



The Billionaire and the Nanny

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Description: The one woman I'm not allowed to f*ck is living in my house, taking care of my baby...

Ethan: She's already broken Rule #1: Must be ugly. This chick is f**king gorgeous with her flowing auburn hair and amazing young body. She's ripe for the taking, so I can't have her in my house. The other nannies they sent met Rule #1, but they were inept. Right away, I can tell Penelope is different. She's got those thick hips and long legs that would look perfect wrapped around me as I pound her hard up against the wall... I need to send her away. She's too good for me, too pure. She deserves a gentle man, not someone as rough and scarred as I am. But I need someone to take care of Lilly, and Penelope's the best one for the job. Soon she's living right down the hall, parading around in her tight little outfits, with no idea how much she's testing my self-discipline. I try to warn her, to tell her to keep her door locked at night, but it's no use. Before long I'm sneaking into her room at night, stroking her, touching her, entering her, making her scream. For the first time, it's not just about the physical for me. Seeing Penelope with the baby, I start to think that maybe I'm not as cold as I thought. That maybe I deserve a family. That maybe I could be the dad that Lilly deserves and the man that Penelope's always hoped for...

Penelope: Ethan Townsend. Billionaire steel magnate, tabloid darling, and notorious womanizer. He stands over six-feet-four with dark hair and cool blue eyes. He wears sharp, precise, well-fitted suits, shiny shoes, and a stern expression that makes me squirm. The first time I meet him, his gaze lingers at my breasts, my face, even leaning to one side as if checking out my butt, undressing me in his mind. I don't know what it is about him, but he makes me feel like I've done something wrong when I haven't. I feel naughty in his presence, like he's going to punish me for being insolent. But he's my boss. So no matter how much our attraction pulses beneath the service, no matter how many times my hand drops between my legs while I fantasize about him, nothing could ever happen between us. I'm his nanny, brought here to take care of his baby and nothing else. Besides, Ethan is cold and distant, and he only dates models and socialites. Until the night I break his most stringent rule and leave my bedroom door unlocked... Soon we're kissing and touching, his hands in my hair, his lips trailing over my skin as he enters me. But

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Penelope

I stand at the steps of a gorgeous brownstone on the Upper East Side across from the Metropolitan Museum, in a quiet, wealthy neighborhood. Taking a deep breath, I wonder if I should button the top button of my blouse or loosen it. I don't want to appear too Super Nanny but I don't want to look unserious either.

I mean, this is Ethan Townsend we're talking about.

Ethan Townsend, the steel magnate always in the headlines for being difficult...and womanizing...and oh, yeah, richer and more handsome than God. Apparently, he inherited something unexpected two months ago when his brother-in-law and older sister died in a terrible car accident, something that has apparently turned his world upside-down.

His seven-month-old niece—Lilly Belle Townsend—is now his charge to raise, and he knows nothing about being a father.

That's where we come in.

Or rather, that's where I'm supposed to come in. The problem is that I'm not even sure how long I'll last. After all, the particularly demanding Mister Townsend has apparently run through three or four nannies from the agency in less than a month.

Who's to say I'll fare any better than the girls who came before me?

I decide on keeping the buttoned-up look for a more polished, professional vibe.

I ring the doorbell and force a smile, remembering that I am in beautiful New York City in the fall.

I have to remind myself to take it all in—the blustery breeze, the swirling leaves, the sounds of the bustling city in the background, the laughter of children playing at the park... A cool front is starting to blow through, marking the end of summer.

NYC is so different than Southern Georgia, where I spent 99 percent of my life thus far. The only thing that changes there throughout the year is the humidity.

I'm excited about the weather changes but nervous as all hell about meeting this man whose work in the steel industry has been a metaphor for his whole life—hard, cold, and unbending.

Shiver.

The door in front of me suddenly opens and reveals the man, the myth, the legend.

There he is. It's him. Holy hell. Breathe, Penelope.

The man from my pre-job research—Ethan Townsend, CEO of the most successful Fortune 500 company this year, Townsend Industries—stands over six-feet-four with dark hair, short on the sides, long on top, and a five o'clock shadow on his chiseled jaw that is sexy as sin. He wears sharp, precise, well-fitted gray pants, steel-toned buttoned shirt, shiny shoes, and a frustrated expression on his face, like he wants nothing more than to get the hell out of the apartment so he can be where he really belongs. The office.

“Yes?” he says in a disaffected tone, as if he hadn't expected me.

Dread floods my stomach, as he examines me. Top to bottom, his gaze lingers at my

breasts, my face, even leaning to one side as if checking out my ass, undressing me with his cold blueeyes.

Gulp.

“I’m here from Le Nanny?” I say, sounding small and weak. My professionalism gets cut down to size with every second he stares at me. So much for new beginnings and confidence. This man makes me feel all too self-aware. I swallow again and try not to feel like his stare-down is about sex, but my desperately inexperienced, weak body knows it’s alie.

He’s only sizing you up, Penelope, my brain tries to rationalize. Trying to get a feel, a first impression. All men do it. He’s noticing how qualified and proficient I appear, how well-put-together, how perfect for the job I am. It’ll all beokay.

I hold out my hand firmly. “You are Mr. Townsend? AndI—”

“No,” he says firmly. And then the ornate wooden door slams in my face, as the swirling, gusty wind curls all around me. I’m in a state of shock.

Nobody’s ever just slammed a door in my face like that. But then again, I am used to Southern hospitality. This is New York, I tell myself, and the social conventions are quite different.

But still...What thehell?

I can’t be dismissed without even getting a chance. The money for this particular gig is better than I’ve ever received in the past. I need the money and I refuse to be thrown aside before this arrogant man has spoken two words tome.

“Mr. Townsend?” I knock, stuffing my indignity down and taking a deep, calming

breath.

Behind the door, I hear footsteps returning, the lock unlatching, and again, Ethan Townsend stands there holding onto the door frame. “Maybe you didn’t hear me, but I said no.” He begins closing the door again, but I reach out a hand to stop it from crunching on my fingers. His glare on me both scares the crap out of me and sends shivers down into the pit of my core.

But I shove aside the ridiculous feelings of lust that I feel in his presence. He’s handsome as hell and his charisma is certainly all that the tabloids have made it out to be and more. But I’m a professional and I soldier ahead. “No, as in you don’t need a nanny anymore?” I ask. “Or no to me, specifically?”

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“No, I don’t want you, specifically. I’ll contact the agency and have them send someone else. Thank you for your time.” Again, he begins closing the door, and again, I stop it, this time with my foot. Shit. Why am I taking this so personally?

“I’m sorry...” I force a smile and air back into my lungs. “But you don’t know the first thing about me. You haven’t even spoken to me, asked me any interview questions...nothing. I’m pretty sure you can’t fire me based on looks alone, Mr. Townsend.”

“Actually, I can, and I will,” he says, blocking my view from the inside foyer. “I’m rich, and money is the only thing that matters in this town. I’m sure when I voice my displeasure to your agency, they’ll send someone more to my style. Thank you and goodbye.”

“More to your style? Like the other handful of nannies you’ve already fired?” I shoot back, immediately regretting my hasty words.

Shit, he’s already got me rattled.

Ethan Townsend’s eyes narrow ever so slightly and his jaw muscle twitches. For some reason, I feel a surge of arousal and power, knowing I’ve somehow impacted him with my comment.

His lip curls into something resembling a sneer. “If I run through two dozen nannies in the next two hours, the agency will supply more. Until I find someone who suits this position to my liking.”

Is it simply a question of looks?

I'm not a Victoria Secret model or anything, but I would say I'm pretty with a pleasant, desirable body...but hold on a second...what does that have to do with being a nanny anyway? This is sexism to the nth degree. Unless he has other physical requirements. Does he need someone taller, stronger? Is Lilly Belle Townsend a hundred-pound baby who needs an Olympic wrestler to wrangle her? I don't get it. What could he possibly see in a few seconds of glancing me over that would make him turn me down?

"Mister Townsend, I don't think the nannies are the issue here," I tell him boldly. And I mean it.

For a long moment, the man just stares at me, and I could swear that he's about to grab me by the waist and kiss me with those full lips of his. And I can feel exactly how my body would react if he did it, how my nipples would stiffen and my tongue would instantly meet his, letting him open my mouth and force his way roughly in.

I feel a sudden moist flush between my legs and realize that I'm completely out of my depth here.

As if he knows exactly the kind of effect he has on me—or perhaps, women more generally—Ethan snorts, checks his watch. "I don't have time for this. I have to go."

I'm dumbfounded. Perhaps he was hoping for an older, more maternal-looking grandmother type and instead got a young woman who might look inexperienced to him, a man who knows nothing of childcare and thinks in stereotypes.

But he's only twenty-eight. He has no right to judge my maturity.

"Wait..." Holding onto the door, I strain my ears.

Behind him somewhere, I hear it—a baby crying. A soft, desperate, punctuated wail echoes from a monitor, the cry of a child who's been trying to get someone's attention unsuccessfully for some time now.

I understand, baby. I totally understand.

It dawns on me that this poor little girl, a creature of no more than seven months, has to live with this unforgiving, harsh man for the rest of her life. I imagine how lonely she'll be in this mighty mansion, how desperate for attention and starved for love she'll grow up to be later on. After getting a crap deal in life by losing her beloved parents, now she has to deal with a man whose entire life is made of steel—including his heart.

“Are you going to get her?” I ask. I crane my neck to hear better, but he strains to push me out. “You don't seem concerned that your baby is crying,” I say, glancing past his shoulder, wishing I could plow past him straight to the source of the wail.

“I will attend to her right after you leave, Miss—“

“Wallach,” I sigh.

Somehow I doubt that he's going to attend to anything once I'm gone. The baby's obviously been crying for some time. Her voice is hoarse.

The crying grows stronger, more frantic.

Any worried mom or dad would show signs of unsettled nerves right now. It's how humans have survived for as long as we have—that need to stop the crying, to appease, to shush and calm baby back to perfect contentment, creating a bond between caregiver and child. But Ethan Townsend doesn't give a rat's ass.

Whereas I came here with one job and only job only in mind—to care for a child—and I remember that he's not the child's parent, so he may not even care. Unable to take the crying anymore, I push my way past him and head for the stairs. "Excuse me, please. I'm going to do my job."

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Ethan

She needs to go away...immediately.

She's already broken Rule #1: Must be ugly.

Even worse, she's pretty and sexy as hell, and she has no idea. Which only makes me want her that much more.

With her flowing auburn hair and amazing young body, those perky tits and plump, luscious ass...she's ripe for the taking.

I can't have her in this house. The other nannies before her met Rule #1 (perhaps one or two were superficially attractive, however nothing tempting), but they were inept. Vapid bordering on unintelligent, shall we say.

But right away, I can tell that this new one isn't. Miss Wallach has too much intelligence for her own good. Not to mention, too much sex appeal, with those legs that would look perfect wrapped around my hips as I pound her hard up against the wall...

Can't do it.

Plus, she's already broken Rule #2: Do as I say, and it hasn't even been five minutes.

"Where do you think you're going?" I close the door and follow her into the house.

“To calm down your baby.”

“She’s not my baby.”

“She is, technically, Mr. Townsend.” Miss Wallach crouches to peer into the video monitor, presumably to find Lilly’s location.

My gaze travels down yet again to those curvaceous hips, imagining my hands gripping them as I slip my cock deep into her wet, tight pussy from behind.

I’m hard now. This won’t do at all.

She sees Lilly lying in her crib. “Is that her bedroom?”

“Quite astute,” I say, perfectly masking my attraction with sarcasm.

I get a hazel-eyed squinty glare. “And that’s upstairs?”

“Yes, but I don’t see how that’s any of your business. Leave this house at once before I call the police.” I pull out my phone to scare her. Unbelievable. Who does she think she is?

“Don’t worry, Mr. Townsend,” she says, unfazed by my display of adamancy. “I’ll be out of your hair in a minute. Let me first calm your baby down.” She climbs the stairs, light on her pretty sandaled feet. Boot season has started, but she obviously plays by her own rules. I imagine those manicured toes clenching as she comes hard with my face buried between her legs, but I shake that image off, too.

I follow her upstairs to make sure she’s not one of these crazy baby-snatchers you read about in the news. I may be putting Lilly Belle up for adoption as soon as this month is over, but that doesn’t mean I want her kidnapped in the meantime.

I didn't ask for any of this.

I didn't ask to lose my sister to a random accident.

And I certainly didn't ask for my sister to assign me as custodian for her daughter in the event of her and her husband's untimely death.

But that is what happened and now I am left to deal with the aftermath of fate's petty cruelties.

Miss Wallach finds the baby's room without issue. "There you are, my precious girl. Shh, shh, it's alright... There, see? She needed to be changed." Miss Wallach shakes her head as if somehow this is all my fault, and then gets to work on changing Lilly Belle.

I let her, because there's no way I'm doing that again by myself. Once was enough. I did it this morning and am hoping to never have to do it again.

The baby immediately quiets. She's taken by this woman, and who can blame her? I'd quiet the fuck down, too, if a hot nanny took off my nappy. Watching her work, I get the full picture from behind, which only confirms why I can't have her around. She's fully equipped with perfect round slap-able assets. What I wouldn't give to grab her backside with both hands and slide into her slick folds.

More and more reason I can't have her here. Not that I can't control myself around women—I am the epitome of self-discipline—but I know what I like when I see it, and Miss Wallach walks dangerous territory if she were to stay. I can already see her at night, climbing into bed, probably in a T-shirt and panties. She probably lies there for a while before falling asleep, thinking about her day. She probably slides her hand into her undies, giving herself a sendoff into dreamland, and there's no way I can live under the same roof and not come sniffing around her like a wolf out for blood.

I already want to possess her just watching her take care of Lilly Belle. She's just so damned good at it. But the last thing I need in my life is more complication after my sister left me a tiny ball and chain.

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After a long few minutes, I fold my arms and speak. “Are you done now? If so, please go. I’ll have a car take you back to the agency. Thank you for your time and impertinence.”

Finishing up the job and snapping Lilly Belle’s onesie back on, she picks her up and holds her close to her breast. Lilly Belle coos and smiles her smushed cheek against Miss Wallach’s curvy, smooth, innocent-looking body.

Something inside of me warms, melting a little at the sight of them together. Except I don’t melt. Ever.

A memory of my own nanny, Yolanda, filters into my consciousness. I was only four when I last saw her, and I remember hugging her this exact same way. My mother fired her in a fit of jealousy, because she worried I was getting too close to her. Yolanda was ripped away from me, replaced by Wilson, who’s been with me ever since. To this day, I don’t know why my mother replaced Yolanda. It’s not like she gave me love herself. My mother can’t cough up a single iota of any warmth or affection, not even to save her life.

Witnessing the embrace between woman and child before me, my initial feelings of warmth are replaced by annoyance. I just don’t have time for anything that makes me feel emotion. I won’t be able to see a beautiful woman, such as Miss Wallach, holding Lilly Belle like that and still concentrate on business, and we need to meet our quota this quarter. Business was slower these last months, and that won’t continue. Money doesn’t make itself, especially in the steel industry, and work is the only damn thing I can count on in this world anyway.

“Are you done?” I ask again.

“Yes, Mr. Townsend, I’m done,” she says, tilting her chin up defiantly. “If you’ll just let me have a moment...not sure if you can tell, but your daughter needs cuddletime.”

“One, she’s not my daughter. And two...cuddletime?”

“Yes, babies need close contact. They need love and warm skin. Theyneed—”

“I know the fundamentals of affection, Miss Wallach—”

“Do you now?” She arches one sassy eyebrow.

Control yourself, Ethan. There’s no point in reprimanding her when she’s not even your employee. Taking a deep breath, I finish my sentence. “Anyway...I was referring to your choice of words.”

“What’s wrong with ‘cuddle time?’ Does the word cuddle make you uncomfortable?” I swear I see the hint of a mocking smile at her lips. Smart, beautiful, effective at caretaking, and a smartass. If I wasn’t so busy hating her, I’d throw her over my lap and spank her.

“You may go now. Put the child down.”

“Only if you take her.”

“Excuse me?” I give her a warning glance.

Her tone softens. “I’ll go, but only if you take her. It’s clear that you need a nanny, Mr. Townsend, and that Lilly Belle needs a loving presence. I don’t know what it is about me that you find so repellant, but if you won’t hire me, then at least take Lilly

Belle into your arms yourself. That way, my conscience can go in peace.” She walks up to me and hands me the baby. “Here.”

Miss Wallach holds the baby up to me, and there’s so much I don’t know how to process. The powdery soft smell of Lilly Belle’s skin, her big blue-gray eyes like my sister’s, like pools of melted wildflowers that will harden into unforgiving iron one day. Miss Wallach’s silky arms as she holds twenty pounds in mid-air. Her infuriating resolve to teach me a lesson, the feminine scent wafting off her skin.

I fucking hate all of this.

Wilson will be here in a few minutes. He can take care of the baby until the agency sends another interviewee. I need Miss Wallach to stay until he gets here, that’s all.

I am certainly not spending any more time with the child than is absolutely necessary.

Why foster a relationship that will be over in a month’s time?

And then, suddenly, as if a dam bursts inside me, my resolve crumbles all at once. I’m too tired to fight it anymore. If she wants this job so badly, she can fucking have it.

I stare at her levelly.

“There are no days and no nights off, so if you have plans, cancel them,” I tell her, moving to the doorway, as she slowly reels the child back into her arms. “You will live in this house until your services are no longer needed. There will be no exceptions.”

Her wide eyes process the meaning of my words. “But—”

“The maid comes every day to clean,” I continue, ignoring her feeble interruption. “She has been ordered not to speak to you. Wilson comes three times a week, though he’s out of town. He’ll be here on Thursday and can get you anything you need. You will follow every task I ask you to do in the manner in which I prefer. There will be no house visitors, no guests, and no timeoff.”

“But Mr. Townsend, surely I’ll have some time for myself. I mean, I—”

“This child needs a mother, and while I know you are merely a poor replacement, mothers don’t get time off. You will take care of her as you would if you had given birth to her yourself.”

She gawks at me, lips parted. I could give her mouth something to do besides gape at me.

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Another absurd thought hits me. I imagine Miss Wallach—Penelope—holding onto her rounded baby bump, smiling in the sunlight.

Why I think of her this way, why I imagine mine as the seed that joined hers to form the life growing inside of her, I don't know. I don't fucking know, and I don't want images like this to torture me. I know it's just science, hormones, testosterone, pheromones fucking with my brain, but I won't continue to indulge these ridiculous thoughts and fantasies.

My sister became a parent, and look what happened—she's gone and now I'm left cleaning up themess.

My responsibilities are to myself. If I die, I don't burden anyone. My death would cause the happiness of many, and Townsend Industries would still grow without me thanks to my well-oiled machine. And part of keeping that machine running smoothly means never getting involved with employees.

“Sir, if I may sayso...”

“You may not,” I cut her off. “And if you continue to question my authority, you won't last long here, Miss Wallach, I assure you. Your job is to care for Lilly Belle according to my instructions. Finally, and I cannot stress this rule enough...you will keep your door locked at night.”

“Why?” Wide, green eyes search myface.

“That's a question, Miss Wallach.” As difficult as she's being, I can tell she's not

doing it on purpose. She's just not used to anyone telling her what to do. Probably the oldest sibling in her family, which would explain her stellar baby-whispering skills.

As if suddenly remembering that she's the one who needs the money, she relents and sighs. "I'm sorry. I'll do that. I'll...keep my door locked at night." I see the wheels in her head turning, wondering why the bizarre request, but it's not rocket science—I'm a man; she's a woman, an intensely hot one, though she doesn't seem to know it.

Which is worse.

And entirely more challenging.

She drops a tiny kiss onto the baby's forehead. No other nanny has treated this baby with such affection. Miss Wallach is perfect for this child, but she can't know that. Because soon, the baby will be leaving for an adoption agency, and Miss Wallach's services will not be required after that.

"Baby food and formula are in the kitchen, your room is to my left, no decorating this room, keep music and television volume to a minimum. Excellent work will earn you a bonus at the end of every week. As long as you follow my rules, you'll be fine."

She waits a moment before nodding. "Do you mind if I put up just a few images, something for Lilly Belle to look at?"

