, appreciation evident in his features. “Hi.”

“You’re staring.” She smirked at him as she hitched her purse up higher on her shoulder. Her wallet stuck out the top, and she took a moment to tuck it back into the bag—she’d splurged on an Uber to get here. Fred had wanted to come pick her up, but she’d wanted her own means of escape, just in case.

“You’re worth staring at.” He gestured with his hand for her to turn around. She did, laughing, letting him get a full view. “Let me use some of the many words I’ve learned over my life to say, damn.”

She knew he hadn’t expected her to show up for dinner in her habitual torn cutoffs and tank top, but he’d never seen her in anything else. She was vain enough to enjoy the hell out of the way he was looking at her, and she knew she deserved it. It had been a bit of work, but damn it, she looked good.

A sleek, satiny, plum-colored dress clung to her curves from throat to knee. It was Meg’s dress, and where it hit midcalf on her sister, it ended just above the knee for her. She’d paired it with spiky-heeled black boots that made the most of her legs. She’d added a thin black sweater that covered her shoulders and arms but was fitted enough not to distract from the lines of the dress.

The look had been chosen with care. She wasn’t ashamed of who she was, or the ink that she’d chosen to mark indelibly on her body. That said, she also wasn’t so naive that she thought any set of parents would be thrilled to be introduced to a girlfriend with as many tattoos as she had. She and Meg had chosen this dress because the high neckline covered the black stars on her neck, and the sweater because it took the attention away from her full tattoo sleeves.

She left her legs bare, the ink there open to view, as well as the four roses that adorned her right hand. And she still felt like herself, but like...well, like a grown-up

version. Like a woman who was ready to meet the parents of a boyfriend.

She'd done a lot of things in her life, but she'd never done that.

"You're drooling already? I haven't even shown you the whole dress." Her words were teasing. Shrugging her sweater down her arms, she turned away from him so that he could see the back of her dress—or rather, the lack thereof.

She heard him suck in a breath when he saw the way the high collar of the dress circled her neck, and then the naked skin that continued to the base of her spine.

She felt him move closer, trailing a finger down her spine. She shivered as he traced her shoulder blades, the muscles of her back, the delicate stripes of her rib cage.

"Let's just leave now," he announced, moving his finger to stroke over the side of her breast. A small sound of arousal escaped her mouth. "Dinner is overrated."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

Closing her eyes for a moment, she sucked in a deep breath to center herself.

“No way.” Stepping forward, out of his reach, she slid her cardigan back into place and turned, fixing him with an arched eyebrow. “This was your idea. Into the belly of the beast we go.”

“The belly of the beast?” She’d thought that he might be insulted by the description, but instead he sounded amused. “Amy, it’s just my family. The people who raised me. It’s going to be fine.”

Shaking away the sense of foreboding, she resisted the urge to tell him that she was pretty sure it wouldn’t be. Either way, she was here and she was going to see this through. Maybe she was a masochist, but she knew that she had to do it.

She wanted Fred, and he came with a family. A family business. She knew that he expected them to just accept her, but she also knew that wasn’t how it worked. She had to know, though—had to know if she would be accepted as part of Fred’s life.

If she wasn’t, then it would be better to get out now, before her heart could be broken any further.

“Amy, you dazzle me.” Reaching out, he took her hand, pulling her through the door and into the house. “You’ll dazzle them, too.”

The Vaughan family was arranged artfully around what she would call a living room, were it not for the ornately carved mahogany bar at one end. They looked like a painting, four people posed beautifully throughout a decorative room, four faces

turned toward her and Fred with curiosity written into their features.

“Hello!” Fred helped her down the steps into the sunken room, waving to the room at large. Amy quickly checked her shoes to make sure she wasn’t tracking mud or wet onto the expensive-looking woven rug that covered a large portion of the gleaming hardwood floors.

She could feel eyes on her. Normally this wouldn’t faze her in the slightest—nobody presented themselves the way she did if they didn’t enjoy attention. The fact that she desperately wanted the people these eyes belonged to to like her, though, or at least tolerate her?

She cast a quick, desperate glance to the bar. She could use some liquid courage right now.

An older man she recognized from the Vaughan Enterprises website that she’d studied earlier this week was standing at the bar, a cocktail shaker in hand. Well over six feet himself, with a rangy build, he looked like an older version of the twins, though the way he carried himself suggested Frank more than Fred. Setting the cocktail shaker down on the bar, he opened his arms in a gesture of welcome as he looked her over.

She saw the exact moment he noticed the tattoos on her legs, his smile freezing in place.

Here we go. She tried not to grimace.

“I was beginning to think your, ah, friend was going to stand us up, Frederick.” Frederick Sr. looked her over top to bottom again, a wrinkle in his forehead demonstrating that he was perplexed. “What is your name again, dear?”

“Dad, this is Amy.” At the introduction, Amy extended a hand—not the one with the four rose tattoos. “Amy, this is my dad, Frederick Vaughan Sr.”