"I said no."

"Fine." She retracts indignantly.

"Good. Glad you understand." I step out of the room and fight the urge to look at Miss Wallach holding the baby in her arms before closing the door. They go perfectly together, it's hard to ignore. She probably shouldn't get attached, but then again,

nannies should know that by nature. I close the door and head down the hallway, descending the stairs and stopping when I hear the voice coming from the video baby monitor.

“We won’t listen to that mean ol’ uncle of yours, will we, Lilly Belle? No, we won’t. He’s a dummy head who doesn’t know the first thing about babies, but I do. And I’m here to make sure you have fun.”

I won’t go up there and reprimand her. She’s allowed to say whatever she wants in private, and I have to get to work anyway. Sighing, I grab my keys off the kitchen hook. Finally, I can get out of here.

But for the first time ever, I don’t want to go to work.

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Penelope

It's been three days. Three days of caring for this adorable little baby while her uncle stays away most of the day and I rarely, if ever, see him.

It's always just me and her, which works fine. During Lilly Belle's second nap of the day, I open up my laptop to try and get some work done. I've been working on the business plan for a small PR firm as part of my senior project, but looks like I won't have much time to work on it, thanks to Ethan Townsend requiring I do nothing but my nanny duties.

The man has issues. Yes, he's incredibly gorgeous, intimidates the heck out of me, and makes me feel like I'm completely naked in front of him, but he's my boss now, so I have to listen to him.

And what's with the whole "lock your door at night" thing? Does he turn into a werewolf? So far, nothing has happened at night, so I think he's just into scare tactics to keep me in line.

Glancing at Lilly Belle, I let light and love come into my mind. Who could look at such an innocent sleeping creature and be so hard and hateful? Poor thing lost both parents and has to live with this cold, distant man. Why couldn't they leave her with a loving couple? Instead, she has to grow up in this prison. A beautiful prison with marble floors, crown molding, and I don't know what else, because I've been too scared to explore the house.

I reach into her crib to cover her with her blanket. She responds with a wispy sigh

through tiny rosy lips. So darned cute! Lilly Belle is fair-skinned and blonde with big blue eyes just like her evil uncle's. I fell in love with her the moment I saw her, and I'm dying to decorate this bare room with four cream walls. All she has to look at is this stupid, high-tech mobile that bores her to tears.

My thoughts are broken when a light knock at the door scares the crap out of me. "Hello? Miss Wallach?"

My heart spikes then calms upon hearing the soothing voice. It's definitely not Ethan's, though I wouldn't mind if it were. As aggravating as he is, there's also something magnetic about him. Piercing blue eyes, chiseled face, wide shoulders and stance like a Roman god statue, even as he's ordering me around. Plus, I rather enjoyed seeing him mildly flustered when I talked back to him.

In my eyes, we're all the same. My mother taught me that. Then again, my family grew up without much money, so maybe that's something my mother said to make us feel better.

Stepping over to the door, I crack it open. A dark man with gray hair smiles at me. He must be about forty years older than Ethan.

"Oh, hello. You're Wilson?" I ask.

"The very one." Dipping his head, he presses a hand to his heart. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Wallach. I'm Wilson Beneti. Don't worry, I won't bite," he says, glancing at my hand on the door.

I feel stupid, blocking him from entering. This, if anyone, will be my ally. Opening the door, I say, "I'm so sorry. Come in, Mr. Beneti. I don't know why I'm so on edge."

“Call me Wilson, please. Let me think...” He leans against the wall. Wilson has dark, round eyes that disappear into his sunny grin. “Because your first impression here was of Mr. Townsend?” He chuckles. “Don’t mind him. He’s been that way ever since he was a child. I would know. I practically raised him.”

I shake my head in sympathy. “I can’t imagine such a warm man as yourself raising such a cold heart. Oops, I didn’t just say that out loud, did I?” I smile to show I’m kidding. Sort of. Mostly.

Wilson’s shoulders shudder with glee, but he raises his finger to his lips. “Monitors everywhere,” he whispers. “Not that he’s home, mind you, but best begin the practice of watching what you say.”

I shrug. “I can see why five nannies have come and gone.”

“Yes, Ethan can be extremely demanding, but he also had a strange upbringing.” Wilson looks around as if other people are around, and I suddenly remember there’s a cleaning lady downstairs. “It’s the only reason I still work for him. I feel sorry for the boy.”

I imagine Wilson raising a difficult teenager, being tasked by Ethan’s rich parents with following him around town and making sure he stays out of trouble, then staying on as his trusty servant years later. Takes guts and patience and suddenly, I really respect Wilson ten thousand times more than Ethan.

“I feel sorry for the baby,” I tell him, glancing back at the sleeping angel. “Guess she’s going to have a hard time, too, growing up with a guardian like him, huh?”

Wilson’s brown eyes take on a sad tilt, like he’s holding onto words better off left unsaid. “Indeed.”

“Good thing I’m here to help,” I tell him. Not trying to toot my own horn, but I’m sure glad Lilly Belle will at least have my smiling face to count on. Well, mine and Wilson’s. “What did they do to him?” I find myself asking the old man suddenly.

“Ethan?” He sighs, walks around the room, making sure everything is in place. “He wasn’t always this way. Used to be fun-loving. Sometimes he still is, when he comes home in a good mood and business is doing well, I’ll see glimpses of the boy I used to care for.” Wilson comes back to the door and taps the door frame. “Anyway, if there’s anything you need, you let me know. I’m at your service, Miss.”

“Thank you.” I watch him leave, shuffling down the hallway then slowly disappearing down the stairs. Then, I slide into the room next door and continue unpacking my things and trying to make a home for myself.

* * *

At night, I play with Lilly Belle, giving her plenty of tummy time, so she’ll roll over like she’s supposed to by this age. Seems like she’s a tad behind developmentally, but then again, she has been through a lot in her short life. No worries, though—I’ll get her back on track soon enough.

She’s a delightful child, and I’m so glad she’s as easy as she is, considering how tough it will be dealing with her uncle. After a warm lavender bath, a full bottle, and a lullaby or two, she’s ready for bed. I do hope she’ll sleep through ‘til morning, and after all the exercises I put her through tonight, she should sleep soundly.

I call my mom to let her know I’ve been fine, just busy the last three days, but the focus of the conversation shifts quickly. “That’s so great, honey. Just in time, too.”

“What do you mean?” I don’t like the tone in her voice, leading me to ask questions she’ll no doubt have a hard time answering. “What’s going on?”

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“Nothing, only that we’re late a couple of mortgage payments. The Etsy store isn’t bringing in enough money, your dad has been searching for something better, and I know I’m going to have to start looking for something full-time.”

“Ugh, Mom. I’m so sorry.”

My mother has been running an Etsy store of handmade scarves, which are absolutely beautiful, but not enough people appreciate artistry like hers, making for difficult bill-paying. “I’ll send you money as soon as I get paid,” I tell her, thinking how much it sucks to keep giving away half my paycheck. At this rate, I’ll never be able to pay for my winter semester.

I look around at the stylish furnishings, the mansion I get to live in, and feel guilty. My family needs the money more than I do. If I can stay employed by Ethan Townsend, that’s.

“I didn’t want to worry you, Penelope, but I didn’t want to keep secrets from you either. You don’t have to send money. Well, maybe just a little to get us by. I’ll get a job by the end of the week, if it kills me.”

“What about the kids?”

“Patty can take care of Callie, and Nancy next door can watch Brandon, since she has two boys anyway. Don’t worry, we’ll make it work somehow.”

“Don’t worry” is my mom’s favorite phrase, and it does little to soothe my worries.

After hanging up, I move to the window and gaze out upon New York City at night. It's then that I notice I have a balcony. An actual balcony facing the city. How did I not notice this before? Oh, yes, three busy days of child-care.

I open the French door and stand outside in the cool air. The full moon is out, absolutely gorgeous, and again, I feel guilty for having a view such as this. I hope things get better for my family. I get to look out upon Central Park and take care of a delightful little baby. It's a blessing to give back to my family.

Lying in bed, I have trouble falling asleep. New surroundings, new sounds, and besides, I'm used to sleeping with very little on, but with Ethan Townsend set to come home any moment now, I'm wide awake. I wonder if he'll go straight to the kitchen and living room like he usually does, or if he'll go to his bedroom, which is on the other side of this wing. I know he never stops by to see Lilly Belle, which saddens me. Remembering his rule about keeping the door locked, I get up and follow orders then head for the bathroom.

Such a strangeman.

But I have to remember what Wilson told me—his childhood upbringing wasn't ideal. Something made him this way. I only wish I knew what that was. It'd help me understand him better.

I shuffle barefoot to the bathroom to rub water on my face. Maybe the cool air drifting through the slightly open French door will evaporate the moisture, creating a soothing effect. I still remember long nights as a child when I was sick, and my mother used to cool me off with a damp washcloth. Between that and her singing, I'd fall asleep right away. It's worth a shot.

I return to bed and lie there staring up at the ceiling, my legs stretched out and my arms on either side. The chilly air works its magic, and I begin drifting off, thinking

about the day, Ethan's demands, his angular handsome face, his terrible attitude, and how mysterious he is. Does he ever have relationships? I wonder how a woman would get along with him.

But I keep coming back to Wilson saying there are other sides to him, which intrigues me.

Somewhere in the house, I hear footsteps. Wilson went home several hours ago, so it must be Ethan coming home from work.

After a while, I hear careful footsteps moving up the stairs. I don't bother covering up, because I'm locked in my room, just like he demanded I be. For a moment, I allow myself to fantasize that I left the door open, that he comes in and sees me in my undies. And then what?

Would he yell at me? Would I beg him not to fire me by sucking his cock?

Jesus, Penelope, get a freakin' grip.

Suddenly, I hear what sounds like a handle turning. I startle and sit up in bed, drawing the sheets up to my chin. But I locked the door. I know I did! I stare at the door but it doesn't open and neither is the handle turning. Am I imagining it? I stand to double-check the lock but before I can test it, I see him standing in the bathroom doorway.

My heart stops. I can barely breathe. I wrap my arms around my torso, fighting off sudden chills. "Mr. Townsend..."

"I thought I told you to keep the door locked at night," he growls, unbuttoning the cuffs of his sleeved shirt and rolling them up. He has tattoos on his forearms.

“I—but I did. This door is...how did you...” The bathroom. He came in through the bathroom’s second door—not the one to the bedroom, but the one to the hallway. Damn it. I’m so stupid. “I’m so sorry. That was my fault.”

“Indeed it was your fault, Miss Wallach.” He crosses his arms and gazes at my body in the feeble moonlight coming in through the French door. “And why is that dooropen?”

“I like the breeze at night. I can close it, though, if you want. I’m so sorry...” I make for the door, but he stopsme.

“No, leave it. It’s fine. I like what it does toyou.”

Does tome?

His gaze falls to my chest, and I know that my nipples are hard and aching. I don’t stop to think about it often, because I’m so busy surviving life, but I need a man. Sometimes I feel my body will explode. Ethan steps into the room and looks around, as if to see what I’ve been up to. I don’t know what it is about him, but he makes me feel like I’ve done something wrong even when I haven’t. I feel naughty in his presence, and though I didn’t have an aggressive father growing up, I feel like he’s going to spank me for being insolent.

Isn’t that what he called me on Monday? Something about impertinent?

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Shivering in my tee and panties, I feel so naked and vulnerable in his presence, but I do nothing to cover myself up. Because I'm also titillated by his presence, his tall form looming in the darkness, his eyes roving over my body, part of me is thrilled that he's seeing me this way. Suddenly, I fully realize why he wanted me to lock the door—because of this. There's undeniable and unspoken heat between us, even in the cool, dark room. He steps closer to me, as my heartbeat races, and I swallow a lump in my throat.

My throat.

Where I imagine him kissing me, biting the soft flesh of my lips, forcing my mouth open, where he'll then plunge himself—

No. Stop, stop, stop. I have to stop these random sexual thoughts of my boss from popping up at the most wrong of times.

A warm flush spreads over my body, and if Ethan had no idea what I was thinking up until this moment, well he does now. Jesus, I want him so badly. I've never wanted anyone so badly and never imagined my boss this way. I was too busy thinking of him as an asshole, but now that he's here in my room, staring at me with those eyes, sucking on his inner lip, fighting his lustful male need, seeing right through me, all I want is for him to put me out of my misery and takeme.

“Clearly you're not fit for this job, Miss Wallach.” He takes a slow step toward me “I should have listened to my intuition when I told you to leave earlier. It was one simplerule.”

“Forgive me for forgetting about the bathroom door,” I nearly hiss, staying in control. I cross my arms over my chest so he’ll stop looking at my breasts even though they long for his touch. So hard trying to stay proper when I want so much for him to strip me. “It was an honest mistake.”

Ethan’s eyes flare with fire as he stares at my body and into my eyes. His burn with anger, but now I think it’s more with himself than it is with me. He can’t control himself around me, can he? He didn’t want to hire me because I am attractive to him, not the other way around. I get it now. The realization fills me with confidence and power. Now that I see him as weak flesh and blood, as just a man, he’s becoming more human to me. And more human means more appealing...

I step over to him, fighting my lust with every ragged breath. Even though I’ve only been with one guy my entire life, and it was terrible enough to forget, my body’s desperate need is driving me. Rein, my high school boyfriend for three months, could never compare to this experienced, powerful man standing before me. Not the same neighborhood, not even the same universe. In the same moment, Ethan takes a confident step toward me and before I know it, he’s pulled me into his arms.

Magnetic.

Commanding.

I’m weak and submissive to his desire. Or maybe it’s my desire for him that manifested this. Either way, I’ve only dreamed of arms like his—strong, outrageously muscular—and a body like his, and now...of a mouth like his, consuming and taking me into his relentlessly. He doesn’t let me go, nor do I want him to. I couldn’t stop now even if I tried.

His tongue tastes of hot mint and freshness as it licks, explores...

What the hell is happening? I'm kissing my boss, that's what, and his stubble grazes my face. This is so wrong, but I can't think about the consequences right now, because my body grows weaker, and I quickly begin falling down a spiral, knowing for a fact that I won't be a nanny at this home for much longer. After failing this first test, I'm sure to be fired.

Screw it. At the moment, I don't care. Because he feels fucking amazing, and I'm a woman held by a man's power before I'm anything else.

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Ethan

I was rock hard before I tried the door to see if she'd been following my instructions.

So when the door gave way, I knew it was over.

For both of us.

I'm pissed that I'm here, pissed that she caught my interest so damn quickly. I've tried staying away from her the last three days, but my darker needs got the best of me. Now here she is, giving in, just like I knew she would. She needs it. It shows all over her body language. She needs to come hard. The only question is where and when I want her to come.

Only one reason why she would unravel so quickly, even as she tried sassing me first—she needs a good fuck. And I'm the man to give it to her. Penelope disintegrates in my hands like she's under the spell of my kiss. I don't blame her. Kissing is my favorite way of getting the panties to drop voluntarily. She wants so badly to detonate. Maybe she's never been with anyone. Maybe I was right and she spends her time before falling asleep touching herself, and I walked in at the right moment.

Whatever the case may be, she failed me.

I was hoping she'd be stronger than I am, but it appears we're both weak. She had to go and leave her door unlocked. A clear invitation. If there's anything I can't resist, it's a clear invitation into a bedroom. I feel her body thawing under me so quickly, I

have to hold her up. I continue the onslaught on her mouth—that lovely, pretty mouth that I want to fuck—and I’m not sweet about it either. She has to understand what she did to me, letting me come in while she stands there in a flimsy old shirt, nipples poking through, inviting me to touch and suck on them.

Her body is as ripe and succulent as I knew it would be. Tasting her sweet mouth and tongue only gives me a preview of things to come.

And I know it’s going to be good.

Reaching down, I pull up the edge of her shirt and lift it over her head. She gasps and tries covering herself with her wrists but I take them and hold them behind her back with one hand. Her tits push out at me—perfect, round with a heavy spread to them, big light pink nipples. Bending low, I pull her waist toward me and wrap my lips around one of them, sucking on her tit while I squeeze the other, pinching the nipple.

God, they’re so good. She’s bursting with lust and my cock feels like it’s going to explode if I don’t bury it deep in her tight pussy soon.

She gasps, tries pushing me away, and when I let her go, she grips my shoulders and reins me back in. We’re clear then—the feeling is mutual. I could kneel and suck on her tits all day. And maybe I will. Playing with the fleshy tips, I graze them with my teeth and move from one to the other. I could throw her in bed, curl up by her side, and suckle on those pretty nipples ‘til they’re sore all night.

Lifting her, I carry her to the edge of the bed and let her fall, bouncing on the mattress. She looks up at me with those nervous, lustful eyes reflecting pale green and brown light.

Bending to kiss her deeply one more time, I feel her nimble, small fingers fumbling with the bulge in my pants. My cock strains against the pressure, and I can almost

hear the words “let me see it” running through her head. She pulls open my belt and zipper and a moment later, her eyes widen, and that’s the perfect time to fill her mouth with my cock. Innocent, sweet eager mouth. Succulent, hot, and tight.

The warmth and wetness of her tongue envelops me, and I have to groan. God, yes. She’s slow and deliberate, wrapping her lips around me as my cock slides to the back of throat then pulls out again, then sliding back in. I feel her tongue bathing me, licking, and slurping up the shaft, then she slides down and takes my balls into my mouth.

Holy fuck. She’s supposed to be young and innocent. At least, that’s how she was in my mind. At this point, I’m not sure who’s more in control—me or her. But it has to be me, no matter what. My house. My rules. “Get on your knees, Sweetness.”

Her eyes question me, but she does as I ask, even though I see her hands shaking. “Yes, Mr. Townsend.”

“Not like that. On all fours, Sweetness.” Craning my neck to the side so I can see her tits slope so beautifully, she gets on all fours. I love it. I can tell her to do anything and she’ll do it.

“Like this?”

“Like that.” Holding her face still, I revel in how gorgeous she looks in this position. So submissive, a dog in heat, and there’s no shame in that. I would do anything to have her like this nightly, even daily. “Open your mouth,” I tell her, and after a moment’s hesitation, she does. “Beautiful.”

I slide my cock into her mouth and slowly fuck it.

Fuck that gorgeous face, that sassy mouth. “Maybe you won’t talk back as much

now,” I tell her.

And this is all her fault for leaving the bedroom door unlocked, as I warned her not to do.

Clearly, she doesn’t understand the monster that lurks inside everyman.

But Sweetness doesn’t care, because Sweetness is hungry for my stiff cock. Hungry for a release. I know because she’s reaching down to fiddle her clit through her panties while she pleases me, but she won’t be doing that herself, not while she’s under my roof. Damn it, she’s putting a kink in my plan. “You want to come?” I withdraw momentarily.

“Yes, Mr. Townsend. So badly. Please fuck my mouth again, and I will.”

Sassy and sexy as fuck with her backtalk.

“Oh, no. You don’t call the shots, Sweetness. I do. On your back—now.” As perfect as that pleading sounded, I can’t have her thinking she’s in control of me. Doesn’t work that way. Penelope scrambles to her feet then slides onto the bed, pushing back so she’s centered. Her legs are slightly parted, and her breathing is ragged, uneven. “Take those off,” I say, eyeing the panties. “Slowly.”

Her fingers hook into the sides of her light-colored panties, soaking through with her juices. I can see it even in the soft light and it makes me harden even more, if that’s possible. “Like this, Mr. Townsend?”

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She's fucking with me. Even in sex, she's spirited as balls, and God help me, I love it. But she cannot be allowed to know that, as I can't encourage this sort of behavior and disobedience.

"Yes. Like that, Miss Wallach. You hear how we're addressing each other? That's how we will always address each other. Why?" I say, as she plucks off the rest of panties and tosses them to the corner of the bed. Her pussy glistens as it drips. I can smell the warmth between her legs like a wolf picking up blood in the forest. I want it. I need it like I need oxygen.

"Why, Mr. Townsend?" she coos, reaching down to touch herself.

I kneel between her legs, grab her wrist and push it to the side of her body. "Because this is a professional relationship," I say, pressing my nose against her hot skin, taking in the lust and pure desire waiting for me there. "And it will continue to be one, and that is why you will never, ever leave your door open again. Are we clear?" I press my tongue against her clit and hold it there.

Not moving.

Not licking.

Just pressing.

She shudders with need. "Yes, Mr. Townsend. I'm sorry for disobeying you. I just need to come so badly."

“Again,” I say, lighting licking around her clit, dipping into her juices, and familiarizing myself with my Sweetness’s innermost secrets. “I call the shots. You lay back and learn.” My finger slides into her, and she moans aloud. The sound is like music, art, and lyrical dance all rolled into one. I could sit in an empty theater, front and center, and listen to the sweet refrain over and over again. I give her two fingers to hear just how amazing she can get.

Her groans fill the room. I’m so glad there’s no one in the house to hear her through the baby monitor in the room next door, because that sound is for me alone. I don’t care that I barely know her—she’s mine.

I feel the need to possess her deeply, down in my gut, in my balls.

Fuck, I’ve never felt anything like this before. For a moment, there’s a flood of anxiety that almost makes me second-guess myself. I don’t want to get in deep with anyone, don’t want to lose myself in another person.

But then I shake it off. My lust overcomes whatever fears this woman brings out in me.

Pressing my tongue onto her clit, I begin to lick and suck, flicking that hard, tiny kernel against my mouth, coaxing it into submission. More beautiful sounds emit from her throat, as she grips my hair and writhes against me, pushing her folds into my face, coating my tongue with her elixir.

I drink it. I drink, because there’s nothing more amazing than this woman’s pussy pushing against my nose and mouth, begging for more, dying for release. I intensify the onslaught with my fingers, fucking her tight little cunt while I continue to lick, feeling her legs tighten, knees press against my head, and I know she’s mine. She’s mine and forever will be. Tightening her grip around her hair and bending to one side, she fights against the waves even as they come. Even from here, I see her

nipples stiffen as she cries out, but I don't stop licking her. I lighten my strokes but kiss her through her orgasm, feeling the muscles spasm around my fingers.

Fucking sweet little temptress.

When she's begun coming down from her high but not quite drifted into the middle realm of giddiness, I stand, flip her around, then slide her to the edge of the bed. Like a cat getting dragged away for a bath, she holds onto the bed sheets, glancing around for clues as to what I'm going to do.

"My turn, Sweetness." With her pussy still dripping from her orgasm, I slip my cock into her cunt, hold onto her hips, and plow in. I need her, want her, have to have her, make her mine. Drive it all the way home.

Wrapping her legs around mine, she's still facing down, facing away, so I don't have to see her pretty face, don't have to feel anything when she looks at me, because this won't be happening again.

Even as I think it, I know I'm lying to myself.

In any case, while I have her, she will obey me. She will listen, and she won't beg for more after I fuck her, because I'm going to wear her out.

"Have you ever been fucked like this before?" I ask.

"No."

"No, or no, sir?"

"No, sir."

“Well, the next time you leave your door open, I won’t be this nice. You hear that, Sweetness? This is me being nice.” I fuck her harder, hold onto those hips, and relish in feeling that ass, watching it jiggle with every pound I give her, contract with every stroke.

Little do I realize until I’m almost close to coming that her hand has disappeared between her legs. She’s getting off on my cock’s onslaught. Damn, she really needed it. I would tell her to stop—not on my territory—but I just want to feel the release now and sensing her muscles tighten again around mine would only enhance it. Still, I can’t have her calling shots, so I reach around and double her efforts by pressing my hand on hers.

Her neck strains out, and I ride her ass from behind. She groans long and loud, and the result is so animalistic, it’s transcendent. “Come again, Sweetness. Come all over my cock.” I love it. I love the juices, I love her hot breath panting, I love the way I’m crouched behind her like some animal catching its mate off-guard, pounding her until we both lose ourselves in the sound and fury and ecstasy.

She feels so good and tight around me, I can’t take it anymore and I blow my load into her delicious pussy. So. Fucking. Good. This woman belongs to me. The whole thing feels so right, that it isn’t until my brain turns back on, as I come down from this high, that I realize I wasn’t wearing a condom. She didn’t care, and I assume that’s because she’s on birth control. Still—it can’t happen again.

The mantra I need to repeat until it becomes fact.

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We're both exhausted. I barely have the strength to lift her and settle her down on her pillow, then I curl up next to her. I should probably leave, but I can't—I've never seen such a beautiful sight in what's left of the moonlight. An angel waking up from a dream, glancing at me like I'm her star-crossed lover, then falling asleep faster than she came.

I look away. I can't take in the vision. I can't stare straight at her or I'll feel, and that was the last thing I wanted when I came here.

Still, I stroke her arm gently and move her hair all to one side, because it's too silky not to touch, and anyway, she's fallen asleep. Fascinating creature, this Penelope Wallach, some kind of siren beckoning me to the rocks, where I will surely crash and be destroyed if I let myself. And I'm a fucking idiot who needs to get the fuck out of this room before I ravage her all over again.

Once she's twitching in her sleep a half hour later, I slip out of bed and pull on my pants, carrying my shirt over my arm. I give her one last glance—beauty in sleep—before exiting the way I came in, through the bathroom. Turning off the hallway light, I close that door and quietly shuffle past the baby's room. Inside, Lilly Belle stirs, whining in her sleep. Did she hear us grunting and moaning in there? Is she dreaming about her mother?

I can't fucking think about that.

I don't want Penelope waking up after I so effectively put her to sleep, especially since she's with the baby all day long. The woman needs a break, and I'm not a total asshole. I slip into the nursery I've kept sparse on purpose, because what the

hell—she’s not going to stay here very long—and peer over the edge of the crib. The baby pumps her little arms and legs with eyes closed. Bad dream. I turn her onto her side and pat her tiny body. “Shh, shh,” I tell her, like Penelope did on the firstday.

The new nanny has already taught me something.

The baby immediately settles into peaceful sleep again, sucking on an invisible bottle, tiny pouty lips moving up and down.

My chest tightens and I swallow hard.

Fuck. This isn’t how it was supposed to be.

Too bad I’m not the right dad for her. I’m not even the right uncle.

But perhaps it’s better this way. Better to lose your parents early, because this is what real life is like—surviving on your own—and the sooner she learns that, the better.

I cover her up and leave the room, making my way back to my wing of the house through empty, cold hallways.

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Penelope

Sunlight filters in through the light curtain, and the sounds of happy gurgling through the baby monitor gently awaken me. I sit up, ready to go check on Lilly Belle, warm her bottle and sit with her when all of a sudden, the memory of last night hits me hard.

Ethan was here last night.

It wasn't some dream spawned by the full moon. He was really here. And oh, my God...the things we did. I was bad. So bad! Did he really... My cheeks flush with prickly heat. Did he really do all the things I let him do? I'm mortified at the acts I let him perform, but also surprisingly impressed with myself. I am not a sex goddess by any means, but I've been needing it.

I slept with my boss.

And holy crap was it good. Holy god was he good. Just the thought of his perfect cock sliding into my mouth, into my pussy, makes me wet all over again.

Shit, I need to get it together...

The baby's gurgling turns to desperation, like Lilly Belle is saying, Hellooo? Anybody home? I heat up her bottle and enter her room with a rush. "Good morning, sweet pea. How did you sleep? Like a rock, apparently. I didn't even hear a peep from you!" She's a good sleeper, this one. She already makes my job that much easier.

Assuming I still have a job.

I'm terrified of what I'll find when I come downstairs.

When all eight ounces of milk are gone, and she's had her changing, I set her to play in her crib with music, while I change into day clothes. Coming back to pick her up, I carry her through the house, pointing out the emotionless, black-and-white photography Ethan (or Ethan's interior designer) has placed throughout the house. Old saw mills, the Eiffel Tower, modern skyscrapers...things to do with steel.

Cold, hard, and strong. Like Ethan.

More memories from last night... He wanted me to fear him, to keep my door locked.

But in another way, he wanted me to want him even more.

It was evident from every move he made.

I am feel nervous about seeing him again, but I have to face him. I have to. We have to talk about what happened, and it's better that I do it with Lilly Belle in my arms, so he doesn't yell at me. Who would yell at a baby?

Of course, Ethan Townsend might...

"Shall we go see your uncle?" I ask O Little One.

Lilly Belle coos and gleefully grips a fistful of my hair.

"Ouch. Leave Penelope's hair alone, honey bunny."

I follow the smell of coffee downstairs into the kitchen and see him standing there,

dressed and ready for work and ho-ly shit, does he look hot as hell. Black pants, dark blue button shirt, silver watch, silver cuffs, cup of coffee in his hand, other on his hip. Perfectly “all man” from head to toe. The sight of him almost makes me regret coming down. Every kiss, every touch from last night comes barreling into my mind, and now I’m just going to look flushed.

“Good morning, Miss Wallach. I trust you slept well?” There’s a glint in his eyes.

“I...” What am I supposed to say? He’s implying that he made me come so hard—twice, now that I remember—that I zonked out. He would be correct, which absolutely burns me. “Not bad. Woke up once or twice,” I force myself to casually say.

“Did you now?” He smirks and resumes sipping his coffee while standing at the counter checking his iPad for work-related things, I presume. What a handsome man, like a runway model for sexy businessmen. “Then you would’ve heard the baby crying shortly after our...meeting. No worries, I took care of it.”

Wait, what? He tended to the baby last night?

Ugh, the nanny mark of shame. Anytime the family has to step in to do something I was hired to do, I always feel so guilty. I should’ve heard her, I should’ve comforted her, not him. It’s even more embarrassing because of why I didn’t hear her. “Thank you,” I mutter, holding Lilly Belle’s hand, shaking her little fist until she smiles. You little thing, you didn’t tell me. “It’s good that she got to see you then.”

There. That’ll bite him.

A quick jaunt down the old guilt trip road never hurt anybody.

I look up cautiously.

Ethan stares at me through steely eyes. “From now on, keep your door closed. I’ll be very busy at work the next couple of days, and I don’t want to come home to find things out of order. Doors remain locked, and the baby...” He casts a glance at Lilly Belle. “Stays upstairs. If you need something from the kitchen, come down alone to get it or have Wilson fetch it for you.”

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Is he serious? I can't walk around with the baby? This little girl who is his sweet, little niece must be kept in isolation? "I see. So you don't want to see Lilly Belle," I stress her name. She's not just the baby, "anywhere downstairs. Just so I'm clear." And to reiterate what a jerk you are.

"Correct. The house is big enough. You both have your domain. I have mine." He glances again at his iPad which emits a cold blue glow onto his face, electrifying his eyes with chilly intensity.

Let me see if I got this: stay out of the way where I can't see you, and get that baby out of my face. Got it.

His aloof demeanor hurts so much more because of what happened between us last night. I'm used to heads of family being somewhat brusque, but this guy takes the cake. What did I expect this morning, for him to present me with roses and tell me what a wonderful time he had? Of course not. Last night meant nothing to him. That much is clear. But...did it mean something to me?

Maybe not in the way of love and romance, because I certainly don't feel that Mr. Townsend is my knight in shining armor, but still—I can't simply forget an intimate encounter the next morning the way he apparently can. Especially one so intense.

Anger boils inside of me. How can he be so disconnected? Is that all that sex means to him, just hard fucking, then you go about your day? I feel sorry for any woman who's ever tried to make an emotional connection with him, but it's not my place to even care. "Yes, sir," I say, trying hard to keep the scorn out of my tone.

“Miss Wallach,” he says, while I grab a snack of grapes from the fridge.

He’s going to say something about last night. Maybe I was wrong about him. Maybe it did mean something to him—he just prefers not to dwell on it. I could understand that, I suppose. But he only says, “No need to take it personally.”

“Right. Of course not.” I take a deep breath, chin up. “Don’t worry, we’ll stay out of your way, Mr. Townsend. Come on, Lilly.”

Damn it, I am hurt, and I am taking it personally.

I may not have much experience when it comes to love and sex, but I’ve never felt so used. I’m sorry but he needed it just as much as I did, or he wouldn’t have come sniffing at my door. Technically his door. Whatever. For some reason, though, things don’t feel reciprocated. Things feel like I’m the one who fell for his charms. I’m the weak one, the one who didn’t pass some test of strength. And I know it’s because I’m not an all-business steel magnate man who’s used to taking what he wants from whomever he wants, like some Category 5 tornado leaving a mess in its wake.

It’s because I’m a woman, emotional and affected.

A woman who should’ve known better.

Ethan

Home might be where I unload, but work is where I come to think.

Usually, that means modeling and setting the company's strategy and direction, leading the executive team, allocating capital to the company's priorities, but today it's something else entirely. Today, I have a twenty-one-year-old girl on my mind.

A nanny, to be exact.

My nanny.

No. Lilly Belle's nanny.

Never mind that everyone is waiting for me in the next room or that the meeting will be starting any moment now. I can't rip my gaze away from my 68th floor Central Park view. Fall is here. Burnt oranges, bright crimsons, and vibrant yellows. Part of me imagines myself out in the park, walking amongst those trees with Penelope and Lilly Belle.

I shut my eyes hard to try and force these unwanted visions from my mind.

I can't stop thinking about—her. Why?

Why can't I get Penelope Wallach off my mind? The memory of her standing in her room, bathed in moonlight, when I walked in after finding her door unlocked, is burned in my brain. Emblazoned. Imprinted. Even though she was in a shirt and

undies, I could see right through her. If I narrowed my eyes, I could practically see the center of heat coming off her body between her legs. Her nipples betrayed her frightened exterior. Her aura radiated desire.

She was gorgeous, mortified, and full of need all rolled into one. I should've fought the urge and left, but I couldn't resist the look in her eyes, like she was begging me to stay and fuck her, put her out of her misery. And I did twice. No matter how much I wanted to pull away, I couldn't. Our bodies melded together, a recipe for beautiful wreckage.

Even terrified of seeing me there, she pushed through the awkwardness and confusion and let me in. Let her carnal desires take over. Let her body and heart win. Then, this morning, she came downstairs to speak to me, even though she could've stayed upstairs all day avoiding me, and I wouldn't have seen her. Coming down to face me took courage, but that's what I like about her. No embarrassment. No regrets, none that I know of. Just readiness to call truce and move on.

Still, I saw that tiny spark of warmth some women have the next morning, the one that gives away what they're feeling, the hint of overinvestment in sentiment. She was wondering if there'd be more to this quick affair.

There isn't. There can't ever be.

I was cold to her. I had to be.

This is who I am and what I've learned in my life. Warmth and emotion were banished from my existence early on, weaknesses that I extinguished long ago.

When it came to my mother, the less I felt the better. My sister was never as cold and indifferent to it all as I was, and she suffered for it.

Despite everything that she put us through, I wanted to love my own mother...

This is why feelings are irrational. Feelings hamper productivity, which is the last thing I need. Feelings cloud clear thinking.

The speaker on my desk clicks on. "Sir, they're waiting for you in the conferenceroom."

"Be right there."

I won't. I'll be there when I damned feel like it, and since those assholes nearly fucked up last quarter, they can wait for me. I don't care what else is on their schedules. I'll get up when I feel like it.

"Sir?" The gentle voice buzzes into my office again.

"I got caught up with something, Bianca. I'll be right there. Tell Bryn to start without me."

"Yes, sir."

Suddenly, I'm wondering all sorts of things about the nanny, the things I didn't learn from fucking her succulent body last night. Where did she grow up? Is she outgoing and sociable? Did she ever have a serious boyfriend?

I hate myself for giving a shit.

Swiveling toward my laptop and opening up social media, I search her name. My eye catches her right away, out of all the others that pop up. She's the one with the radiant smile and reddish hair in the profile pic. I would know it anywhere. There are those dimples that come out whenever she smiles at Lilly Belle.

Her hometown is Sleepy Hollow, New York, and apparently, she has a small PR startup—barely even a company. Everyone can have a business and a webpage these days—the notion has lost all meaning.

Still, I'll have to check into that later. Scrolling through her profile pics, I see she has three—the smiling one, one of her looking out across a mountain view, and another of her standing on top of a hill in workout gear like she just conquered Mount Vesuvius. Strength, determination.

Sass.

Those are the only three photos I'm allowed to see because her account is private and I'm not a friend of hers. I switch to Photo Album to see if more pics of her are there. What does she do in her spare time? Does she paint, does she cook, play tennis? I scan the few available photos for clues with such intense focus that I almost completely forget about the meeting. The last photo is a field of sunflowers.

I'll have to look through this later, and I find myself wishing the meeting would be over quick just so I can continue checking her profile out.

I try to push the positive emotions away by imagining her acting like my mother would. The rages, the accusations, the slaps, kicks and punches. The hysterical shrieks followed by crying and the same old apologies about how it would never happen again.

But for some reason, when I look at Penelope's pics, I can't see it. I can't really imagine her screaming at anyone—certainly not at Lilly Belle. She's too gentle, of pure heart.

When I click off "Photo Album" and try checking out her "About" page, I accidentally hit "Add Friend." Agh, you gotta be fucking kidding me. Quickly, I hit "Cancel Request" but it won't matter. The fact that I was stalking her page will soon be known to her. I slide the cursor off but the damage is done. Fuck—that's what I get for being curious.

Time to get back to work and put my mind where it needs to be. Where it should've

been in the first place.

Penelope

Central Park is alive. With children, nannies, mothers, joggers, pigeons, pigeons, and more pigeons still. It's another blustery September day and Lilly Belle and I love being outside. Her azure eyes are wide, alert, taking it all in. I swear this child is an old soul. Lilly Belle is my spirit animal.

Immediately after talking to Ethan the other morning, she took to patting my face, cooing, as if saying, "Listen, Penelope, it's all going to be okay. You made a mistaken. Fuck it. Get over it. You can do this." She agreed her uncle is a dickhead and we should both move on.

We're thick as thieves, Lilly Belle and me. Sometimes when I look at her, my heart wells up with so much love that I feel scared. I shouldn't get too attached.

Maybe because she doesn't have a real mother and father, I'm growing closer than I should. This is just a job, after all. I could be fired any day, especially with a boss like Ethan.

When we reach the playground, I stop the stroller in front of a bench and take a seat on the edge. Four other mothers or nannies sit crowded on it, chatting. I smile at them, hoping one of them might say something encouraging. I could use some non-babbling adult conversation. But they all smile at me with those forged, upper East Side smiles, like they know I'm not Lilly Belle's mother.

"Are you Ethan's new nanny?" One of them with big, bright teeth asks me.

I'm taken aback. It's not like I'm wearing a name tag or T-shirt. Then, I realize I'm being stupid. It's Lilly Belle they recognize. She's probably come to the park many times before me, as other nannies vied for the job. "Townsend?" I ask, just to make sure. Stupid, since I guess everyone knows him around here. Especially these hot yoga mommies who make it their business to know everyone else's.

"Yes, Townsend," toothy woman laughs. "You've survived a whole week? Amazing."

How she knows exactly how many days I've been in the Townsend house, I don't know, but it shouldn't surprise me. These women learn everything about everyone. "Yes, I'm Penelope. Nice to meet you." I nod quickly then bend to fuss over Lilly Belle's toys, making sure they're all secured to the stroller and nothing's going to fallout.

An eerie quietude falls over the bench. I don't want to look at them, but I just know they're exchanging looks. I'm fresh meat, even though I've been to this park a million times. Though never with Lilly Belle.

Ethan's surprise child is surely big news around these parts.

It's faint, definitely not meant for me to hear it, but I do—a whisper from the end of the bench. "She must be good at what she does." Cackles titter across the row of women. It's clear that she means I must be having sex with Ethan Townsend, and for a moment, I'm appalled.

Then, I remember that I am having sex with Ethan Townsend.

Even if it was only one night. One incredible, mind-blowing night that I still think about constantly.

My cheeks redden. I'm mortified, because they're right. These catty bitches are right. I'm probably still employed because I was good at what I did in the bedroom that night. Suddenly, I'm pissed at myself again, as a myriad of questions flit through my mind. Did he "audition" the other nannies? Did I have sex with a man who'd just "interviewed" several others in the same week? Were any of these women on the park bench part of his auditions? Have any of them seen him naked the way I have, laid eyes upon his chiseled form and massive cock as I have? Suddenly, I feel so small. So stupid. A notch on his wall. Of course there's nothing special about me.