“Lovely to meet you.” Amy smiled brightly. Frederick Sr. seemed slightly taken aback by the wattage, as though he’d been expecting her to glower.

“Ah, hello.” Frederick, Sr. belatedly set down the cocktail shaker and took Amy’s hand. Though he seemed slightly taken aback by her bright smile, his icy reserve seemed to thaw just a bit under the brilliant wattage. “Welcome to our home.”

“Dad, I’d like one of whatever you’re mixing there.” Fred smiled pointedly at his father to move things along. “Amy? Would you like a drink?”

“Wine would be lovely.” Her voice caught in her throat—nerves. “If you have it. If not, anything is fine.”

“Oh, we have it.” Fred rolled his eyes. Reaching over the bar, he grabbed a stemmed wineglass that looked as light as air. “My parents are wine snobs. Red or white?”

“Really, Fred.” This came from the only other woman in the room, who stood, dusted off her skirt and crossed to the bar as well. “The correct term is collector.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Fred grinned at the woman, who was as short as her sons and husband were tall, with chin-length red hair and a face full of fine-boned features. “Hi, Mom.”

“Nice of you to make time for your parents,” the woman replied wryly. “Are you going to introduce me to your friend?”

“Mom, this is Amy.” Fred smiled down at her, rubbing the small square of her back where his hand rested. “Amy, this is my mother, Rosemary. The wine collector.”

“That’s it. None of the good stuff for you.” Rosemary rounded the bar, snatching the glass Fred had retrieved and replacing it with a shorter goblet that had a shallower cup. “I’ll send someone out to Discount Depot, shall I? Now Amy, tonight we’ve opened a Chevalier-Montrachet we purchased several years ago in France. It has hints of citrus and some spice notes, when served in the correct glass. Does that sound appealing to you?”

“It sounds lovely.” Amy smiled mildly. The wine she usually drank came from the aforementioned Discount Depot, usually for about seven dollars a bottle. She was sure she’d like whatever they gave her just fine.

Rosemary filled a glass precisely one-third of the way, then handed it to Amy as if bestowing her with a glass of liquid gold. Amy quickly lifted it to her lips and sipped. When she lowered it, everyone in the room was staring at her, aghast, except for Fred.

“It’s...very nice.” What? What had she done? From the corner of her eye, she watched Frederick Sr. pick up his own glass. Holding it beneath his nose, he sniffed at it as though he was starring in a commercial for men’s body spray. He then took a tiny sip, rolling it around his lips before nodding and, finally, swallowing.

Amy was put in mind of the time her brother-in-law Theo had taken them all to a fancy restaurant—one that wasn’t too far from this house, actually. Theo had ordered the wine, so the waiter...no, not the waiter, but the sommelier...had initiated something similar. He’d poured a swallow of the wine into a glass and handed it to Theo, who had sniffed and tasted, approved, and then promptly been called a pompous ass by Jo.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

So apparently rich people drank their wine a certain way. Duly noted. She sniffed awkwardly at her glass, sipped again and received a thin smile, but a smile regardless from Frederick Sr.

“How’s that cocktail coming, Dad?” Sensing her discomfort, Fred cast his father a look. With light pressure in the fingers that rested at the small of her back, he quickly and smoothly steered her across the room, stopping in front of his twin. Amy’s fingers clutched the stem of her wineglass tightly as Fred clapped his brother on the shoulder, then shook the second man’s hand.

“Amy, you know Frank.” Still put off by Frank’s backhanded comments that afternoon, Amy didn’t offer a hand. “This is his boyfriend, Mark.”

So Frank was bisexual, or pansexual. Not something that would normally have her even raising an eyebrow, but she did wonder what the very proper Frederick Sr. and Rosemary thought of it, when her own reception had been so very lukewarm. Of course, clad in a pricey-looking blue button-down, navy blazer and well-cut charcoal trousers, Mark gave off a very different vibe than she did.

A bead of cold sweat rolled down her spine. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been so uncomfortable. Why was she doing this again?

Fred chose that moment to press a light kiss to the silky gold curls on her head. An absentminded gesture, but it sent warmth streaming throughout her entire body.

This. This was why she was here, at this dinner where she didn’t feel entirely welcome. And maybe it would all be okay.

“You know Frank as well? How interesting.” With her own glass of wine in hand now, Rosemary settled herself back on the sofa. An amused smile curled her lips. “How did you come to meet my boys? Neither of them seems the type for tattoos.”

Another subtle zinger from a Vaughan. Lovely.

“Well, I lease a space in the newest Vaughan Enterprises property,” Amy started. She stood tall, trying to draw confidence from her core. Fred pressed his hand more firmly against her back, so she continued. “But I actually met them both in Europe, five years ago.”

“The infamous postgrad Europe trip.” Mark elbowed his boyfriend lightly, careful not to let his martini slosh over the edge. “You were there? I have so many questions.”

“All in due time,” Frederick Sr. started, “but I can see Margaret waving from the kitchen. Let us adjourn to the dining room, shall we?”