And ever since it happened, I've kept my door unlocked intentionally, in the hopes that he would come see me, but he hasn't. In fact, he's barely been home. It's like he's purposely avoiding me, and again.

I should be grateful not to see his heartless face. I should be glad he's not there to tell me how to do my job. I wonder if he micromanages his people at work the way he micromanages me. I should be happy I only have Wilson to watch over me for a few hours each day. He says he doesn't come every day anymore, but he has, simply because he likes watching me and Lilly Belle interact.

Wilson makes me smile.

Ethan Townsend does not.

Ethan Townsend can kiss my ass for making me wish he'd slip into my room again, take me into his arms, and lay a soul-wrenching kiss onto me. A heart-stopping, breathless kiss that weakens my legs like I'm some baby giraffe standing for the first time.

The evil bitch moms are still tittering, and that's my cue to go. I stand, nod at them, because unlike them, I am polite, refined, and un-full of shit. I push the stroller along the route. Lilly Belle bangs her little hands on the stroller tray over and over, going,

“Ba, ba, ba, ba...” loving the sounds of children playing on the jungle gym.

“Yes, Lilly Belle, those mommies were bad, bad, bad girls. You and I are not. You and I rise above. We’re survivors. Especially you, sweet pea. You’re the bee’s knees.” I laugh to myself. The bee’s knees, like my mom always says.

I love my job. Despite it all, I really do.

The rest of our park time goes well. I pick up an orange fall leaf and hand it to Lilly Belle, who stares at it like it’s a sparkly diamond in a dark, dark world. But then, figuring pretty things must also taste delicious, she crams it into her mouth, and I pluck the crispy pieces off her tongue. “Silly, you can’t eat that,” I say. Silly nanny, for giving it to her.

“Can’t you just get the kid a burger?” It’s a man’s voice I recognize. When I look up at the angled afternoon sun, I see Robert Ellis, a friend of my family. In running gear, he slows down, smiles, leans in for a short hug. “What’s up, Penelope? Still doing the nanny thing, I see?”

I smile. It’s nice to see a familiar, friendly face. Robert was just a skinny kid in high school the other day, but now he’s about nineteen and looking like an adult--almost.

But compared to Ethan, he looks like a goofy young boy still.

“Hey, you! Nah, I married a billionaire and gave birth to a seven-month-old since you last saw me,” I joke.

“Aww, don’t break my heart, Wallach. You know I always had a crush on you.”

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We laugh and make small talk, chatting about what we've been up to. I tell him about the PR website and the small, freelance jobs I've been taking just to get things going while I save enough money for winter semester, but how being a full-time nanny is taking up most, if not all, mytime.

"But you get breaks, right? Days off?" Roberts sort of jogs in place abit.

"No, not with this family. I'm pretty much on all thetime."

"Wow, that sucks. I'm sorry. Must be hard for you." He says this like someone who knows what my family has always gone through, my mom's struggles to keep up, to raise five kids. "But good for you. You've always been diligent."

"Diligent," I repeat, thinking hard on that word. Yeah, I guess diligent would be correct, but I also do it out of need. I would love to relax like other women my age, but it's just not in the cards.

"Anyway, what about you? What have you been up to?" I ask Robert. Lilly Belle stares at him, as she would like to know as well. This kid is attuned and smart, I tellyou.

A deep registered voice booms out from nearby. "Yes, do tell us. We're dying to know."

I turn and see Ethan coming up the walk, hands in coat pocket, looking super fucking handsome as always. He's in a suit and coat, wearing a hat. A hat, like one of those old-style bowler hats men used to wear when there was a world war going on, like he

owns both Boardwalk and Park Place.

“Mr. Townsend,” I say, catching my breath before looking away. I can’t look into his eyes, or he’ll know that I think he looks amazing. Robert will know it, too, and the whole thing will be over-the-top weird.

“Excuse me?” Robert turns to him, holding out his hand, wondering if he knows this man.

Ethan doesn’t shake it. “Never mind. Miss Wallach, time to go inside now.” He swooshes me up the steps like I’m a child. I don’t appreciate it. But I’m not in the business of looking uncomfortable at work, so that Robert can blab about it, and then next thing I know my mother is calling me asking me if everything is alright.

So I smile and tell Robert, “It was great running into you. Hope to see you again soon...around here, or wherever.”

“NYU,” Robert gives me a secret look. It’s almost as if his deep brown eyes are saying, don’t listen to that guy. You can stay and talk to me all you want. “I’m at NYU, studying film, and everything is great. See you around, Penelope.”

“Not if I can help it,” Ethan mutters behind me, as I step into the brownstone and he closes the door. “Who was that?”

“A friend. Who did you think he was?”

“I ask the questions here, Miss Wallach.” He plucks off his hat and hangs it on a hook by the wall, then he takes off his coat and hangs it on the coat rack. He smells delicious, like spice and fall highlighted with masculine undertones that bring me back to the other night. I can’t believe I slept with this man.

And I want him again—damnit.

“I took Lilly Belle for a walk and just ran into him. You know, running into friends on the street. You do have friends, right?” Shit, it comes out sarcastically. I have to remember to keep quiet and just do what he says. It’s a job, and it’s for money, and if only I can get past his holier-than-thou attitude, I’ll be fine.

“Miss Wallach, you can’t bring strange men around the baby.”

“Strange men?” I gawk at him. Now, this is getting ridiculous. “How is a friend on the street a strange man? I’ve known that kid since he was in Kindergarten, and he was just being friendly, saying hello.”

“Well, I don’t know him. And I can’t have you and the baby around men I don’t know.”

“Are you serious?” I gasp. Stay calm, Penelope. Jesus. But then, I realize why he’s doing this. Maybe I’m crazy or delusional or both, but could it be that Ethan is jealous just now? Jealous of me talking to another man?

Noway.

“I’m completely serious,” Ethan replies. “How do I know you’re not giving him too much information? What if he’s a common criminal looking to break into my home, putting the baby at risk. You wouldn’t want to put the baby at risk, would you, Miss Wallach?”

I almost choke on my laughter. “I’m sorry...I just...you’re talking about little Robert Ellis here. He used to dance outside my house in his Spider-Man underwear and pillowcase cape to get my attention.”

“A class act,” Ethan blurts and then heads for the kitchen.

I extract Lilly Belle from the stroller then fold it up, putting it away inside the foyer closet. I can’t imagine any other reason for this parole officer mentality, which reminds me... I follow him into the kitchen. “By the way, are you stalking me online?”

He stiffens a moment before reaching for a decanter and pouring himself a drink of amber liquid. Reaching for ice from the fridge, he simply says, “It’s an employer’s right to see what activities his employees are engaged in. I also do not wish you to be focused on your social media accounts while living here, and I wanted to make sure everything was to my liking on that front.”

“Mr. Townsend, I do nothing but take care of Lilly Belle. When she’s sleeping, I work on other things, such as my schoolwork and things related to it, but that’s my future, and I have the right to work.”

“I see no problem with that. It’s the male company you keep that concerns me. As you know, Lilly Belle is my niece and my sister entrusted me with her life. I would be remiss to break that trust by endangering her.”

“Endangering her? He was just a friend, and you’re being silly.” Yes, I said it. And now I’m walking away from him. Because he’s being stupidly overprotective, though I’m almost sure it’s because he got jealous seeing me talking to another guy.

I’m glad he’s rarely home, because I can’t imagine having him watch over me like a hawk, meddling in my life, twenty-four hours a day. I also can’t imagine wondering where he is, if he’s going to come back to my room for more sex like he did the other night. I’m not even sure that my yearning body could resist him. I hate that I want him and hate him at the same time.

No, it's better that he's never here. Thank God for Townsend Enterprises and the long silences in this big mansion.

"Well then, since I'm so silly, and because I have some time open in my schedule," he says, taking his drink to the kitchen doorway leading to his living room where he's going to sit in one of his sterile, gray armchairs. "I'll be working from home starting tomorrow. Take more of an interest in home matters. Go ahead, be thrilled." He lets loose a smirk, and my insides turn to jelly. "Goodnight, Miss Wallach."

You've gotta be shitting me. He's going to start staying home every day? Shit.

Shit, shit, shit. Now I'm really in trouble.

Ethan

Being closeto the source of my obsession will only make it worse.

I knew, when I opened my mouth to say I'd be working from home, that was the case, but I couldn't stop myself from saying it. Normally, I look forward to going to the office. Staying home makes me feel uneasy. Finding things to tell Wilson makes me feel uneasy, filling the silence makes me feel uneasy.

But here I am, and I'm not entirely surewhy.

I told her to stay away from the downstairs area near my office. I can't exactly work if the baby is crying. Ah, screw the baby. I can't work knowing that Penelope is wandering around, swaying that sweet ass and sending me the softest, slightest of fragrances. Probably undetectable to most, but for me, it's like blood to a shark. Still, I can't afford that douche-y Robert guy coming aroundhere.

If he danced in his underwear for her when he was a kid, what would he do now for her attention?

That's how it starts, conversation on the steps. Smiles. Before you know it, she's inviting him in when I'm not here, and no way, I can't have that. Why can't I have it? Because I don't want guys I don't know around Lilly Belle? Because I don't want my nanny to have a social life, or because I want her all to myself?

"Looks like the young lady has been banished from the west wing." It's Wilson standing at the doorway to my office, folded newspaper under hisarm.

“Banished? Wilson, you know as well as I do that I can’t have any distractions while I’m working. It’s a big enough house. Don’t give me thatshit.”

He ignores my cussing, the way he always has. “You don’t want them near you,” he says in that tone. That all-knowing fatherly tone I hate. Love. Hate. “However, you can’t act like a beast in your own castle either, demanding that the princesses remain locked and out of your sight. They’re free individuals.”

“Yes. Yes, I can, Wilson, and that’s what I’m going to do. It’s my house.”

“Oh,” he says, eyes wide with mock surprise. “I forgot. Your house.” Then, he walks off silently, leaving me in a swirling mist of my own thoughts. I hate when Wilson does that—talks to me like I’m a moron. I wish he’d go bother someone else. Then, I remember...I’d have no one if he did.

* * *

After a few days, I’m working in my office, going over numbers when I hear the refrigerator door open nearby. “Wilson?” I call out. I could use a tall glass of cold water.

A gurgly goo-goo sound is my only reply. Knowing that most babies cannot come down the stairs and open refrigerator doors at nearly eight months, I wait for Penelope to explain why she’s down here. “It’s me, Mr. Townsend.”

“Lurking around, breaking rules, are we?” I step out of my office and stand in the kitchen doorway. She’s wearing pink leggings with clouds on them, her hair up in a messy ponytail, looking as adorable as ever. The leggings are a mistake. They outline every curve on her lower body, her toned calves, and that ass I can’t get out of my head. Now I know I won’t be finishing my work for today, and that pisses me off. The baby sits in a bouncy chair with a wire frame on top of the counter.

“I’m sorry. Lilly Belle needed a snack, and we’re out upstairs. I should’ve asked Wilson to get me some before he left. Sorry.”

The baby stops bouncing in her chair to examine me. I feel awkward that she doesn’t know me very well, even though that’s entirely my fault.

“I’m sure I asked you to keep the baby upstairs while I’m working, didn’t I?” I say, unrelenting.

Closing a drawer shut, Penelope lets out a frustrated sigh. “You can’t keep a baby locked away, Mr. Townsend. And it’s Lilly Belle. You should try saying her name. She’s your niece. She was hungry, so I’m looking for the baby crackers.”

“Are babies supposed to eat crackers at this age?”

“Yes, Mr. Townsend. They’re not super crunchy or anything. They dissolve on the tongue and are perfectly safe.” She continues to rummage through the cabinets while Lilly Belle continues to stare at me like I’m the beast Wilson said I was.

I walk up to Penelope and peer into the cabinets with her. I know what crackers she’s talking about. They’re inside of a gallon zipped bag in the back row. So close to her, I smell her scent wafting off her skin. It’s an earthy, feminine scent, way better than all that fake shit women put on. Suddenly, my blood races through my body. I’m immediately hard.

Slowly, she backs up, aware that we’re so close. I can almost hear her heart beating through her skin and shirt. Her hazel eyes flash at me, with flecks of gold, as she holds her breath. I reach in and pull out the zipped bag. “Is this what you’re looking for?” I hold it near her chest.

If the baby weren’t here, I might throw her against the counter and suck her tits

before fucking herhard.

Clutching the bag close, she nods without a word, staring at me as though she's heard my thoughts.

"Ah, the sassy one has lost all ability to talk back. Maybe I should stand close to you more often." I arch an eyebrow and then move over to Lilly Belle, shoving my hands in my pockets and staring at her. She's actually a really pretty baby. My sister and her husband didgood.

"You can, um..." Penelope clears her throat. "You can pick her up, youknow."

"I can see her fromhere."

"She's not going to bite you." Penelope laughs, reaching into the box and pulling out an octagon shaped pale wafer that looks like it would taste awful and stale. "In fact, why don't you give it toher?"

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I know it's all innocuous. Giving a baby a cracker isn't going to bond us everlastingly. But for some reason, I hesitate. Penelope stares at me with the softest of smiles on her face. The baby stares at me, too, like give me the damn cracker already. I know I said they needed to keep their distance, and they do, but I don't want Penelope to think that I'm completely heartless. I want her to know that I'm sensible, practical, that it's not a good idea to form bonds that will only be broken later on, but for some reason, I want to see her smile rightnow.

Taking the cracker, I hand it to Lilly Belle who slowly reaches out, big blue eyes fixated on my face, and snatches it out of my hand. Except she doesn't eat it right away. She stares at me and gurgles. "Look at her. She likes you," Penelope laughs. "Pick her up, Mr. Townsend. You'll see she's really yummy."

I've never picked up a baby in my life. From the moment Lilly Belle arrived here, I've had someone, whether Wilson or the cleaning lady, Luz, or one of the fired nannies to hold her. I've treated her like a nuclear explosive.

But I do know how to compartmentalize. I know how to keep feelings separate from affecting my everyday life. I'm a professional.

I can dothis.

Suddenly, Lilly Belle throws the cracker on the floor and cries out, laughing and giggling and acting totally loopy.

"Why did she do that?" I ask. I'm not used to anyone rejecting my gifts, even if the gift is a bland cracker.

Penelope laughs hard. She loves seeing me confused and befuddled by the tiny troll. “She must have the midnight crazies. Plus, I think she’s just surprised that you’re here, looking at her...” She shifts to pick up the cracker, eyes pausing on me, as she slowly makes her way backup.

The filthy areas of my mind imagine her doing numerous things in that position. Not with the baby present, of course, but my body wants what it wants, and suddenly, the hardness is back, as I imagine her on her knees, bent over. That door better be locked tonight if I decide to go check on it.

The baby’s coos bring me back front and center, and my hard cock melts away. Now I’m looking at my niece pumping her arms and legs like an energetic doll.

“Oh, yeah. She’s definitely smitten with you. You should pick her up.”

“Some other time,” I say, reaching out to hold the baby’s little hand instead. Look at those fingers. So little. So chubby. Wrapped around my finger which looks so big next to hers. I wish I could hold her, but I can’t. This is already too much as it is.

“How did you get so good at caring for kids? I mean, you’re practically a kid yourself,” I ask.

She scoffs through a smile. “I’m twenty-two next month. And it’s because I have younger siblings. I always had to take care of them to help my mom out. I guess I’m used to it.”

“Like second nature.” I continue to shake Lilly Belle’s little fist. She’s enthralled and watching me intently. I don’t feel as uncomfortable with her stares anymore. I feel like she might actually like me, as Penelope says.

“Yes.” Penelope comes over and reaches to take Lilly Belle’s other hand. Now we’ve

formed a chain and all we would need is for me to take Penelope's hand and form a circle. "You know, Wilson was right. There are more sides to you."

"Wilson is an old fool," I say, thinking how I'm going to break his kneecaps for talking nicely about me. "You can't trust him."

Then, suddenly remembering where I am, where we are, how these two strangers shouldn't even be in my life at all right now, I drop the baby's hand and step away. They shouldn't be down here. I shouldn't be here. I should be working, making sure our numbers align and approving new sales campaigns for next month.

Penelope studies me. I know she must think the worst, and part of me wants so badly to show her that I'm not that way all the time. I can be lots of things—funny, clever—all the things nobody associates Townsend Industries with being, all the things my employees and competitors don't know about me, but it makes no sense to try and impress the nanny. What is so special about this girl that I feel the need for her to like me? It shouldn't matter. It doesn't matter.

Nor does it align with who I am and it needs to stop now.

That's why I wanted them upstairs, out of my sight.

At that moment, the doorbell rings. It's late. Who the hell would be calling at this hour?

Penelope

Ethan gets up to answer the door while I let go of the breath I'm holding.

We were about to have a moment, weren't we? Because it sure felt like it. Even Lilly Belle seems to agree with her questioning eyebrows and pucker. It's late, and I should escape upstairs, but I'm dying to know who's at the door. I'm nosy that way. If it's a woman here to see Ethan, I have to admit, I'm going to hate it.

It's not like Ethan is anything to me but my employer, but I can't help but feel that there's more there. Varnish has hardened over his inner self, and it just needs cracking open. But should I be the one to crack it? I don't see how things between us could ever work. Yes, it was nice, even for just two minutes, to feel like we were almost a family, but that doesn't mean I should allow myself to fall for him.

Scooping Lilly Belle into one arm and the bouncy seat into the other, I start heading upstairs while Ethan opens the front door with a scoff. I make my way up the stairs slowly, so I can eavesdrop on whoever is there.

Sounds like a woman alright, talking right after Ethan mumbles something, but he's not happy to see her. "Ethan, darling, if I don't visit you at this hour, I'll never find you, that's why. Please let me in."

My stomach is in knots. He wouldn't be dating an older woman, would he? Like, way older? Suddenly, I realize how little I know about him, except what I've read in the tabloids, heard from Wilson, or experienced myself in the bedroom.

“Mother, get in your town car and leave. Just go.”

His mother. And that’s the way he talks to her? Terrible!

“You can’t keep her away from me,” the woman says, “It’s not right. She’s our granddaughter. Let me in this instant.”

“It’s that easy, huh? Just demand it and it becomes so? Doesn’t work that way. You had your chance, now leave.” Ethan’s voice is icier than ever. A thousand times worse than he is with me. If this is Ethan when he’s upset, then the way he speaks to me is pretty civil.

If he doesn’t want to let her, there must be a reason. Though I think it’s awful—just awful that he won’t let her.

“You are ridiculously stubborn, you know that?” Mother Townsend hisses angrily. “I’m prepared to adopt her. You know you’re too busy for a child. You don’t even have a wife, for Pete’s sake. Now, move before I break down this door.”

“Like hell you will. I can’t believe you showed up here at this time, and drunk, no less, but some things never change. Get this through your skull—you will never adopt Lilly Belle,” he grits his teeth. “A nice couple who will spend time with her, raise her right, will do all the things you never did.”

Wait, what? Ethan won’t raise her?

“I have the money, I have the home...”

“You have nothing she needs. Never show up at my house again, you hear me? Now, go.” He shuts the door on the begging woman while I stand on the stairs feeling like I got punched in the lower intestines.

A nice couple will raise her? Did he mean himself with possibly someone else in the future? The whole conversation has left a metallic taste in my mouth, and that's when I realize I was clenching my jaw so hard, biting through my lip, that I've drawn blood.

Ethan spins around in a huff, the face of a haunted man in place of the gentler one who spoke to me in the kitchen.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

He stops cold in his tracks and cranes his neck down to look up at me near the top of the stairs. "Were you listening the whole time? That's unprofessional, not to mention insensitive, Miss Wallach."

"I'm sorry. I was leaving, actually, but your voices were rather loud. Don't you have custody of Lilly Belle?" I ask, totally outside of my business.

"Time for you to go upstairs," he deadpans.

He's not going to answer my question, that much is clear. He's fuming and rattled from the encounter, and he's not the type to open up and share his thoughts to feel better. It was stupid of me to ask in the first place, but at least my question is out there.

The man has ice water running through his veins to treat his own flesh and blood this way, yet I'm still checking on him. He should be grateful that someone cares. I want to tell him all this, tell him that family is the most important thing in this world, and he should be more respectful of his mother, but then I remember my own mother, and the mortgage and bills needing to be paid, and I keep my fat mouth shut.

Ethan points at me, or Lilly Belle, rather. "Keep her away from me. I won't tell you

again.”

I don't agree, I don't nod, nothing. I just storm upstairs and into Lilly Belle's room, feed her the bottle, and rock my anger away. Within minutes, the baby is asleep. I lay her down, cover her with her light blanket, and hope to God that this poor creature gets raised better than Ethandid.

* * *

At night,I can't sleep.

I lie in bed worrying over the things Ethan and his mother said to each other. Did he mean that he would be putting Lilly Belle up for adoption? Is my job as nanny a temporary one, not because Ethan will soon take care of the baby himself or because he has a girlfriend who'll soon move in to raise her, but because he's going to be getting rid of her, like an abandoned puppy at a homeless shelter?

I need answers.

The thought of that happening to Lilly Belle forces a wave of tears into my eyes. As much as I feel that Mother Townsend has a right to see her granddaughter, I also got a sense of the kind of woman she was. Something about her demeanor was strange and makes me believe that perhaps Ethan has good reason not to want to be around her.

He mentioned she'd been drinking. Perhaps she is an alcoholic—whatever it is, the situation is terribly sad.

Maybe it's better this way. Maybe putting Lilly Belle for adoption is the right thing to do, and a nice couple will take her in. It's just so unfair. My siblings and I were blessed with a wonderful mother and father who are still around, yet the little creature in the room next to mine, sleeping while moons and stars dance over her head to the tune of Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star gets a beautiful big house filled with icy air.

Why is Ethan so cruel to everyone? I thought he had a softer, gentler, nicer side, but if the man can't even bring himself to speak nicely to the woman who brought him into this world, then I shudder to think how he'll speak to a wife, a girlfriend, any woman who loves him.

I don't know what to do. I've never had a job like this where I've become emotionally invested. I've never had a problem leaving a home when the job is done, but this case is special. We have a baby here who needs a home, needs a loving heart, but it hurts too much to stay. Even with the pay increase, I am not getting paid enough to deal with this torment. Even if he quadrupled my salary tonight, it still wouldn't be enough.

That's when it hits me that I'm not still here for the money.

I'm here because I care for that sleeping angel. I care about what happens to her. I worry that if I leave, everything will go to shit for her. I'm the only good thing going on in her life right now, and this is a quandary I've never been in before.

Then, there's Ethan. I find myself caring for him, too. But why, though? He's callous, he turns warm and cold like a faucet, and he's clearly a dick. Take that back. Scratch that. It doesn't feel right to say that about the man who smiled at Lilly Belle and me in the kitchen, who held me tightly the night that we slept together. He didn't have to do that. He could've walked right out, but he stayed a while. Made sure I fell asleep then helped the baby fall back asleep, in order to not wakeme.

There is a softerside.

He must be in pain, then.

There's only one reason a man would speak to his mother that way, and it has to be because of his past, his upbringing. Again, the benefit of the doubt. I'll stay. I'll stay only because I care to see how this ends up. I don't like all the rules, or the restrictions on where I can walk in the house, or the absence of a social life, but I've already got both my feet in the pool, so I may as well go for aswim.

Besides, I need the money.

If it becomes too much, then I'll tell Le Nanny I can't anymore. And that'll be it.

I check my phone in the darkness of my room for the time, noting it's three in the morning. From somewhere downstairs, I hear a clanking sound, petrifying my body. Is someone breaking in, or is that just Ethan walking around? I'm scared to go look, but I can't risk staying upstairs if someone were in the house. I would want to alert

Ethan as quickly as possible.

Grabbing my robe off the hook in the bathroom, I wrap it around my body and head out slowly. Not only is there clanking, but there's music, too. A light aria coming from somewhere. Maybe the burglar loves opera? Pfft, crazy. I'm not usually awake at three in the morning, so it's most likely I'm just hearing noises from the buildings next door or something. I creep downstairs, through the kitchen, following the source of the sound, which leads me all the way to dark hallway at the back of the house. I've never ventured this far before into Ethan's home, and now I'm nervous as allhell.

I hug myself in the cold hallway, padding my bare feet on the wooden floor, slowly approaching a mostly closed door left ajar. The light glows around it like in some horror movie but instead of hearing screams or ghostly moans, I hear what sounds like gym equipment, clinking, clanking and being thrown down in bursts of frustration.

When I reach the door, I push it open ever so slowly, peeking through. Finally, I see him. He doesn't see me, but it's him, and I'm somewhat relieved. But seeing Ethan Townsend wearing only workout pants, no shirt, his chest rippled with shiny muscles, and his brow line covered with sweat might actually be worse than encountering a burglar.

Because now I'm mesmerized by his aura. I want him again.

He lifts the barbell, struggles to raise it above his head, forcing the veins to protrude from his biceps, triceps, and every kind of cep known to mankind, and seeing his frustrations vent with every breath, shake of his head, and pacing around the room, I know I'm in trouble.

This man is tormented. Haunted by his past. I see it in his face, hear it in his heavy breath. Know it with my heart, because why else would he be awake at this time,

working out like a madman?

My footstep causes the floor to creak, calling attention to my presence. Before he can call me on it and get mad about it, I step through the open doorway into the full light of the fancy home gym. “Ethan...” Not Mr. Townsend. We’re not at work right now.

His striking face whips around, his mouth slightly open with exhaustion, both the physical and mental kind. “Miss Wallach, what are you doing here?”

Doesn’t matter what I call him, because standing here, feeling the static electricity in the space between us, potential or stored energy waiting to be released, the exchange of empathy plus need and desire and longing, all amplified in the middle of the night from emotional exhaustion, our boundaries mean nothing.

My status as employee means nothing. Right now, he’s a man going through turmoil, and I’m a woman unsure of what to do, how to comfort him, and all I know is that I want to take him in my arms and tell him it’s going to be okay, that things will sort themselves out, and in the meantime, I can take care of him.

I don’t have to say a word. He understands, and he’s all for it. Ethan rushes toward the door, a man on a mission, pulls me harshly away from the door, and then he’s slamming me against the gym mirror, pushing my arms over my head, and kissing me.

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Ethan

I can't take it anymore. Day in, day out, I want her so badly.

She pisses me off and works positive magic on me at the same time. I don't know what the fuck's wrong with me, why I let her stay in this house in the first place. I knew I wouldn't be able to resist her, yet I gave her the job. She's the best nanny, that's why. I can't tell if I'm grateful to her, enraged by her that she makes me feel things deep inside, or falling for her.

Maybe all at once, but I can't think that way.

I can only kiss away the rage. Deeply. Ravage her mouth, take her tongue and explore its essence, push her against the hard, cold mirror.

My mother's visit reawakened anger I've been holding back. Anger I thought I'd gotten rid of by immersing myself in work.

"Why are you still here?" I ask through gritted teeth, my voice lowered a notch.

"What do you mean?" Her question slides from her throat, heavy with torment.

"Shouldn't I be here?"

"Why haven't you quit? I'm making it difficult for you, Penelope. Why are you still hanging on?"

"Because..."

“Because what?” I breathe into her hair, exhaling negativity and inhaling pure perfection.

“Because of Lilly Belle.”

All the more reason to keep her. The care is evident. “And?”

“Because of you. Because I’m still hoping...”

“Hoping what?” My mouth slides to her neck and the softness of her needy pulse, its beckoning call to me.

Her body arches, breasts and tight nipples aching for touch. My touch. My fingers and lips. I cup one breast in my hand—she’s not wearing a bra—and squeeze, pinch, cup again. Yanking up her shirt, I affix myself to her breast, sucking the life force out of her. I desperately want everything her body has to offer.

“Tell me,” I demand.

“Hoping you’d come back to my room,” she breathes. “I’ve left the door open...”

“You’ve broken my rule,” I remind her.

“I don’t care. I’ve been waiting for you to come back.”

“And do what?” Licking one nipple then the other, I suck the other one between my teeth and graze it along my tongue. Fascinating, perfect roundness against my face.

“Tell me.”

“And make love to me. I want you to make love to me.”

“Fuck. You want me to fuck you, Penelope. There’s a big difference.” I’m hard as steel, and I pull her hand onto my crotch so she can feel it then I slide my hand into her pajama bottoms, searching for that hot, wet core. There it is, slippery and scorching. She gasps, arms around my shoulders, widening her legs to give me better access. “I feel how wet you are. Making love isn’t enough for you. You’re burning up.”

“Yes. Feel it,” she says breathlessly. “Taste it.”

Her words send me reeling. I’m dizzy just hearing her request. I make quick work of removing her pants, sliding her panties down, and pushing her legs aside, so she’s fully exposed. Her sweet pussy, bright pink folds glistening with her juices. Nectar for the taking.

Falling to my knees, I hold onto her thighs and admire her bounty. I take in her unique aroma then bury my face in her cunt, lapping at her hungrily. She smells fresh, sweet with a hint of nervous sweat, a concoction I want all over my face for days to come as a reminder. Face in pussy, I taste her secrets while she moans above me, fingers digging into my hair and pulling me toward her. “Ethan...”

“Yes, say my name.” I slide a finger into her cunt and begin fucking her while I bathe her clit with my tongue. “You taste delicious. I want to eat your pussy for days.” I speak between licks, giving her strong ones after every other phrase, feel her hips pushing against me, working toward her orgasm. It’s building quickly. “Just bring this to me every day. I’ll survive.”

Her hands clutch the back of my head, drawing me closer, smashing me against her sweet lips. Cunt pie, bounty of the goddess. She’s my goddess, and I’m her loyal servant. Until it’s my turn, that is, which it will be soon, because I can’t take much more of this pressure.

“Ethan, I’m going to come...”

Of course she is, because I’ve kissed and sucked and tickled that clit of hers, fucked her pussy with two fingers, and we’ve been wanting this for days. When I begin rubbing her little asshole with my pinky, she writhes against my hand. “Dirty girl, fucking your boss. Come on my face, you little slut.”

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It's a delicate word. I don't mean it in a bad way, only that she loves getting eaten, loves having my hand grazing her asshole, and loves trouble. Well, guess what—I'm just what she needs then.

“Come for me, Sweetness.” I want, need to feel her muscles singing their pleasure.

After much grinding, she comes and it's hard, pulsating against my face, smearing her slick essence against my chin. Scooping some up, I wait until her waves subside and then I bring it up to her lips, sliding it onto her tongue and kissing the juices into her mouth. “You taste that? That's what a bad girl tastes like, Penelope. You like being bad, don't you? That's why you get out of bed in the middle of the night looking for trouble.”

“I'm sorry. I just...”

Ripping her away from the mirror and carrying her to a workout bench, I lay her down, placing her head just off the edge of the black vinyl. “I don't want to hear you're sorry. Just pay the consequence.” If I have to scare her out of this house, I will, but I can't do this again. One more time and it's strike three for me. I'll fall—hard.

I'm terrible for her, yet she comes back for more. She's too good to be here, yet she won't leave, and that fucking infuriates me.

I slide off my pants and stand naked at Penelope's upside-down face flushed with heat. She knows I'm going to shove my cock in her mouth, and she's ready. “Look at you. Touching yourself again. Such a dirty girl.” Legs apart, I crouch until my

massive cock is even with her face, my balls just grazing her forehead.

Penelope slides her head further down to prepare for a better angle. One hand massages her left breast while the other slides between her legs. She cranes her neck for my balls and takes one into her mouth, moaning as she lets it drop onto her tongue and gently sucks on them. I lean forward, reaching for her ample tits, squeezing them, as I slide my cock into her mouth.

It feels so fucking good, reaching the back of her throat and hearing her gag and make yummy sounds at the same time. As good as this feels, I have to fuck her—now. Stepping over her, she watches me, as I turn around and widen her legs, kneeling between her knees.

I can see her face this way. With gorgeous brown-green eyes rimmed in gold tones, reddish brown hair, and a pretty, perky mouth, she's meant for gazing. Angel face. Without waiting another moment, I slide into her, slowly at first, then all the way to the hilt, filling her up good. And it feels fucking amazing. Her pussy tightens around me, drawing me in. Her breasts shift and wave with every slow thrust I give her, as I build up momentum.

"I'm going to pound you good, Sweetness." I fuck her harder, faster. She has no idea what's coming, literally. It takes me a while to come, usually, but with Penelope, I get there much faster. She brings out the best and worst in me.

She watches my face with mixed fascination, lust, determination. "I love how you fuck me, Ethan. Do it harder, please. I want to feel you filling me up inside."

"As do I." Reaching down, I grip the back of her head, fingers laced into her hair, and stare into her eyes. "I want you now, because I know I can't have you. I'll fuck you until you scream, and then you'll becomemine."

I don't deserve this creature but here she is, and I'm not one to turn down a gift. I pound into her, pulling back and hammering again, over and over, building us both up to new heights. As she tilts her head back again, I kiss her neck, suck on her throbbing pulse.

"Come again, Penelope. Anytime you need to come, you come to me. You understand?" I don't know why I'm saying this. Didn't I want her to leave? I do but I don't. If I had it my way, she'd stay every day for me to gaze at, strip naked, and fuck whenever I feel like it, but I'm also in awe of her and wish she could depend on me for everything.

That smile. I love gazing at it.

I don't know where this feeling is coming from, but I'm overwhelmed by it and nearly ready to explode into her. Slowing down, I hold back my release and focus on her instead. "Come with me," I say, taking her by the hand then hoisting her into my arms. With a screech, she holds onto my shoulders.

"Why are you carrying me? Put me down, Ethan." Her tiny fists pound against my back. "I can walk on my own. I don't need—"

"You need whatever I say you need. I've been alive longer than you."

"So?"

"So, you'll listen to every word I say." Entering the shower room, I place her gently on the stone bench where I sit to soak in the hot vapors and ask her to flip over.

"Why?"

"You're asking questions again, Penelope. Just trust me."

That's what this is about, ultimately—trust. For a girl who's used to excelling at everything, being the big sister in charge of all, it's time for her to let someone else take control. And that someone is this man right here.

Narrowed eyes examine me. I know I haven't given her much reason to trust me, but then again, I've stayed away from her for the most part. I turn on the shower and let the water run for several minutes, as swirling hot mists fill the room. Dizzying. Sweat beads up on her face and body, and my cock is on edge. My balls hurt from interrupting our fucking, but I need to hear her come again. Only then can I finish.

Flipping her over, I raise her onto her hands and knees and command her to stay there. Then, I direct the shower head onto her body, reach for the soap, and lather her all up. Her body is tight, toned, all natural. I haven't seen her work out not once. She shivers with anticipation.

"Trust me," I say again. As much as I loved her ass the first moment I saw it, I would never ram into it blindly until we'd built trust together. Maybe one day—if she's still around. Which is pure fantasy, because it won't happen.

Penelope shows her brave side again, going along with anything I tell her. I wouldn't jeopardize that for anything. I rinse her off, get behind her on the bench, and spread her ass cheeks apart.

Fucking beautiful.

A perfect round peach marked by a pink center, and the moment I press my hot tongue onto it, she sucks in a breath and lets out a long groan. When I grazed her asshole out in the gym, she was sensitive to it but wanted more before she came quickly. Now, she'll get that extra time to explore what she likes. "Has anyone done this to you before?" I ask.

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“Never. But Ethan...”

“You can stop me if you don’t like it.” There. A little niceness. I want her to rely on me. I want her to know that if I’m demanding or controlling, it’s only because I have to act that way. I can be nice. I want her to know that. Pressing my tongue onto that puckered, dry entrance, I lick in long strokes, sliding my fingers into her pussy and rubbing her clit in small circles. “Does that feelgood?”

She can’t speak. Only moans and arches her back, pressing her ass into my face slightly more. I can’t tell she doesn’t want to love it. She doesn’t want to go “all bad” and admit that she loves my eating her ass, but I know that she does. She’s speechless, her mouth open in a roundO.

“Don’t hold back, Sweetness. I’m the one worshipping you. Feel it.” I go all out, licking her asshole, imagining myself entering her there, taking her completely. Making her mine. She is beauty, sex, love, and trust all at the sametime.

I must really want her to break down her walls this way. I must want her to see more of me aswell.

I’m tired of wondering why, and maybe it’s time I stop and just accept it. I want to spend more time with her. I want to fuck her every day that she’ll let me, and I want to eat this ass out until she screams. Because she loves it. Increasing the pressure on her clit, I rub her a different way until I hear her gasp, continue my tongue bath on her asshole, feeling it clench against me, feeling her legs tighten around my face, holding me in there, nearly keeping me from breathing, and then she’s coming again.

Hard and loud she screams into the shower mist, curls of steam billowing around her like she created the heat herself. I can't take it anymore and whip her around, making her sit on the stone bench, while I kneel between her legs. Cradling her face in both my hands, I gaze into her eyes, as I enter her one more time, as she's still coming. This is how I want to do it—watching her face and knowing that I satisfied her twice. That she needs me as much as I need her.

Waves of energy spike through me. I groan out loud, pressing my forehead against hers. I come with her, into her, through her. She is mine, and we are one. I spill my seed into her cunt, claiming it, pleasing it, pleasing her. Penelope watches me, draws my face in, and kisses me deeply. She understands more than I'm telling her. She's comforting me like I'm made of haunted dreams, and maybe I am.

She shushes me, but I didn't even know I needed quieting.

All I know is that my chest heaves, and she can read my mind, what I'm feeling, thinking without saying a word. I've been through a lot in this life, and she seems to get it. How does she do it? It's a long time before we move from the stone bench, where I collapse onto her body, cheek against breast, slender arms around me, fingers caressing my hair.

I almost don't hear it, but then she sits up tensely, listening. "The baby is up. I should go," she says, reaches for a towel, then begins to leave. At the door to the shower room, she pauses. Looks at me with worried eyes.

"Go. I'll be fine."

But I won't. Because I see myself in her expression. Yes, Sweetness, I understand how you feel right now. I don't know what the fuck is happening to us either.

Penelope

Something has shifted. Not sure what it is.

But Ethan has been out of his home office more, banging around the kitchen, walking around the house, and even venturing upstairs, which I now call Neverland since he banished us here. Ever since the episode in the gym and shower the other night, we've been gravitating towards each other, like two molecules hovering and swirling near each other, never quite connecting. Not a very scientifically accurate, but that's how it feels.

He's not as super strict as before. Though I'm respectful of his rules by staying upstairs, he hasn't barked at me, hasn't come to check my door at night, but I know he wants to see me. It's like he's been trying to do it in a more...organic way.

Every so often, he'll appear in the doorway to the nursery to say things like, "Did you call me?"

"No..."

"Oh, I thought I heard my name. Well, in any case, text if you need anything."

"I will." I smile.

"But you can come in...if you want." I gesture to the colorful foam floor mat where Lilly Belle is busy reaching for a plush bear, a line of drool sliding from her lips in her intense concentration.

At first, he seems to think it's a bad idea, then he walks in, but instead of sitting on the floor with us, he sits on the edge of the glider, knees apart, hands together. He looks more casual than I've ever seen him, in sweatpants and T-shirt. He looks younger, like a kid my age. "What's she upto?"

I'm confused by his sudden interest, though happy for it. "She...is getting ready to crawl any day now. I have to ask Wilson to order the gates."

"The gates?" His eyebrows dance.

"For the top of the stairs? To make sure she doesn't fall when she starts getting more mobile?" He really is clueless about babies. I don't know what else to say to him. Do we talk about the other night? Do we continue to pretend like it's nothing? Like bending over so he can lick my ass in the shower is all part of the job description?

I have to admit, I liked it. I'm not sure if it was because of the physical sensation, or because it was Ethan, of all people, kissing my ass, because he's so incredibly sexy, but I'm not sure it matters. Sex is all in the mind, and if I like what he did to me it's because of how it made me feel about him.

The question is, do we need to stop, or is this going somewhere?

"Ethan," I begin saying. My sigh comes out heavier than intended. "I'm not sure where we stand...exactly."

"Do we need to know?" he counters, leaning back in the chair.

"Well, yes. This is tricky territory, don't you think? I don't want to jeopardize my job, but I also need to know what you're thinking." Oof, wrong words. Ethan isn't the type of man who likes talking about what's thinking or feeling, much less to a needy woman.