Wrapping an arm around her waist, Fred steered Amy toward the attached room, with its long mahogany table and velvet-cushioned chairs. As he pulled out her chair for her, he bent to whisper into her ear. “You’re doing great.”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire,” she replied through a bright, fake smile. He rolled his eyes.

“Amy.” Settling himself into the chair next to her, he ran a finger along the line of her jaw, just one quick movement. “I don’t want you to pretend to be who you think they want you to be, okay? Just be yourself. Be the woman I lo—the woman I know.”

The woman he what?

“What did you just say?” Amy turned fully in her chair to face him, but then the woman she assumed was Margaret, a young woman with pale blond hair, was there.

She took the crisp cloth napkin from the table in front of Amy, flicking it through the air before laying it gently in her lap. She repeated the action for every person at the table, then disappeared into what Amy assumed was the kitchen. She returned with a tray, placing small bowls of soup in front of each of them. Amy dragged her attention back to the table. She reached for a spoon, then froze.

In front of her was a place setting more intricate than anything she'd come across before. Could all this really be for her? A quick glance around the table showed her the same setting at every place. Unlike her, however, no one else seemed intimidated by it.

The central feature was a plate, shiny gold and larger than a dinner plate. The napkin now on her lap had been resting on top of it. Arranged precisely around the plate were four different forks, two spoons, two knives, another napkin, a bread plate and four glasses. She looked from all of it to the soup and back again. Which one was she supposed to use?

"Work from the outside in," Fred leaned in toward her and whispered. He nodded slightly toward the correct spoon. Amy picked it up, hoping nobody had noticed, but a quick glance showed her that Rosemary had noted her hesitation.

Well, whatever. So she didn't come from a household where they used four forks per meal. Whatever.

There was silence for a moment, spoons and china clinking as everyone worked on their soup. Once Frederick Sr. was done, he sat back, eyeing her again.

"Let's circle back to our earlier discussion. How did you meet the boys?" He took a large sip of wine, which Amy noticed had been topped up, in a fresh glass. She thought briefly of the extra washing involved with all this excess and couldn't quite wrap her head around it.

She didn't like it. And while she wasn't quite ready to give up on the evening just yet, she decided there and then that she wasn't going to feel bad for not fitting in.

"I met both Fred and Frank in a club in Amsterdam." She continued to eat her soup.

"And you've kept in contact with them?" Rosemary set down her spoon. "I must say, neither of them has ever mentioned your name."

Zing.

"That would be difficult, as neither of them knew it." Amy took another polite spoonful of soup. "This soup is lovely. My compliments to the chef."

"I don't imagine you've ever had lobster bisque." Frederick Sr. nodded at her down the table. "I believe the next course is beef Wellington. This meal should be a treat for you."

His words weren't meant to be cruel, but Amy caught what he hadn't said out loud. That he assumed she didn't eat meals like this because he couldn't imagine she could afford it.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

Her temper flared. Setting down her spoon, she placed her hand on Fred's knee and squeezed once, hard, to let him know she wasn't feeling this. He cast her a quick, worried glance.

"Actually, Amy's sister Meg is a chef," Fred interjected. Reaching for the bottle of wine, he refilled Amy's glass, though everyone else had signaled Margaret to do the refilling. Amy was sure that didn't go unnoticed. "She owns a catering company."

"Interesting," Mark interjected. "What kind of cuisine?"

"Is it gourmet," Rosemary wondered out loud, "or is it one of those food truck situations?"

Food truck situations?

This time Fred squeezed her knee, and she swallowed the vinegar on her tongue.

"The type of cuisine is dependent on the needs of the client," Amy replied. "She can do anything, though. For my last birthday, actually, one of the things she made was lobster bisque, as it's one of my favorites."

"Do you have any other siblings?" This was Frank. He cast her a quick smile of apology, and Amy thawed toward him, just the slightest bit.

"I have three sisters." Amy thought of them each in turn, of how they'd react in this particular situation. None of them, she knew, would put up with these passive-aggressive putdowns, especially not for a guy. She sat up straighter in her seat,

calmly sipping her own glass of wine. “Meg is the oldest. She’s the caterer. Next is Jo, a writer. Then Beth. She’s a mechanic. And then me. The tattoo artist.”

Frederick Sr. furrowed his brow as though something had just occurred to him, but Fred spoke before his father could.

“Do either of you remember Theo Lawrence? That friend Frank and I had in college?” Fred eased back in his chair as Margaret served the next course. “He’s engaged to Amy’s sister Jo. And Dad, I recall you used to golf with someone named Lassiter? His son, Ford, is married to Beth.”

“Theo Lawrence? And Ford Lassiter?” Rosemary turned to look at Amy, calculating. “It seems your sisters have made good marriages.”

They’d made good marriages? Who talked like that?

“Is your sister Meg engaged as well?” Rosemary continued.

“She is.” Amy’s smile was tight. “To a very wealthy businessman named John Brooke. In fact, all my sisters are going to be rich as hell once they get married.”