He glances away at the window then down at his phone. Finally, he casts a look at me, blue eyes slicing through me. “You won’t get fired. You’re amazing at what you do, Penelope. I mean, look at you.”

I smile and breathe out in relief. “Thanks.” I pat down Lilly Belle’s diapered butt. “But she makes it easy.”

“You make it easier. I couldn’t do this.” He’s quiet for a while, as he watches me and Silly Lilly. There’s something deeper than what he’s trying to say, and I’m not sure what it is. I don’t want to pry, though. Something tells me that if I push him, he’ll pull away.

“About the other night...” he begins. “It was...amazing.”

Whoa...yes. My heart soars, released from its holding pattern. No, it doesn’t mean anything more than that—amazing—but at least it wasn’t a mistake in his eyes. “It was,” I say.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed I can be difficult.”

“You? Hell, no. I’ve never worked for a jollier man.” I give him a smartass smile.

Luckily, he takes the jab, then moves to the floor where he sits cross-legged. Picking up the little plush bear, he moves it closer to the baby where she can easily reach it. I take it and push it back.

“We want her to work for it. You know...goals.” I laugh.

“Got it. Anyway, I know you overheard my mother the other day. My relationships with my family haven’t always been what they should be. Lots of things in my past have made me...reticent.”

That's what I figured, that there was more to the story. "I'm sorry to hear. What kinds of things went on between you all?" I figure since he's the one who opened this door, it's okay to ask.

At this, he sucks in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. Now, he takes the plush bear and wiggles it back and forth to make it look like it's dancing. Lilly Belle responds by pumping her little arms and legs even harder to try and get it. "It's long and boring and honestly..."

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“You don’t want to talk about it.”

“No, I don’t.”

“It’s okay.” It’s enough. For now. I mean, I don’t know if we’re ever going to talk more, if this is a “thing” between us, if we are a “thing.” At least he’s opened up a bit. So if he recognizes that he can be difficult, does that mean he can address it, work past it? Not that he has to, but I feel like it would make him a happier person. “I’ve had problems, too. Maybe not the same ones, but...”

“You? You look like you come from a great family.”

“I do. They’re the best. My mom works hard, my dad works hard...it’s just that we’ve always had to struggle. You know. Money. It’s always been an issue.”

He scoffs, shakes his head. “Money isn’t the big Band-Aid everyone thinks it is.”

“Only rich people say that, Ethan,” I roll my eyes in his direction. “You don’t think money is a big deal until you don’t have any, so trust me—it’s a big deal.”

“Fine, I accept that. I’m only saying it’s one of life’s biggest lies.”

“What is?” I ask. Lilly Belle lunges forward, grabs the bear, and shoves it into her mouth. “Yes! She did it.”

He sniffs a laugh under his breath. “See what I mean? You love the little things. You’re so good at what you do. I suck at this. I suck at babies. I suck at home life, at

domestication, even though I admire it.”

“Wow, I didn’t know you admired it.”

“I do. I should voice my appreciation more. What I meant before is, money might solve problems but it doesn’t make you happy. Happiness has to come from somewhere else.”

“Most people say ‘within.’” I crack a smile.

“I can’t agree with that, because that hasn’t been the case for me.” He says it so somberly, it only confirms my belief that Ethan is a tortured soul. “I’ve worked hard all my life for validation, to have things, to build a company from the ground, and it still doesn’t fill that void.”

Good Lord. This man has all the money he could ever possibly want, a gorgeous mansion, he’s blessed with handsome, dashing looks and talent for making my toes curl, even has this beautiful little gift called Lilly Belle who hasn’t ignited his soul yet, and he talks about a void? Like, in his heart? Wow. I don’t know if anything could ever make him happy.

I want so much to ask him about whether adoption is in the cards for Lilly Belle or not. I want to know what’s real. At this point, I just want him to trust me enough to mention it, come clean. Just like he wanted me to trust him during sex.

Trust—it works both ways.

Could Ethan and I ever be together? Or will he always be this confusing and difficult?

“I could make you happy,” I blurt out suddenly.

My words. Mine. Words that came out of my mouth.

I don't know why I said that. I blink several times to make sure it was real. What in the fuck would possess me to say such a thing? Still, I believe it's true. If he would give me a chance, I could share my happiness. I have plenty. I had a great life growing up, and I could show him how love is supposed to be. My parents showed me and my siblings, and I could show him how a happy life is supposed to go down.

I just don't know that I should.

"That's quite possibly the loveliest thing anyone has ever said to me," Ethan says, studying my face like I'm some strange specimen of bird or flower, his bright gaze flitting over my features. The next thing I know, he's leaning over the plush bear to take my face in his hand and kissing me. Softly, sweetly, with purpose.

When the moment dissolves, Lilly Belle is staring up at us. "Bababababa," she says.

Once Silly Lilly goes down for her nap, Ethan leads me to his room on the opposite side of the house. I've been here two weeks, yet I've never seen where he sleeps. I feel like I've entered Oz, another dimension, the "upside down." Walls are painted a peaceful light gray, and his bed is perfectly made, of course. My stomach hurts from how nervous I am. We've had sex twice now, but this feels different.

"When baby sleeps, the parents sleep, right?" Sitting me on the edge of his bed and lowering his face to kiss me again, he's in no hurry to get me undressed. Did he just call us "parents?"

We kiss, and with each kiss, I feel myself connecting to his mind and soul a little more. Soon, we're lying in bed kissing for what feels like hours, my body yearning for more but my heart only wanting this. Kisses. Hands in my hair, on my face, sliding down my back. Kisses, deep and intimate. More intimate than anything else

we've done together. Ethan knew what was missing. I didn't think he was capable of holding himself back physically, but maybe I don't know him that well. Scratch that—I know I don't know him thatwell.

What is happening?

Why is he ravaging me one night then making love to my mouth the next? Where are we going on this journey? It seems that we don't know and we don't care. We're just going to ride this wave until it breaks and then we'll find out where we stand once we land ashore.

All I know is that his hands entwined in mine feel like I've always known them. Like they were meant for mine. I know he's had to have touched dozens of women in his life so far, but right now, his big, strong hands are mine. These perfect nails, his perfect veins roping over his skin, so sexy, I can't stand it. But he doesn't want more than this tonight. He only wants to hold me. And kiss. And sleep.

And I'm good withit.

So good, in fact, I fall asleep dreaming this is my life—forever.

Ethan

I haveto get out of this house.

I can't remember the last time I was here so many consecutive days. The office hasn't seen me in a while. I don't want to stop there, because I don't want people asking me questions. I decide on a walk down Fifth Avenue, maybe take a train ride downtown. Donning hat and glasses, most people don't know who Iam.

Penelope stands at the kitchen counter getting a drink. She looks exasperated and tired.

"You okay?" I ask, pausing in the doorway.

"Yeah, just tired. Lilly Belle's been a little cranky this morning."

Lilly Belle does indeed look cranky, and I feel bad leaving them here while I get some fresh air, but I need to be alone after the changes going on between me and Penelope. "Are those flowers?" On the counter is a vase filled with sunflowers. They look bright, happy, and alien in my house.

"Yes. I asked Luz to bring some. Hope that was okay. Sunflowers make me happy. I think Lilly Belle likes them, too." She smiles at the baby in a tiredway.

"Why is she biting her hand like that?" I ask. Silly Lilly is gnawing relentlessly on half herhand.

“Probably teething. She’s eight months now.” Eight months. Shit. Before we know it, she’s going to be nearing her first birthday. I have to decide on her adoption ASAP. I’ve been avoiding it, just like I’m avoiding the office.

“Hey, I’m heading out for a bit. I’ll be back later.” I tap the doorframe and head for the door without giving out any more information. I’m tempted to ask if she and the baby want to come with me, but it’s toomuch.

“I remember going out alone,” she laughs under her breath. “Noony’s on 34th and Broadway. Love their blueberry scones. Seems like so longago.”

“I’ll have some delivered.”

She smiles sadly, like it’s not the same. “Thanks.”

Closing the door, I step outside, taking in a huge breath of air. Holy fuck, I need this. Open spaces, fall air in my nose, spiking my eyes with tears.

This time of year really is nice in New York City. Maybe later, if I’m feeling adventurous, I’ll stay with the baby for a few minutes just so Penelope can take a walk alone, too. I’ve noticed she needs a break, and I haven’t exactly let her have one in almost two weeks. I end up walking all the way to Washington Square, remembering all the things I love about this city when I’m not tied up inside my building.

The time lets me think. I never meant to get so close to Penelope—it just happened. How did I go from “don’t come anywhere near me” to “want to make out on my bed?” We didn’t shed even one piece of clothing last night. Kissing for hours was probably the most intimate thing I’ve done with anyone. I have her face memorized in my mind now. The little beauty mark on her cheek, the dark lashes with the golden tips to them, the fullness of those pink lips. She’s beautiful in the most natural,

alluringway.

I know it's wrong to be doing this, but it feels right somehow.

Until it doesn't.

Nobody could ever erase my past, and that's why this can't continue. First of all, she's too young for me, she doesn't even have her career out of the gate, though it must be hard to do when she has to take nanny jobs for assholes like me. Second of all, I'm damaged goods. I can't make any girl happy, not with a fucked-up brain like I have. I'm good for a quick fuck, but not for love.

Love is for the brave. And the whole.

I'm a bag of broken bones. She'll hate me intime.

Several miles on my feet later, I'm ready to go back, taking a different route than the one that brought me here. I love this neighborhood and wish I'd walk around more often. I spot Noony's, the coffee shop that Penelope mentioned, and slip inside for a minute to pick up ten blueberry scones so she can have plenty to freeze for later. On my way out, something tells me to get the baby something, too, so I walk into a CVS. They would have those plastic things that babies chew on when their teeth hurt, right?

I pay for the chew ring, trying not to overanalyze anything too much, avoiding glances from passersby who think they recognize me.

When I arrive back into the house, I'm surprised to hear the baby crying and right away, it grinds against my eardrum. Me and babies don't mix, which was Reason #1 for putting her up for adoption. Yeah, she's cute and all, but it was bound to happen when she'd have one of those bad crying spells that irritate the shit out of you, which is why I asked Penelope to stay upstairs most of the time.

Still, as annoying as the sound is, I follow it.

Because something is clearly wrong, and besides, I come bearing gifts.

Walking into the nursery, I see Penelope holding Lilly Belle, bouncing her around, singing, totally wiped, and the baby's face is flushed bright pink. Her voice is even a little hoarse like she's been crying a while. "Hey. She okay?"

"No, Ethan, she's not. I don't know what's wrong with her. Shh...shh...my little sweet pea, it's okay."

I pull the chew toy out of the plastic bag in my hands and tear off the packaging. "I brought you something," I tell the baby, handing the colorful ring to her. She's going to love it, though I can't believe I'm talking to a small infant creature who doesn't even understand English. "Here you go."

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Lilly Belle snatches the ring from my hand. I feel good to have helped somehow, but then she tosses the fucking thing to the floor and starts crying even harder. What thehell?

“It has to be washed first anyway, Ethan. And kept cool in the fridge. It’s the cold that soothes the gums, but thanks for bringing it. I’ll try using it later.” She paces across the room with the baby while I stand there helpless.

“I brought scones, too, for you whenever you want.” I hold up the bag, knowing that’s going to make her happy to have her favorite blueberry scones, but Penelope only gives me a forced smile then sits in the gliding chair to try a different quieting tactic.

So much for trying to be thoughtful. It didn’t work, but it felt good while it lasted.

* * *

I’m sitting in the living room listening to a podcast on the steel industry when she walks in with Lilly Belle twenty minutes later. “I’m going to try going for a walk with her. I don’t know what’s wrong, and we all need some fresh air. Do you want to come with us?”

As she opens the closet, unfolds the stroller and loads the baby in, all single-handedly while I sit there like a king on his fucking throne, being a useless dick, I think about her question. It’s an easy question, but the answer has all sorts of implications. Yeah, I’d like to walk with her, but do I want everyone seeing us together? No one may know who I am on the train downtown, but at the park across the street there are

women. Women who know me, and I know them. I even know some of their husbands. What will they think when they see us all together taking a nicewalk?

Who fucking cares?

Do I care about their feelings or Penelope's? That seals it.

"Sure, I'll go," I say, slapping closed my iPad case and heading out after her.

It's close to sunset and the colors are insane. Orange, yellow, red, and all sorts of amazingness. Though I already went for a walk earlier, this time's different. We may not talk about it, but it's clear we're doing this for the first time—going outside together. In public. The baby quiets immediately. Amazing what a simple trick going outside can do for a crying baby. So many high-tech toys for what? The air is free. The leaves are free. The paved park roads are free.

I think I even feel a smile emerging on my face. It can't be. It must be hay fever.

I know Lilly Belle loves the walk, because she's sucking on the ring I got her. "She loves that chew toy," I tell Penelope. "We should've brought the scones."

"It's called a teething ring, not a chew toy." She laughs.

Penelope pulls out a small bag from her pocket. She breaks off a tiny piece of scone and hands it to Lilly Belle who devours it and asks for more. This woman thinks of everything. So prepared, like a Girl Scout. She offers me one. "You know, I'm amazed by your resourcefulness," I tell her. I saw her getting the stroller ready, multi-tasking like she had eight arms. I'm amazed by that and so much more.

She looks at me funny. I guess I'd look at me funny too if I suddenly started paying her compliments. "Thanks."

We come upon the play area, and I start dreading who I'm going to run into. Right away, I see a few mothers, and it's a sad day when I can't remember which ones I've slept with and which ones I haven't. Not proud of it, mind you.

They all stare at us as we walk past. Somebody mutters, "Well, I'll be damned. He can be tamed." I bite my lip pretty hard. We keep walking, heads held high. I don't think Penelope heard it, but I got it loud and clear. Is that what they think of me? That I'm a wild stallion being domesticated by this young girl? She's my nanny, for fuck's sake. Anybody can see that.

Nobody controls me, not even Penelope.

If that's what they think is happening, if that's the reality of our situation, then I'm fucked. I can't go down that road. It's a recipe for disaster. I've made a mistake coming out here with her. "We should go back. It's getting late," I say

"But we just got here. And this is the most gorgeous time of day." She closes her eyes, sticking her nose up in the air. "Feel that breeze."

Fuck, she's right. It's an amazing evening. And if it means Lilly Belle feeling better, so she and I can both get a good night's sleep, I'll stick it out. I have to get over this. I have to get over my fear of closeness. Behind closed doors is one thing, but when you take it publicly, it's a whole different ball game. It means it's serious.

I fight the urge to give the bitchy moms my middle finger.

Luckily, we don't encounter anyone else who knows me. We venture through a more quiet park of the park where we pass an old couple sitting on a bench together. Penelope nods in greeting, and the couple lean their heads into each other as if sharing a secret.

“We were just saying,” the old fella says, pointing at Lilly Belle with his cane. “That the three of you remind us of us when we were yourage.”

“When we’d just had our first born,” his wife agrees, finishing off applying her lipstick and putting the case away. “Such a happy family.”

A happy family. Is that what theysee?

The ache emerges out of nowhere. It rises right out of my gut and heads straight into my chest where it begins to suffocate me. We’re not a happy family. I don’t have happy family material in me, and this woman by my side is my employee. This child is my sister’s, and all of this was forced on me without my consent.

The magnitude of just how much my life has changed in such little time smacks me hard upside the head, and I find myself fighting for breath. I even separate myself from Penelope and the baby a bit, walking ahead. I’m not part ofthem.

“Ethan, are you okay?” Penelope’s concerned voice reminds me that I need to play it cool, or she’ll start asking questions, making it all worse. When we get back to the house, I can let loose at the gym like a madman, take a long shower, work on financials—anything to erase the significance of this evening’s outing.

A happy family. The potential is evident but still as impossible as it everwas.

It can’t happen. Not with me in the picture as the father or guardian. I won’t subject any children to the pain of life’s cruel reality the way it was subjected on me. Lilly Belle’s been through enough. And she deserves better than what she’sgot.

Penelope

They say that sometimes in life you get premonitions, or you see things you otherwise wouldn't be able to see. Well, something about the walk in the park tonight allowed me to see things in a different light, like tapping into an alternate reality. The old couple on the bench saw it, too. They thought we were a family.

Could we be?

But Ethan seemed distracted. I'm sure it's because of work, but I wanted to be sure it wasn't me, so after we put Lilly Belle to bed at night, I close the door and turn to him. "Do you want to come to my room?" I ask, putting myself on the firing line.

"I can't," he says. "Have a Skype meeting in the morning I have to prepare for, but maybe another time." Another time. Not tomorrow, not any day/time specifically, just "another time."

Rejected.

But hey, I get it. What's happening to us is weird, and he's allowed to feel weird about it, and I should give him space if he needs it. Same with me. "Sure, sounds good." I fake a smile and slip into my room to let out an antsy breath, waiting to see if he'll kiss me or change his mind, come charging in to take advantage of me. My body tingles with anticipation and need. I want him so much, but I also want to know where we stand, and if he can't commit to a kiss, then I should probably push him out of my mind.

He leaves quickly while I get ready for bed.

Only I don't get to rest long, because Miss Lilly Belle Poopypants has decided she can't sleep either. I don't understand. I did everything right—I gave her a nice lavender bath, I gave her a full bottle, sang her “You Are My Sunshine,” and I even put her in her favorite brushed cottonPJs.

It has to be the teething, only when I enter her room, I find her, not only burning up, but sick to her stomach. After changing her, I fetch her some water, but she pushes the bottle away, so I look for the thermometer and see she's got 101. Baby Motrin, it is. Tummy virus, most likely. We'll have to go to the doctor in the morning.

I wonder if Ethan would come with us again or blow us off like we don't exist.

Hot and cold, hot and cold. Ethan is like Lilly Belle's fever, on and off.

As it turns out, Lilly has a stomach virus, but thankfully, it's only the 24-hour kind. We don't go out much. I guess it doesn't matter. Germs are everywhere and we did walk through Central Park yesterday. Ethan comes in to check on her every once in a while, looking concerned, and I have to assure him that babies get sick just like adults do, and she'll be fine.

“I just want to make sure,” he says several times.

“Ethan, it's all good. I promise.” And it is for the rest of the day, but I'm happy to see him worried for her. He should be. Lilly Belle gets back on her feet—well, not literally—but soon, she's her happy peppy self again, playing with rings, sitting up, falling onto her side and rolling around the room, her preferred method of mobility.

That night, she sleeps like a rock. Taking care of her hasn't given me much time to think about much else, but I've noticed Ethan lingering around a lot, almost like he's

not sure if to come in or not. When he stands in my open doorway in workout pants and no shirt, I almost faint at the sight of him. I expect him to chastise me like he used to for leaving the door unlocked, but he only leans against the frame watching me.

“Thank you,” he says.

“For what? Just doing my job.” I pull the comforter close to me. So cold outside. Meanwhile my body heats up for his touch.

“For taking care of Lilly. I know you are, but you don’t have to do it well. You don’t have to care, but you do.”

“Are you just going to stand there? Come in,” I say from my bed.

“The sassy one speaks. You know, you forget who owns this house, I think.” He walks in and sits on the edge of my bed, like he’s scared to lie down with me. I never know how he’s going to be feeling from one day to the next.

I take his hand. “I haven’t forgotten. Just fucking with you, Ethan.”

His eyes light up with a smile. “I like when you fuck with me.” The following sigh is so heavy, I can tell there’s a lot on his mind. I pull on his arm to encourage him to lie down with me, and he does. Dying for warmth, I curl up into his chest which feels cool to the touch under the ceiling fan, but after a minute warms up against my skin. I don’t know if we’ll kiss or make love or what. Not feeling well anyway. Must be exhaustion.

I shiver against him.

Ethan places his hand on my forehead. “You feel warm. I think you’re getting sick,

too, Sweetness. Stay here.” He scrambles off the bed and disappears down the hall, coming back a few minutes later with a glass of water for me and a thermometer. “Yep. You got whatever the baby had. Shit,” he says dramatically.

“It’s alright. It’s not like it was your fault.”

“I could’ve helped more. I could’ve given you time to yourself.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. Once you catch a virus, you’ve caught it.”