Rosemary’s upper lip curled with distaste, presumably at the fact that Amy had actually spoken out loud of wealth. “I see. One might think it was your turn. How lucky that you kept in contact with a suitable candidate. Two of them, in fact.”

“Mom!” Fred sat up straight, glaring at his mother. “Why are you being so rude?”

“Protecting my son from people more interested in his bank account than his personality isn’t rude, son.” Rosemary sniffed, pushing away the plate that held her portion of beef Wellington with a nose in the air. “It’s called being prudent.”

“Tattoo artist. In our plaza.” Frederick Sr. scowled at her over the edge of his wineglass. “You’re that Marchande woman that the other tenants signed the petition against.”

“What?” Rosemary looked between her sons and her husband, clearly eager for ammunition. Amy wasn’t overly insulted, because she understood now that this woman had been prejudiced against her since before she had even walked through the door. Rosemary wouldn’t have been polite to anyone she didn’t consider a suitable match for Fred—it was nothing against Amy personally. “I must say, I’m not surprised. The plaza was conceived to create a luxury shopping experience for the wealthy Bostonian, you see. It requires a certain...aesthetic.”

“Mom.” Fred pulled his napkin from his lap and slapped it down on the table, right overtop of his beef Wellington. “That is enough.”

“Your mother isn’t wrong.” Frederick Sr. nodded into his wine. “Who approved the lease for a tattoo shop in the first place? Might have a word with them. Unsavory elements can decrease sales over the entire plaza. And traffic. Not surprised they formed that petition.”

Amy didn’t want to spend even one more moment around these people. These people, who couldn’t see past her choice of career, what she looked like, who her family was.

Had she really expected anything different?

She had not. In fact, she had come prepared. Following Fred’s example, she removed her napkin from her lap, placing it delicately over the congealing gravy of her entrée. Lifting her glass of what she was sure was hideously expensive wine, she lifted it to her lips and drank...and drank...and drank. Once it was empty, she handed it off to Fred, who took it with what she thought was a nod of appreciation. Then she stood, pushing her chair back so abruptly that it wobbled.

“I might not have grown up in a rich area of the city. I might not have a big house, or a huge business, or ties to the Mayflower.” She pasted a fierce smile on her lips and looked at Frederick Sr., then at his wife. “But I have a hell of a lot more class.”

“Class?” Rosemary made an unpleasant sound. “You run a tattoo parlor, dear. I’m surprised you know the word, and I don’t understand why you’re taking such offense at the truth.”

Beside her, Fred slammed his palms on the table, starting to rise from his chair. He stopped when she shook her head.

She didn’t need a knight in shining armor to come save her. She could do this all by herself.

“I did not keep in contact with either of your sons in hopes that one day I’d marry one of them. In fact, I never thought I’d see Fred again until he came wandering into my shop this week, claiming he wanted a tattoo to hide the fact that he’d been ordered to deliver a warning letter he didn’t agree with. So really, you have yourself to thank that he got reacquainted with me.” She glared at Frederick Sr., then turned her attention to Rosemary. “By the way, your sons might be twins, but they are not interchangeable, at least not to me. It’s only ever been Fred I wanted. I’m not the least bit attracted to Frank. No offense.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

She nodded across the table to Fred's twin, who looked shocked and not a little delighted at the drama. As she looked, Frank shrugged, then wrapped an arm around Mark. "None taken. As you can see, it's worked out all right for me."

"I never—" Rosemary started, but Amy wasn't done.

"As for who approved my lease, that would be you, Mr. Vaughan." Reaching into one of the hidden pockets of her sleek dress, she removed a thumb drive and tossed it at him. It fell into his plate of beef Wellington. "Perhaps you allowed it because, in addition to offering works of art that use skin as a canvas, it is a gallery. Both of your sons have agreed that its aesthetics go above and beyond most tenants in the plaza."

Frederick Sr. blustered, but he actually stopped when Amy held up a hand to indicate she wasn't done.

"On that thumb drive, you'll find a copy of the lease agreement, with your signature, in case you disbelieve your own role in events." From the corner of her eye, she saw Fred rise to stand with her. "You'll also find letters from every single tenant who signed that petition, recanting their signature."

"How did you manage that?" Across the table, Frank whistled. "Some of those tenants have iron rods up their bums."

"It wasn't difficult." Amy smirked at him, and he grinned back. Okay, he was growing on her. "I merely did some statistical work. I researched traffic into and out of the plaza on a random sampling of days. Conversion of that traffic to sales, and where they shopped. Compared the numbers to the likelihood that these shoppers had

been drawn into the plaza due to any given piece of advertising, be it the plaza's, another tenant's or my own. And guess what? Since the day the plaza opened, Four Sisters Ink has been the reason that twenty-eight percent of shoppers have entered the plaza. And in case you've forgotten, there are two hundred and twelve storefronts, so let's please dispense with the notion that I am an unsavory element scaring people off."

"Fascinating," Frank muttered, drumming his fingers on the table. Beside Amy, Fred stood still. She couldn't see his face, couldn't bring herself to look. Was he proud of her? In disbelief? Angry?

It didn't matter. She'd wanted to impress his family, but at the end of the day, all she could be was herself.

"How did you get them all to back off from the petition, though?" Frank continued, speaking over the inarticulate sounds his parents were making.

"I wrote out a case study about my own marketing methods, and the percentages by which each tactic had increased my business. I broke it down into ideas that other businesses in the plaza could apply to themselves." She sucked in a breath. "They all backed down, and most apologized on the spot for judging me on the nature of my business. The petition you drafted the warning in response to is now null and void, I would think, so unless you have some other problem with my business being in the plaza, I think we're done here."

"But..." Frederick Sr.'s face was scrunched so tightly that he resembled a bulldog. "How do I know your numbers are true? That you didn't just make them up to get yourself out of trouble?"

"I guess you don't." Amy pinched her lips together as she looked at Frederick Sr., then at Rosemary. "But before you continue with your judgment, I'll tell you that I

have a business degree. It's from a community college rather than an Ivy League school, but let me assure you, I'm as savvy as I am artistic."

There—she'd had her say. She'd expected to feel relieved, triumphant, even. Instead, as she turned to Fred, still standing silent beside her, she only felt empty.

"I'm sorry. I can't do this." The words were heavy on her lip. He'd risen to stand beside her, but she couldn't quite read the expression on his face. He was silent, too, and she didn't know if it was because he was proud of her for standing up for herself, or because he was loyal to his family and Vaughan Enterprises, to the end.

She supposed it didn't matter, really. No matter what she'd thought had sprouted between them, it would shrivel and die with the way his family felt about her. She looked up at him, into the eyes of the only man who had ever made her want more, and she took a single, painful step back. Something hot stung at the backs of her eyes.

She would not cry in front of these people. Not ever. So she went with the only other option available to her in that moment—she decided to leave. Spinning on her heel, she crossed the dining room, her steps loud on the marble floor. Just before she passed through the archway that led back to the sitting room, she paused, looking back over her shoulder.

"By the way," she started, catching Rosemary's eye and winking, "I have a frequent shopper card at Discount Depot. I think I'm almost at a free bottle on my stamp card. When I drink it, I'll make sure to think of you."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FRED HEARD THE front door slam, and before he could even think about what he was going to do, he was halfway across the room, following her.

“Frederick!” His father used a tone that Fred was well familiar with, conditioned to, and he turned around even though every cell in his body called out for him to follow Amy.

“Explain yourselves.” Fred couldn’t remember ever being this angry. He looked into the faces of the people he’d thought he’d known so well, the people who had raised him, and wondered how he could have been so wrong.

“I beg your pardon?” Placing his napkin very deliberately on the table, Frederick Sr. rose to a standing position. “Watch your tone, young man. When you are under this roof, you will show some respect.”

“That’s the thing, though, Dad. You’ve always taught us that respect is earned, not automatically given.” Fred flexed his fingers, surprised to find that his hands were actually shaking with rage. “Why would I show you respect when you just treated the woman I love so horribly?”

“Love?” Rosemary gasped, clutching her short pearl necklace to her throat. “Oh, surely not, Fred!”

“Fred.” His father tried a placating tone now, one Fred had heard him use on investors when they became antsy. “Look. I must admit that your young woman has, ah, spirit. A certain resourcefulness and business acumen that I hadn’t expected someone like her to have.”

“Someone like her. What does that mean, exactly?” Fred shifted his weight, itching to go after Amy but understanding that this conversation had to happen. “Are you referring to the fact that she’s a tattoo artist? To the way she looks? To the fact that you don’t know her family? Which is it, exactly? Please, enlighten me.”

“That’s enough.” Frederick Sr. waved a hand in the air, gesturing for Fred to stop

talking. “As I was saying. I suppose I can see the appeal as you sow your oats, or whatever this attraction is. But even if the Lawrences and the Lassiters have approved matches with girls in this family, you are a Vaughan. Blood is thicker than water, and this is not the girl for you.”

Fred stared at his father for a long moment, silent. He’d convinced himself that introducing Amy to his parents would be fine, but now that the words had been spoken, he wondered if he hadn’t expected this the whole time. Expected it, and wanted it.

Being with a woman who was so true to herself had made him understand things about himself that he’d never before been brave enough to acknowledge. And one of them, the biggest one, perhaps, was that while he would always love his family, and be grateful to them for the opportunities they’d provided, he was no longer interested in being associated with the way they handled business. The way they treated people, on the most basic level of human decency.

He was done.

He looked at his father, shook his head. Eyed his mother with disappointment. Caught his twin's eye and gave a nod to indicate that they would speak later.

Then he turned on his heel to follow the path Amy had taken out of the dining room and to the door.

“Frederick!” His father's voice thundered through the room, at a decibel that would have made Fred tremble in the past. Now he paused but didn't deign to look back over his shoulder as he spoke.

“Yes?”

“If you walk out that door right now, you can consider your participation in Vaughan Enterprises over.” Did his father know how smug he sounded, how utterly certain that Fred would fall into line with what he'd demanded, simply because he wished it so?