He gives me two fever-reducing pills, which he practically has to force feed to me, since in the time he’s been in my room, my fever chills spike. I tremble underneath the comforter, wrapping it tightly around me, even though I know I’m not supposed to.

Right away, he’s on his phone searching for information. “Says here you shouldn’t do that. You should let the ambient air cool your body down.”

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“I know, but I’m so coooolddd...”

By morning, Wilson is there to make me chicken soup and take care of Lilly Belle, all the while I stay in bed curled up and watching Netflix sideways against my pillow. Ethan doesn’t leave my side. He watches the show with me and even works from his laptop on my bed. It’s weird to hear him talking to secretaries and supervisors about steel and projection charts and all sorts of business things. He takes on a completely different tone when he talks to them—the cold, steely Ethan.

He really is two different people.

I wonder if there’s a way to get him to be one amalgam instead of two polar opposites.

Once off the phone, Ethan goes back to playing nurse, fetching me cool towels to lay on my skin. I end up in the bathroom half the day, and I always ask him to go downstairs when I do, because I don’t want anyone near me when I’m audibly sick. I know you’re not supposed to care about things like that around people you trust, but my heart is confused about what it’s supposed to be feeling.

When he returns to my room, it’s with Lilly Belle. He’s holding her in the doorway, and I have to say, my heart soars seeing him carrying her. He bounces her up and down. “She was worried about you. See? There she is. There’s your...nanny.” Mommy. He almost said Mommy. “She’s sick, just like you were, but she’s going to be okay. Okay?”

Wilson slides into the picture to see if I need anything else, and it occurs to me that

I've never had so many people taking care of me at the same time. At home, whenever I got sick, it was only my mom to care for me. My siblings were usually asked to stay out of the way, and my dad was almost always at work.

"Why don't you go home?" Ethan asks Wilson. "I got everything covered here."

"You sure?" Wilson is not convinced. Honestly, I'm not either. Who's going to bathe Lilly Belle—him? Feed her, rock her, sing to her—him? Who's going to change her diapers—him?

"Yes, go. How hard can it be? Bring Miss Wallach chicken soup and crackers, give Miss Lilly Belle a chew toy now and again." He shoots me a knowing smirk, bouncing the baby a little too much. I would tell him to do it less, except it's really nice to see him connecting with his niece.

His niece who will hopefully be his daughter one day. His mother's words that night at the front door come back to haunt me. I just can't bear the thought that Lilly may go to an adoption agency.

Wilson pats him on the back. "Goodnight, folks. If you need anything, let me know. I'll be right over. All the way from Brooklyn," he adds facetiously. As he's leaving, the old man eyes me over Ethan's shoulder, makes the universal sign for "call me," and points at Ethan. I laugh so hard, I almost have to use the bathroom again.

I love that guy. Ethan doesn't know how good he has it. Wilson has been taking care of him for years. I know—I've talked to him so many times now. The man has his own family in Brooklyn but comes up three times a week, more if needed. I asked him why he hasn't retired yet, and his response?

"Who will take care of Ethan?"

Pretty sad. All he wants is to retire and live the rest of his life on a fishing boat off the coast of South Carolina where his extended family lives, but he's still here because Ethan does need him.

Ethan has nobody else in this world.

My fever spikes again for what feels like the tenth time. I did not get the 24-hour variety of the stomach virus like Lilly Belle did, as it turns out. While Ethan goes through the baby's bedtime routine all by himself, I vaguely remember telling him to wash his hands often, then I snooze in and out of consciousness, the state of mind reserved for the sick and those on mind-bending drugs. So far, he hasn't called for help, and I'm surprised when Lilly Belle goes down without protest.

She must be shocked that her uncle is helping. I'm shocked he's helping.

When he comes back to my room, he looks like he's run a marathon. He lies down flat in the middle of the floor and tosses a small hand towel onto his chest. "How. The fuck. Do you do all that?"

"And you only took care of her one night," I remind him.

After a minute's rest, he gets back on his feet, sits at my bedside, and caresses my hair back. "You okay?"

I close my eyes and just feel. His hands on my forehead. His fingers running through my hair. His soft breath near my cheek when he stoops low to hear my faint replies. His warm kiss on my cheek and his care, more than anything. Two sides to Ethan Townsend? I'd say three, four, at least.

As he makes himself comfortable on my bed, I'm vaguely aware of him glancing at my open laptop, checking out my website, and making a few tech changes in the

design.

I let him. He's only trying to help. Hey, I will gladly take all the free help I can get from a successful billionaire. But it's his voice talking to me quietly about different things—about his evening with Lilly Belle, about business, about the Netflix episode we watched, about return on investment, about any topic he feels like mentioning—that makes me drift away. His soothing presence lulls me back to sleep, and I vaguely dream about hearing it at bedtime every night for the rest of my life.

Ethan

Hadsomeone told me I'd be making dinner for other people while a baby bounces in her bouncy chair a few feet away, laughing at Wilson's funny faces, like he's her grandfather when I'm supposed to be at work making sure my company stays on target, I would've told them they're on some serious drugs.

Yet here I am, making a rosemary chicken recipe I found online, filling the house with serious herbal sorcery.

Penelope's still sick, but today was her first day without fever, so I hope she'll be good to go sometime tomorrow. Taking care of Lilly Belle has been tough—I'm still a raw beginner when it comes to doing this stuff.

She's cute, though. Spending time with her this week has melted me. At this point, it's going to hurt when she has to go...but does she have to go?

I wouldn't have even thought of really giving this situation a go, but Penelope getting sick changed things. I've surprised myself. Sometimes I actually enjoy taking care of Lilly. Of both of them, actually...

"Is that chicken? Is that chicken your uncle's cooking? Who knew? Who knew, Miss Lilly Belle?" Wilson's face is an inch away from hers, giving her full access to slap and grab his nose as much as she pleases.

"Hey, I'm a pretty good cook when I put my mind to it, old man. I just prefer notto."

“You just prefer not to do lots of things, kid.”

I shoot him a look, point the spoon in his direction. “Don’t sassme.”

“Somebody has to.” Brushing me off, he goes back to teasing the baby. There’s only one employee who can talk to me that way, and that’s Wilson. “And I don’t meanme.”

Fine, make that two employees. What’s been going on with me? I set out to keep people at arms’ length, and now look at me, cooking for them like they’re family. I stare into the chicken sautéing in the oliveoil.

“She’s quite impressive, isn’t she?” Wilson picks up Lilly’s brown bear and taps her nose with it until she giggles. “It’s been good of you to take care ofher.”

I sigh in Lilly’s direction. “Yeah, she’s growing on me, Wilson. I have to admit.”

“I was talking about Miss Wallach. She needed someone, Ethan, and you steppedin.”

“What else would I have done? Send her home? Bring in a substitute nanny?”

“Knowing you? Yes,” hesays.

“What do you mean, knowing me?” I scoff then shake my head. “Nobody could replace her, you know that. Ugh, fuck it, you’re right. I would’ve called for an in-house, full-time doctor to take care ofthem.”

“But you didn’t,” Wilson reminds me with a nod. “Seems to me that these women are growing on you. A man needs a good woman in his life and you have two. Well, one is still in baby form, but you know what I mean.”

I've been testing the waters these last few weeks, pretending like I'm important to Lilly Belle and Penelope, even to Wilson, but the truth is I'm nothing to them. I'm Mr. Moneybags, that's it. It's the only reason people do what I say, listen to my opinion, or have any respect for me. Because I got the cash they want.

I want to be more, but I'm not really ready. And I don't think I ever could be.

The damage is all still there. The demons, the bad memories, all of it.

"You're quiet, Ethan."

"Yes, Wilson. I'm quiet. You know why—I can't do this." I don't have to extrapolate what I mean. He knows. He's always known what I'm feeling. He was there for some of it. Not the worst, perhaps, but enough to understand the realities I face.

After a few minutes of quiet, I turn off the rice and begin plating the food. Wilson says, "Are you proceeding with the adoption?"

"Shh..." I cut him a look. I don't want to talk about it in case Penelope can overhear. I resort to whispering. "I don't know. I should. That was the plan. Another part of the plan was not to get emotionally involved, because I knew this would happen."

"What would happen?"

"This. Indecision. And then emotion would cloud my judgment. But I haven't been listening to my intuition, and now look where we are. This isn't what's best for her."

"I disagree," Wilson says. "I think you have been listening to your intuition, and that's why you're cooking for your family, Ethan."

I spin around and face him. "Don't say that again."

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He throws his hands back and shrugs. "I'm just sayin'. If you decide on giving her up, I'll support you, if you truly feel that's what's best, but I think you're discrediting your abilities, Ethan. And your wants."

"My wants don't factor in, Wilson. When have I ever gotten what I wanted in this life?"

"You've gotten everything."

"Everything except the one thing I wanted most, and you know it." I sound like a bitter man, and I know it. Yes, I realize I have a lot more than most people. I'm grateful for it, but what does it matter having everything money could buy if you can't commit to sharing it with anyone?

Wilson sits at the counter to eat, digging in. "Mmm, really good."

I don't say anything. He's trying to make me think. I won't do it.

"You can't keep souls apart, Ethan." He shakes his head, looking down at his food. "No matter what you do. You can try, but they'll always find each other again."

Fuck me, the guilt. "Yes, I know that separating them is going to suck." Lilly Belle without Penelope would be traumatic at first, but hopefully she won't remember a thing since she's still so young. I scoop up some chicken, testing it before I serve a plate for Penelope. My creation tastes pretty damn good.

"I was talking about the three of you."

Before I can formulate a reply in the way of “stay out of my business, you old fart,” she appears at the kitchen door dressed in pink pajamas. “Something smells so good, I had to come down.” Penelope waves at us, and Lilly Belle begins a chair dance at the sound of her voice so hard, I think she’s going to fly out of her seat. “Sweet pea!” Penelope makes a beeline for the baby.

“I was just bringing you dinner,” I say, while simultaneously hoping that she did not hear any part of that conversation. While Wilson reaches for a placemat, napkin, and silverware to set down next to him, I lay the plate on top and pour her a glass of water.

“I’m starving. Wow, this looks five-star-restaurant-worthy!” Penelope takes a seat and digs in like a hellhound tearing into its kill. Holy shit, the girl can eat. It occurs to me that I’ve never taken her anywhere for dinner. So many amazing restaurants in NYC. I’m suddenly filled with the desire to show them all to her, but I wouldn’t know where to begin.

“Ethan is good at many things,” Wilson says. I give him the “stop, please” look and take my seat next to Penelope. The four of us, sitting together at the table, eating a home-cooked meal. Four of us—my butler, the nanny, the foster child, and me. They eat and talk while I can only sit here staring at them as though their voices are coming from behind glass, and I’m outside of myself.

Wilson’s right—we’re like a family.

I’m about to stand and excuse myself. I can’t take feeling like I’ve been given something good. Good, wholesome things don’t come to me. They don’t. I didn’t get that card growing up. But I decide, for once, not to run away from what I’m feeling.

Stay and fightit.

Stay and give in.

So, I do. And it's the best time I've had in a long time.

* * *

That evening, I decide to do it again. Push past the fear. Take things to the next level with Penelope. What's the worst that could happen? If it doesn't work out, which it probably won't, then my life goes back to the way it was before. Nothing lost. In business, there's a saying: you don't invest more than you're willing to lose. I haven't completely invested in Penelope and me at this point. I've been on the fence, but tonight showed me there could be more.

And I'm fucking terrified.

I arrive at her room right at midnight. All is quiet, except for the sounds of tapping on her laptop. Checking her room, I find it locked. Disappointed, I'm ready to turn around, convinced that she doesn't think it's wise to move forward, she's changed her mind, when I remember that's not how I came in last time. The bathroom door to the hallway gives way.

I walk in quietly, knocking on the door. "Hey," I say, trying not to scare her. "You're working."

"Yeah, trying to catch up. I love what you did to my website. Thank you."

"Oh, you're welcome. There was too much clutter. You want your home page to sell an idea, something that your client could get if they used you as a PR person, not your actual service. For example, 'With us, you get peace of mind.'"

"I know, I love it, seriously." She closes the laptop and stands, pushing her hair

behind her ears, wrapping her arms around herself. Unsure gesture. I guess I should explain why I'm here.

"I wanted to ask you something." I walk in and take her by the hand. "I wanted to know if you wanted to go out with me. Sometime this week, whenever you have time."

She sniffs a laugh. "I don't know."

Not the answer I was hoping for. "You don't know?"

"Yeah, my boss...he says I'm not allowed to have a social life while working here, you know. He specifically said I have to act like the baby's mom, and that's what I've been trying to do."

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“Doing. It’s what you’ve been successfully doing.” I pull her in close. “How about I talk to your boss and pull a few strings. Would you go out with methen?”

“I think that would be acceptable, but will your nanny let you goout?”

“My nanny? Youmean...”

“You know...Wilson—your nanny.” She bites her lip to keep from laughing. “I know you think you’re too old for one, but I don’t know...he keeps a pretty close watch on you. You better ask him for permission just in case.” She’s fucking with me. I pinch her waist just for that remark.

Her laughs lights up the room. I take her face and kiss her cheeks, her forehead, then her lips. That wasn’t so bad, asking her out on a date. Delicate arms wrap around my shoulders, drawing me in. “Thank you for the invitation. I thought you’d never ask. And for coming to my room again. I’ve been fantasizing about it for weeks.”

“Have you now?” I kiss her deeply, tasting her lips and tongue and drawing from her strong energy tonight. It’s so nice to see her feeling herself again. I’m immediately hard and wantingher.

“Yes. I’ve had this great balcony all this time and haven’t used it not even once.” Evil smile. Wicked woman.

“We need to fix that immediately,” I say, taking her hand, the comforter off her bed, and trailing it behind us onto the balcony. The quarter moon is just visible above the tall buildings, and the city is alive, as usual. I sit in the big chair outside and slide her

onto my lap. Now she can feel my solid hardness for herself.

No more talking. No dirty words this time, either.

Something has clicked on inside of me, and I don't feel the need right now. Tonight is different. I slide my hands up her tank top, cupping her breasts and feeling the slight weight to them, pinching her nipples and playing with them while she writhes against me with her ass pressed against my crotch. The pants come off, the shirt too, everything until we're both naked underneath the comforter against the city skyline. Feels good.

Alive.

The fall chill breezes over us, but under the blanket, we're warm and growing hotter, as she slides her slick, wet pussy over my cock, taking it in her hand and guiding it into her. She's tight and warm and pulsating with need, and I can't exercise any patience.

I drive into her—hard—without waiting.

She moans and leans back against my chest, her head on my shoulder, and the whole thing happens quickly, as I pat my fingers against her core and rub her in circles with increasing urgency. My woman. I won't deny myself anymore. Whatever happens, happens. Fuck it. And it does, as she makes love to me under the moon, over the bustling city, bouncing on my cock and taking us to that next level.

And I don't mean the orgasm that rises and ebbs over her at that moment or the way she calls out my name while she's coming so hard, she has to hold onto my head to keep from sliding off my cock. I'm not talking about how quickly it takes me to spill my seed deep into her, something that rarely happens thanks to how desensitized I can be with some women. I'm talking about this—her—us—changing me.

I'm talking about lovingher.

Penelope

When I first arrived here, I was turned down, told “no.”

Now I’m sitting in a limo next to the most gorgeous man I’ve ever met—complicated and difficult, yeah—but also sweet at times. The same man who told me to leave on the first day. I literally had nothing to wear when our date night arrived. I didn’t exactly bring going-out clothes to the Townsend Mansion for my nanny position, so Ethan sent me off earlier today to buy something to wear for dinner. Even though he handed me \$500 in cash to spend, I found a pretty black lace dress for just under \$100, and I paid for it myself.

When we arrive at the restaurant called Hamel’s, a nice tapas-style place, people watch us arrive. At the door and inside, everyone knows Ethan by name, and it’s the first time I really feel like I’m with someone famous. He looks amazing in his nice pants, shirt, and dinner jacket. It’s an old-fashioned style that he pulls off because he’s got great hair, an impeccable taste for clothes, and because he just looks...rich.

Women watch us. Some lift their hands halfway in tentative greeting then think twice about hugging or double-kissing on the cheek when they see that he’s with someone. Not just someone—me. I’m not going to lie, I feel out of place. This fancy place and these fancy people—it’s not me, but I’m excited that he asked me out.

Doesn’t this change our employer/employee arrangement, though?

Didn’t that change the moment he came into my room at night checking for locked doors?

I'm not going to analyze the implications of this date. I'm nervous enough as it is. I'm just going to enjoy my time with him despite my growing worries.

Our table is near the back in a cozy corner near a fireplace. When he orders wine for us and raises his glass for a toast "to autumn in New York," I clink glasses and try to remember to breathe deeply. Okay, he doesn't just look snazzy and rich, he looks hot. I'm just going to say it—sexy as fuck. And he's mine.

I let that sink in—I have the attention of the hottest billionaire in the city.

Ho.

Lee.

Crap.

And it all feels incredible. Being out. Talking like an adult, dressed like an adult, having adult conversations. Though I worry about Lilly at home, like did she go to sleep okay and is she giving Wilson a hard time? I ground myself on Ethan's shimmery blue eyes. "Everything okay for you?" he asks.

"Are you kidding?" My eyes widen. "This is fantastic. Totally amazing. I love the décor. It's so..."

"New York."

"Exactly." With the tall ceilings and people still dressed the way they went to work, dark corners, and mini magical bulbs everywhere.

"Well, you look beautiful. Not that you don't always, but tonight, you're glowing. And that dress...hmmm..." He tilts his head to check out my ass, which sends sparks

of electricity shooting through my body. My mind starts thinking about what could happen later when we get home.

To his place, I should say.

The Townsend Mansion isn't my home, though I sometimes forget that. It's going to be hard going back to my own little place one day after experiencing what could be...I guess I've gotten pretty spoiled. "Hmm, you don't look so bad yourself, Mr. Townsend."

"So, we've known each other for almost a month now," he says after we order several plates of different foods to try. "Tell me what your goals are. I know you're working on your PR business, but what else?"

"Well..." I begin to tell him about building my career first then finding the right guy, settling down, and buying a house somewhere upstate to start a family. I get quiet then, because as much as we have felt like a family on a few occasions, Lilly Belle is not my daughter, and there's a good chance I'll never see her again after this gig is over with.

The thought dampens my mood for a moment but I force a smile and ask, "What about you?"

I don't know why he looks surprised that I'm asking him this. I mean, I was bound to reciprocate the question. Yet, a dark look eclipses his face, as he presses his lips together and shakes his head softly. "I don't think about the things I want. I just focus on the present mostly."

"Why?" I ask.

"I don't know. I just don't pine over what I don't have. I don't mind that others

dream, but it's not me."

"So you don't have goals?"

"Of course I do—business goals, but my personal life is my business life. They're one and the same."

I'm not even sure I understand what he means, but I stay quiet, because I can see that he's reanalyzing what he said.

Finally, he shrugs. "I used to yearn, a long time ago, but that's not me anymore."

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Cryptic. Heartbreaking. A man with no dreams for his life. How quickly our date has turned somber, but I think it's good that we're at least talking about it. I don't push for answers. Whatever is plaguing him, I know it's a byproduct of his former life. There's deep pain there, and the caretaking, maternal side of me wants to make it go away. But I wonder...could Ethan ever truly be happy? He's a deeply wounded man.

Is it possible for one person to absorb grief away from another?

Covering his hand with mine, I say, "If I could take away your pain, whatever it is, I would in a heartbeat."

Lips press into a sad, regretful smile. "You already have."

I have? I'm delighted to hear that. It makes me feel sturdier on such shaky ground.

After that, we talk about more light-hearted subjects such as where we went to school and the rather insignificant boyfriends and girlfriends we've each had. That's one thing we have in common—neither of us has ever been in love before. Me, because I just haven't had time, being the oldest and helping my mom take care of the family, but Ethan, because he hasn't let anyone into his life. Instead of relationships, he's had a string of quick conquests, a fact I'm trying hard not to think about right now.

My phone rings during dinner. It's my mom, but I decline the call.

"Is that important? Answer it," he says.

"It's just my mom."

“I don’t mind. Your mom is important to you.” To you. Aren’t moms important to most people?