There was so much privilege in that. As a wealthy white man from a prominent family, Fred knew that he possessed much privilege as well, but he'd just discovered a huge difference between himself and his father.

Frederick Sr. was content to let his privilege continue to serve him. Demanded that it did, even.

Fred, though? Maybe he'd felt that way, too, once upon a time. But being with Amy, with a woman who followed her own passions, had shown him that he'd rather use

his position to make some kind of a difference.

He understood exactly what he was doing by walking away, but he did it anyway. Where was he going?

He needed to go find Amy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“HOW DID YOU get in here?”

Paintbrush in the air, Amy stilled, just for a moment, before continuing on. On the sawhorse beside her was an artist’s palette that she’d brought up from her shop, fully loaded with pools of oil paint. Alizarin crimson, cadmium yellow, Prussian blue and zinc white.

Dabbing the tip of her brush—a dagger, this one was called—into the crimson, she swept it across her canvas, leaving a deliberate streak behind. Her canvas in this case was the plain white wall of the single empty retail space in the plaza. Well, formerly white—it now featured the outline of a giant orange rose, the beginning of a mural she’d sketched out to work through her anger.

“It wasn’t hard.” She shrugged as she examined her palette, still facing away from Fred. She wasn’t surprised that he’d found her, and in fact, she’d wanted to be found. “I know security is up to each tenant, but all you had protecting this empty space was a door with a thumb lock. I was prepared to try to pick it with a hairpin, but it opened with one hard twist.”

One hard twist that had broken it, but that was neither here nor there. She expected him to sigh heavily, to remind her that if she wanted to stay here, she needed to back down. That she should go apologize to his parents, grovel on her knees for not being

who they wanted her to be.

“All they had protecting this place,” he corrected, as she geared herself up to argue with him.

“I’m not going to...” Her voice trailed off as she processed what he’d said. Turning slowly on bare feet, she found him standing a few feet behind her, hip propped up on the dusty sawhorse she was using as a table. He was watching her calmly, hungrily, and unless she was very much mistaken, he wasn’t in the mood to argue with her. “What did you say?”

“I think you heard me.” A sexy grin curved his lips, and Amy felt something tighten in her chest, a fist clutching her heart. “It seems that I’m no longer part of Vaughan Enterprises. Which I suppose means that we’re both trespassing, but I think Phyllis will give us a pass if she happens by.”

Amy was pretty sure that security guard Phyllis read Harlequin romance novels on her phone when things were quiet, so she was pretty sure that Fred was right. With no possibility of interruption, though, it meant that there was no more wasting time—it was time to have the hard conversation.

She ran a dry tongue over cracked lips, then tried to swallow. She opened her mouth to speak, but Fred beat her to it.

“I’m sorry I insisted on dinner with my family. I should have known better.”

“How could you have known?” Setting down her paintbrush, she crossed her arms over her chest. “Have you brought home other tattoo artists that you met in Amsterdam that your parents hated?”

“No.” The corner of his mouth quirked up with amusement. “I met the best of the lot

right out the gate. Didn't need to go looking anymore."

"Maybe you shouldn't say things like that." Her voice was faint. She cleared her throat, tried to speak more firmly. "It will only make things harder."

"What things, exactly?" He moved in closer, and she could feel the heat emanating from his skin. She wanted to touch.

"You know." She swallowed again, wishing desperately for a glass of ice water. Warm water. Anything to wet her throat with. "Things between...us."

"Amy." Reaching out with one hand, he cupped her cheek. She couldn't help herself; she pressed into the warmth of his touch.

"You didn't follow me." Her breath hitched; her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "When I left. You stayed. That says something."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

“I stayed because I had some things to say.” He dipped his head, brushed his lips over her forehead. “Things that have been fermenting for years. Things that could no longer wait to be said.”

“I think my feelings about your family are pretty obvious at this point.” Restless, she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “But...well, they’re still your family. I’m not sorry for what I said to them. They were awful. But I... I don’t... I mean. I understand that you’re trapped in between a rock and a hard place.”

“I see things differently now that I’m with you.” He stroked her cheek with his thumb, absentmindedly. “And you know what? I’m not trapped at all.”

“What...what are you saying?” Her pulse stuttered.

“I’m saying that...if you hadn’t come back into my life, I might have been content enough to stay on with the family business. To float along, meeting the status quo and living a shell of a life.” He sucked in a deep breath. “But you showed me that it’s okay to want something different. To be who you really are. To love who you love.”

“What did you say?” Her knees trembled. She looked up at him with wide eyes, her heart on her sleeve. “Don’t say it unless you mean it.”

“Amy.” Curling his free arm around her waist, Fred pulled her in closer to him. Her breath was unsteady as she looked up into his eyes. “I love you. I love everything about you. Don’t you know that by now?”

She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, let the anxiety wash away. She’d known this

somehow, on some level, but even knowing that, she hadn't been certain that love would be enough for him to defy his family.

Was he defying his family? Squeezing one eye open, she looked up at him with suspicion.

"How does this work with your job? Your...legacy?" She gestured wide with her arms, indicating the empty space. "I don't think your dad is going to be pleased for you to keep seeing me."

"I don't care." Fred's smile was so quick, lighter than she'd ever seen it. "As of right now, I'm no longer an employee of Vaughan Enterprises. And you know what? I've never felt so free."

"What?" A siren rang in her ears. "Fred, Boston is expensive. What are you going to do?"

"I'll be fine, I promise." He laughed lightly. "I went to law school at Harvard, and even if I've been disowned, the Vaughan name carries weight. I'll have plenty of opportunities...if I want them."

"What else would you do?"

"I don't know." He turned to study the unfinished mural on the wall. It was a shame that it would inevitably be painted over once tenants were found. It was some of her best work. "Maybe I'll become a tattoo artist."

She had a quick, bright mental picture of Fred, tattooed up as he bent over someone lying in his tattoo chair, and snorted. He raised an eyebrow, but he was smiling.

"What? You don't think I could do it?"

“I think perhaps you should leave it to the professionals.” Biting her lower lip, she reached around him for a brush. Swirling it through the yellow, she turned back to the wall, considering where to place the bristles. “It’s an art form, you know?”

“I’m aware.” Plucking the paintbrush back out of her hand, he set it back down on her palette at the same time he turned her around. Catching her chin in his hand, he held her still while looking her over. “You have paint on your dress.”

“I make a mess when I paint mad.” She smoothed a hand over the purple satin skirt and grimaced. “I’ll have to buy Meg a new one.”

“Hmm, I think it’s salvageable.” The hand at her chin moved down, stroking over the delicate curve of her throat. “But you should probably take it off right now. So you don’t get anything else on it, you know.”

“I see.” She eyed him, momentarily uncertain. “Is this a good idea? Not to overthink sex, but right now...might it not complicate things that you need to think on?”

She gasped when one of his hands slid right into the side of her dress, cupping her breast, which pebbled against his palm. Fire in her belly ignited, she inhaled deeply, waiting to see what he would do next.

“The only thing I need to think about,” he replied, delivering a sharp pinch to her nipple that made her gasp, “is how many spanks you’re about to receive for questioning my desire to be with you. Understood?”

“Understood,” she gasped, pressing into his touch. He plucked at the silver barbell, and her need became a sharp ache, traveling quickly from her breast to the space between her legs.

She’d loved it when Fred had taken control the night before but had imagined that it

was a one-off, a kinky game he'd indulged in to appease her. Hearing the rough edge in his voice right now, and having a better understanding of the dynamics to which he'd been born, told her that this dominant streak of his likely ran deeper than she'd anticipated.

She fucking loved it. Even more, after the way the evening had gone, she was more than happy to hand over the reins to someone who wanted to take control—her control.

“Do you still want me to take my dress off?” A taunting note in her voice, she did a slow spin. She'd removed her sweater and shoes when she'd broken into this space, so her naked back was revealed. She paused facing away, to give him a good look.

“No.” Closing the space between them, he quickly undid the hook and eye closure that held the neck in place. Amy gasped at the kiss of cool air on her naked skin when the top of the dress fell down around her waist. She moaned when she felt him reach around her from behind to cup her breasts, working the tips insistently until she was a panting mess, pushing back against him.

She groaned when he released the soft flesh. Trying to steady her breath, she felt him fist his hands in the hem of her skirt, slowly pulling it up to her waist. He tucked it into the waistband of the fallen bodice.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:42 am

“You create beautiful art.” His voice was rough, harsh in the quiet air of the dusky room. “But I don’t think I’ll ever see anything more beautiful than this.”

She was wearing full-bottomed panties, but they were sheer and black. Without warning, he slapped his palm over the crease that divided them once, then twice. Heat pooled between her legs, and she felt herself pushing back toward him, desperate for more.

Rather than delivering another blow, he gathered the waistband of the panties in his long fingers and ripped. Amy gasped again when she heard them tear, felt his questing fingers explore the opening he’d just made.

“I want to take my time with you, but I don’t think I can.” Reaching between her legs, he swiped his fingers through her wet heat, then traced them back, along the crease that divided the cheeks of her behind. “I’m feeling a bit primal tonight. I need you, Amy. I need to claim you. If you’re not okay with this, please say so now. I’m afraid I’m going to lose control.”

His clever fingers found the pucker of her rear entrance. Her body bucked, and she cried out her response.

“Take me.” She barely recognized her own voice. “However you want to, but take me now.”

He snarled—that was the only word for it. With a palm flat on her back, he bent her over the sawhorse, then ground his pelvis against her naked behind.

“Hold on to this.” He delivered one more quick blow as she did as she was told, fingers digging into the rough wood on either side of her body. When she closed her eyes, she could hear the metallic rasp of his zipper being undone, the soft sound of fabric dragging on flesh, the metallic crinkle of a condom wrapper. She inhaled, and he pressed the head of his cock to her soaking-wet entrance; she didn’t have enough coherent thought left to be embarrassed by her shameless state.

With a grunt and a single hard thrust of his hips, he was inside her, all the way inside her; the way she was bent over the sawhorse left her open, inviting him deeper inside than he’d been before. She gasped for air as he pulled back, fingers digging into the wood. When he worked his way back in, he pressed a finger to the hidden rosette of her rear, shocking her body into sensations she’d never experienced before.

Working his finger past the tight ring of muscle, he filled her in two places, and she couldn’t hold back the scream. One thrust, two, and then she came, his bossy fingers ordering that she take her pleasure. She did, clenching around him like a vise. Behind her, she felt him shudder, his muscles tighten. His movements shortened, because a short series of sloppy thrusts as he pursued his own pleasure, and then he came, his shout mingling with her hoarse cries as she continued to come, around his finger and around his cock.

The force of his release made Amy shake, pushing her up and through one more of her own. Her body resisted it for a moment, overly sensitive at this point and not sure it could handle more, but Fred had told her he was going to claim her. Her body knew that this wasn’t her decision, so when he thrust into her roughly again, and again, and again, she fell, spiraling through the glittering dark in a way that should have been terrifying. Should have been, but wasn’t...because Fred was there to catch her.

EPILOGUE

“NICE DIGS.”

Fred looked up from the cardboard box he was unpacking to find his twin in the doorway. While Fred was dressed down in his new daily uniform of khakis and a crisp button-down shirt, Frank was, as always, wearing a perfectly fitted custom suit. He looked, Fred thought, much as he himself had, only a month before.

“Thanks for signing off on the lease.” Pushing the box away with one foot, Fred lowered himself to his new office chair, which still had a layer of plastic on it that squeaked beneath his weight. He gestured to the equally new chair that sat on the other side of his box-store desk.

“There wasn’t much to think about.” His twin shrugged as he lowered himself into the chair that Fred had indicated. “The space was sitting empty, and a law office is a good fit.”

“It’s not a law office.” Fred scowled at his brother. “Jesus, Frank, didn’t you read the paperwork? If this doesn’t pan out because you—”

“Chill.” Frank rolled his eyes, then placed the long, slender box he’d been carrying onto the desk—fifty-year-old Glenfiddich. Nice. “Have a drink before you have an aneurysm. Yes, I read it, but ‘legal counsel for the Boston Underprivileged Housing Authority’ is a bit of a mouthful to say every time.”

“As long as it’s legit.” Fred eyed his brother again, then reached into the box he’d been unpacking. From it he withdrew two mugs, both with Amy’s artwork on them, a new item she was offering in her shop. Frank nodded at his approvingly before reaching for the scotch.

“It’s legit.” Fred watched as his twin opened the box. Removing the heavy bottle, he uncorked it, then poured a generous measure into each mug. “You did have the upper hand, though. No one else wants to lease a space with a giant mural on the wall.”

“That mural is fine art, I’ll have you know.” Picking up his mug, Fred inhaled the

peaty aroma, then took a careful sip. “Did you buy this or steal it from Dad again?”

“I didn’t steal it,” Frank replied, indignant. “I told him I was heading over here, and he took it out of his desk and handed it to me. Told me to bring it.”

“Interesting.” Fred paused with the mug at his lips again, considering. He and his family had reached a *détente* of sorts when he’d applied to lease this space, but he and Amy still wouldn’t be heading over there for dinner any time soon. He wanted an apology for the things they’d said about her—to her—and thus far they hadn’t offered one. The scotch was a small step forward, but there were a lot more steps to take.

Fred held on to the hope that they would be taken, at some point. And if they didn’t, that was okay, too, as long as he had Amy.

“I have to get back to the office.” Frank nodded to his brother as he stood. “Anything you want me to tell Dad?”

“Tell him thanks for the scotch.” Fred pondered saying more, but he just wasn’t ready. Lifting his mug, he saluted his brother. “Thanks for being the go-between.”

“I don’t work for free, you know.” Frank drained the last sip of his drink, then held the mug up to the light for inspection. “Can I have this mug? It’s cool.”

“Sure you can. For twenty bucks.” Frank rolled his eyes, and Fred gestured widely with his palms. “Hey, I just work here.”

“Uh-huh.” His twin made a big show out of pulling a money clip from his pocket and extracting a twenty. With exaggerated gestures, he moved to lay it on the desk, then snatched it back. “I suppose I should go downstairs and leave this with Amy, then?”

Fred grinned as he tried to come up with a snarky comeback, which he knew his twin would then inevitably try to top. Happiness was a warm glow in his chest, spreading

outward as he leaned back in his chair and looked at the gigantic orange rose that stretched the length of the wall in his new office space.

Life wasn't perfect, but he no longer thought it was supposed to be. And with his twin still in his life, a new job that ignited fire in his gut and, most of all, the woman he loved at his side during the day and in his bed at night?

He might not be part of his family legacy anymore. But you know what? He was doing just fine anyway.