My mother calls again, which is weird and insistent, so I pick up. “Mom? Can I call you back. I’m in the middle of dinner.” She sounds frantic and stuffy-nosed, as though she’s been crying, and something about her tone makes me still and listen. “I mean, I’m sorry. Tell me what’s up.”

She’s in danger of losing the house. She doesn’t know what to do. My dad’s been out for weeks looking for a job. I had no idea he had lost his previous one at the auto repair. Suddenly, the warm tones and New York City ambience around me feel out of place. I’m not this high-profile socialite. I’m a simple girl from the suburbs, and my parents are going through a hard time while I pretend to be the girlfriend of a richman.

“Okay, Mom, just stay calm, alright? I’ll wire you money tonight,” I promise her. “I’ll call you when I get back to the house.”

After the call, Ethan looks up. “Everything alright?”

“She’s behind three months on her mortgage payment,” I explain.

“How much is it?” he asks.

No. I know where he’s going with this, and it’s not going to happen. “I don’t know,” I lie. “But my whole next paycheck will go to her, or my siblings won’t even have any food or clothes. God, this sucks. Be glad you have no idea what this feels like.”

“Let me help, Penelope.”

“No. No way. This is not your problem, and I was already going to help her out. It’s

why I took this job.” I feel strange telling him that, because nannies are supposed to look so cheerful and happy to be living in your home, taking care of children who aren’t ours, but yes, the truth is—we’re usually in need of money.

“Can I at least give you an advance on your paycheck? It’s Tuesday. You don’t get paid until Friday. That way, she’ll have the money by tomorrow?” hesays.

I appreciate that he’s trying to help, so I nod. “That’s fine. Thanks, Ethan.”

But now our dinner has been dampened twice. And now, the question I’ve been pushing away every day begins to creep into my thoughts. The whole way back, in our car ride, he holds my hand, but I’m dying to know—is he giving Lilly Belle up for adoption? I’m dying to know. Dying for him to finally divulge.

Why should it matter?

She’s not my child. I’m not her mother. Am I just stressed because my mother called me freaking out, or because Ethan had the chance to tell me about the adoption during dinner but he didn’t? Is it because I’m falling for a man who’s emotionally unavailable? The exact crux of my stress tonight is undefined, and maybe it’s just my current mood, but suddenly, I need to know the answer.

I’m tired of waiting.

When we get back to his house, I pause at the stairs while he hangs our coats and says goodnight to Wilson. I enjoy the air of silence and tranquility before it all changes. His answer will determine so much. I need to know if I’m to move on in my life. The fact is, I’ve grown attached to him and to Lilly Belle.

There—truth.

It shouldn't have happened but it did. "Ethan, I need to ask you something."

"Can it wait 'til I'm upstairs and changed?"

"Not really. It's been bothering me for a while. I wasn't supposed to know, but I overheard your mom. I've acted like I don't know. Maybe it's not even my business, but...are you giving up Lilly Belle for adoption?"

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Ethan slows down, stops, and stares at me. “Where did you hear that?”

“Right here, the night your mom came to the door. There was reference to finding her a good home.”

I can almost hear him swallow in the dark and quiet foyer. “You’re right, it’s not your business, but if you must know—I haven’t decided yet.”

Relief washes over me, followed by more anxiety. It’s not a yes, but it’s not a no either. “Why haven’t you decided?” And why hasn’t he told me himself?

“I can’t answer that, Penelope. It’s not an easy decision. I just know that I wasn’t expecting her, and I have a life to live.”

“Lots of great things in life are unexpected, Ethan.” Us, for example.

“I’m not meant for parenting.”

“That’s not true. I’ve seen you with the baby. You’re great. Nobody knows how to be a parent automatically. It takes practice.”

“You do. It comes naturally to you.”

“Like I said—practice. I’ve had plenty. You can have plenty, too.” My voice is strained. I don’t want to come across as begging or pleading, but this matters to me and I can’t just pretend that I don’t care. “I know I’m just the nanny here, but I think you’re meant for it more than you think. The universe doesn’t give us anything we

can't handle."

"Where'd you hear that, a fortune cookie?" He scoffs and brushes past me up the stairs.

I'm too baffled to be hurt by his curt reply. I follow him upstairs. "It's true. We're greater than we think we are. We're capable of handling so much in this life."

He whirls around. "Some of us have already handled enough for one lifetime."

But this is a baby, I want to tell him. Not pain, not family discord, not whatever trauma plagued him early on in life. This is a joyous thing. But I say nothing. Clearly, it's not my place. Maybe he's right. Maybe Lilly Belle would be better off with a warm family ready to love her. Who am I to have an opinion?

"Just...let me think about things. Don't push me." Ethan's eyes reflect confusion, pain.

"Of course. I was just asking."

He heads to his bedroom. I don't know if he'll come to my room tonight or if this date is over now that the spell has been broken. Too many of life's worries took control, but I had to know. If Lilly Belle is leaving, I don't think I could ever fully fall for Ethan. I wouldn't let myself. I would miss her too much. If she stays, however, then I know I could.

I've already committed the cardinal nanny sin of caring too much about my charges.

And Ethan is still so hot and cold, I'm not sure what to expect from him. He could decide this is over between us at any moment. Am I in over my head? Sure feels like it. But because I don't have a crystal ball, and I can't see into the future, I'll just do

this—love like it's my last day. Smile like it's my last chance. And kiss a sleeping angel when you see one.

Slipping into Lilly Belle's room, I pause at her crib to behold her perfect image. I imagine her sleeping under twinkling stars and a shimmering magical forest. If I could decorate her room, it'd be Neverland.

The tears come quietly, slipping down my cheeks. If Ethan is capable of giving away the flesh and blood who needs him, then what would he do to my love if I were to give it? I have no answers. I can only cross that bridge when I get there. For now, I push down the crib siding, lean close to the little one, and whisper. "I love you, Silly Lilly Belle."

Ethan

I don't fallin love. I don't let women into my life past the guard gate. The biggest reason is because love doesn't last, so why invest into it? It's a honeymoon phase, it's la-la land. Sure, it's awesome how she and I have been spending time together around the house, going for walks in the park, going on dates in the evening once the baby is put in bed, and all that. I love taking her into stores and letting her choose things. She never lets me pay, but I always insist and sometimes get the clerk to ring it up on mycard.

She's stubborn as fuck, but she's real. Down to earth. A real woman with real good values. Her mama raised her right. I have to remember to thank her if I ever see her. The whole thing is a fucking fantasy come true. But fantasies don't last. They don't follow through. They always fall apart—everybody knowsthat.

Half my brain tells me “so what?” Enjoy what you have while you have it, Ethan. So what if it's an illusion? So what if this woman's head in your lap while you watch Baby Einstein is a mirage that will disappear as soon as you can't handle the real pressures of a love relationship anymore? And that baby over there, crawling toward the TV cabinet, trying to figure out how to pull herself up so she can reach those shiny toys on the big screen? Another mirage who'll one day fade away when she grows up and leaves you in the dust.

It's better you end this soon. You're getting in way too deep.

It's the best choice for everything. Yes, there will be a period of temporary pain for everybody, but then soon, life will resume in a much better way for both of them than

I could've ever provided. I don't deserve them.

I am damaged goods to the nth degree.

But because of Penelope, I'm trying to stay positive. She has a way of seeing things that instills hope in me, and I'm trying to adopt that same mentality. I've gone all in these next two weeks. We make love more and more like we did on the balcony. We make dinners together, and we talk about her startup business. She's even let me step in a bit to help, between her website and sending her a couple of my client's clients. It's small and humble, but it keeps her busy and happy, and there's nothing I love more than seeing her happy.

She deserves it.

She deserves so much more than I can give her.

* * *

One day, while Penelope is sleeping, Lilly Belle is fussy as all get out, so I take her out for a walk—just her and me. It's the first time I go anywhere with her alone. A month ago, I never would've seen myself doing it, but here I am. In the stroller, she's bouncy about the endless possibilities. Maybe that's why she was fussing—she wanted us to take her for a stroll. I think I'm learning babytalk.

Right away, I feel the pressure to make her happy. Amazing how women can do that.

“Alright, Silly Belle,” I say, turning right and going down Fifth Ave. “Where to? Uncle Ethan at your service.” I inhale the city's deepening aura. There's Halloween decorations in windows, the park is a blanket of gold, and there's a bite of deep fall in the air.

She slaps the stroller tray happily, sitting up all the way. This kid has grown so much in the two months she's been with me. I was scared of how fragile she was when I first saw her, but now that she's older, I can almost see her as a toddler running around the playground. I think that's when dads do their best, when they can chase the kids and toss them into a pile of leaves.

If you let her stay, you can do that next year at this time.

Pushing the thought away, I take her up Fifth Ave, cut into the park, and take her all the way to the Discovery Center. There by the lake, I take her out of the stroller and plop her into the grass. She gives me the most thankful look ever, like Penelope never takes her out of the stroller. Then she stares at the green stuff around her, wondering what it is.

"It's grass, Silly Belle," I laugh, ripping some up and handing it to her.

She examines it carefully then takes it straight to her mouth, of course.

"No, not to eat. To play with. See?" I pull it off her lips and rip up more grass, throwing it in the air and making a big show about it falling on my head.

Lilly Belle laughs her ass off, which in turn makes me laugh my ass off. She pulls at the grass and throws it in the air, except her fists are empty, 'cause she wasn't strong enough to actually rip out any. Doesn't matter. She keeps laughing. An older woman sitting in yoga position nearby laughs, too. This baby is so cute and crazy, I get a real unexpected pang of sadness in my heart just then. My sister's not here to see this. Just nine months ago, they brought this little garden gnome into the world with the biggest, happiest expectations, and they then fucking perished, because some DUI asshole decided his drunk driving was more important than anyone else's life.

It's fucking cruel. A cruel joke.

A duck heads our way under the false impression that we've got some breadcrumbs for her. "Sorry, girlfriend. Just grass. Shoo," I tell it. Then I see Lilly Belle's eyes widen in horror at the massive feathered beast headed her way. She whines and turns toward me to please pick her up, and I do, and she clings to my chest. Who knew that babies could be scared of birds?

I hold her against me, feeling her tiny heart pounding against mine.

I can't explain what goes through me just then. She turned to me when she got scared. She clung to my chest. She needed me to protect her.

"I got you, Silly Belle. It's just a mean, ol' duck." I shoo the evil beast away one more time until it finally gets the point. Silly Lilly Belle clings to me until she's sure the imminent danger has passed. Then, she gets up and looks in my eyes, babbles something then pats my face, tiny finger-spread hand just "whack" on my face.

"Ah, the thanks I get," I tell her, pulling her hand off. "Nohit."

She points at the duck. Her eyes are deep blue with sparkles reflecting off the water's surface.

I don't know what to say to her after that. I almost can't even look her in the eyes anymore. How am I supposed to tell this little girl that she'd be better off without me? That somewhere in her future, there's a mom and dad who desperately have been waiting all their lives for a baby girl like her who will give her the most amazing childhood ever?

How do I tell her that I don't think it can be me? That I don't have the patience, the lifestyle, nor the relationship for it? "I love her, Lilly Belle. I love your nanny. At least, I'm pretty sure I do, but it's just a feeling, you know? It fades with time. This is a known fact."

No, it's not, her eyes seem to tell me. Would you stop loving me overtime?

Don't know where that thought came from, but the answer is a resounding no. What she doesn't understand is that she should go away from me because I love her. She should go with another family because I care for her. I want her to be happy. I can run a Fortune 500 company, I can make billions of dollars a year, and I can keep the families of Townsend Industries employed and functional, but I don't know how to be the parent I never had.

Little girl, our beautiful fall will soon turn to coldest of winters, but then will come spring, and spring means rebirth. And hopefully by then, you'll have a real family.

Penelope

As I sink my feet into warm water laced with lavender oil, I think about where I am.

Ethan's gorgeous house, yes, but where else? Am I his girlfriend, his employee, what? I'm still getting paid and I still watch Lilly Belle, though he's been taking on a lot more childcare responsibility lately. He even took her for a walk yesterday by himself, which was astounding considering where he came from. But at some point, we should define this.

I need to know how much I matter to him.

So...my intention tonight is to take this relaxing bath (because he insisted he could handle Lilly Belle after I've had her all day) and then when he comes into my room after bedtime, lead him to talk. Ethan doesn't talk much. I know when he's content, and I know when he's frustrated, but he doesn't express his feelings much, and when he does, he needs a break. It's exhausting work for him.

Sinking all the way in the bath, I lean back against the tub pillow and watch the curls of steam rise into the air. I wouldn't mind if Ethan walked in right now and gave me some of that sweet-n-sour love that he's so good at. Some days, he's so hardcore and filthy, a dirty horny lion, and other days he's a docile lamb. That's who he is and it still scares me. I'm still waiting for the day when he flips the switch and decides his fear will win.

I take a deep breath, taking in the scented air and exhale long and contentedly. I live like a queen. I'm an extremely lucky woman. Soon, I'm falling away into a

meditative trance, imagining my family taken care of. Money is no object. I've graduated, my business is doing great, and I'm taking care of them.

Suddenly, I hear something out in the hallway. Shouting? Ethan's shouting. At first, I think I've fallen asleep and having a bad dream, but then I realize he's still yelling like the world has ended. A surge of adrenaline shoots through my veins, spreading throughout my body like an atropine injection, and I sit up, splashing water over the edge of the tub. I'm up and grabbing a towel before I can process anything. "What is it? Ethan?"

God, please, please don't let it be anything terrible.

My brain goes through a mental checklist: did I cover all electrical outlets, did I leave anything sharp lying around, did I baby-proof the entire upstairs before I headed into the bath? Skidding into the hallway, I find Ethan sitting about a third way down the stairs holding Lilly Belle close to his chest. She's crying, and all I can think is "thank God" that she is. Crying is good. Crying means she's breathing.

The stair gate is wide open. "Ethan, what happened?"

He pulls Lilly Belle's head away from his chest so he can inspect her, as I crouch next to her and give her a complete visual check. Her face is pink from crying, fat tears are falling down her cheeks, but otherwise she looks okay. "She fell."

"What do you mean she fell? I locked the gate." Did I? I'm pretty sure I did. I'm pretty good at securing the house, though I could've made a mistake.

"Yes, but I went downstairs to get her some juice and forgot to lock it. She fell, Penelope. She fell down the fucking stairs." He's nearly in tears, holding the baby so close to his chest, my heart breaks for him.

“Here, let me see...” I hold out my arms to Lilly, and she immediately flies into them, wailing and wailing her grievances. “I know, baby. Shhh, it’s okay.” Double checking, it seems that her arms and legs are fine. Nothing looks broken. She’s got a nasty bruise on her forehead, though. “How far did she fall?”

Ethan’s hands tremble at his brow. “Several steps. I caught her before she fell all the way.” At this point, I notice the spilled juice cup downstairs, which he’d probably been screwing closed when he noticed the baby falling. “We should go to the ER. Now.” He takes out his phone and calls for an ambulance.

He’s taking this pretty bad. “Babies are pretty tough, you know. Look, she’s already bouncing back,” I say after Lilly Belle’s cries turn to sobs. “She’ll probably only have a couple bruises and—”

“We’re taking her to the ER,” he hisses, giving me a wicked glare.

I draw back and let it go. No point in arguing with him. Besides, it’s no skin off his back to make sure that she’s well-taken care of, checked out by a doctor, and everything. The fees are nothing to him.

And even though I’m fairly certain she’s going to be okay, she should be checked out by a doctor to be certain.

“I’ll go get dressed.” Standing with Lilly in my arms, I head to my room, put her on the floor surrounded by pillows, but she immediately wants to be carried. I end up having to get dressed with one arm while I carry her. It’s times like these I think of my own mother.

* * *

At the hospital, Ethan is a wreck. I’ve never seen him so distraught. He paces back

and forth while we wait for X-ray and MRI results, and I know he's going to take the blame for this. I only wish I could tell him that all babies have accidents and survive. Even the doctor told him so, though he did say she was very lucky. It could've been worse.

Lilly Belle falls asleep inside of a crib while we wait to be seen by the doctor again. I can tell this is something Ethan has never had to do—wait for service. Apparently, it doesn't matter how much money you have, this hospital gives attention in order of urgency like they should.

“How much longer, for fuck's sake?” he mutters, sitting on the edge of a hard metal chair, head in his hands.

“It's good that we have to wait.”

He shoots me a sharp look that makes me instantly regret it. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I just mean that if it were worse, they'd be attending to her right now. If it was a matter of life or death, she'd be surrounded by doctors and nurses. It wasn't that bad, Ethan.”

He sucks a deep breath through his nose, like he's losing patience with me. Never mind that I've been patient with him and always feel like I'm walking on eggshells around him. “She could have died, Penelope. I don't think you realize the gravity of what happened. Those stairs are wood. The bottom floor is polished concrete. She could've ended at the bottom with her head split open.”

“I know...” I nod, shaking off the horrible image. I see where his shock is coming from, but it still ended well. “It could've ended terribly, but it didn't.”

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“But it could have!” he shouts, standing halfway out of the chair only to sit down again.

I won’t be scared by Ethan’s antics. I don’t care how loud he gets with me, his bark is worse than his bite. I don’t back down. “I understand,” I say quietly. “But my point is, we should be grateful it wasn’t worse.”

“This has nothing to do with gratitude, Penelope. This has to do with me, my inefficiency as a parent. I can’t do this.”

“What?”

“I can’t...fuck...” He drops his head into his hands and shakes it. “I can’t do this anymore. I’m not fit to be a parent.”

I want to slap him so hard. But I also understand that he’s going through emotions. Sitting in the hard chair next to him, I put my arm over his shoulder, knowing there’s a good chance he’ll shrug his way out of it. Ethan has a way of not allowing himself happiness or even comfort. “Ethan, listen to me. All babies have accidents. All parents go through scares like this...”

“Don’t...do that, Penelope.”

“Dowhat?”

“Tell me this is normal. It’s not. Nothing about this is normal. Her nearly dying isn’t normal, and us being here together isn’t normal. Nothing is normal.”

I can't help but feel hurt by his words. "So, you hate this new normal? Is that what you're saying? You hate the way your life has changed? Because I don't. I've had the best time of my life here with you, Ethan. With you and Lilly Belle, and even though I didn't expect to feel any of the one thousand different feelings I've had, I'm still grateful for them. I welcomethem."

"Well, we process things differently."

"I know. But don't think for a second that I haven't been scared by what's been happening between us, because I have. I'm scared that it won't last, I'm scared that you won't want me anymore, and I'm scared about the adoption. I just choose to be happy."

"Well, good for you. You're Mary Fucking Poppins, practically perfect in every way." The anger is palpable.

"I think you're just scared about what happened tonight."

"You bet your ass I'm scared." He pulls away from me. "When my sister left her to me, I swore I'd take care of her."

"And you have."

"I didn't know how I would do that, and for a while, I thought that meant by hiring other people to do it for me. You, an adoption agency, whoever. Either way, I would take care of her," he says. "And I failed tonight, Penelope. I nearly fucked it all up."

"But you didn't," I say quietly.

His eyes turn on me. "Get it through your head. I'm not cut out for this kind of life."

“This is just one moment. One bad, scary moment, but it will pass,” I plead, starting to feel sick. Starting to feel legitimately nauseous. The look on his face.

The worst is happening.

“Penelope,” he says, and his voice breaks. “We’re living a lie pretending to be parents. I’m the child’s uncle, and you’re her nanny. And that’s the reality. That’s the truth.”

“We are whoever we say we are.”

“No, the world doesn’t work that way. We can’t go on believing we’re a family just because we look like one. I’ve let myself live in a dreamland for too many weeks now.”

“A dreamland?” I scoff. “Is that what you call this amazing life we’ve been living? Seemed pretty damn real to me, Ethan.” I fight the tears rising in my eyes. How dare he negate everything we have just gone through, pretend it didn’t happen or call it a mistake?

“And because of it, we need to go back to the way things were.”

“No, don’t do this...that’s your fear talking...”

“It’s logic talking. Someone has to be the voice of reason in any given situation. I have to be the voice of reason right now, Penelope. This has to end. For all our sakes. Starting tomorrow, I go back to work at the office. You go back to being nanny full-time. In a few days, I’ll call the adoption agency...”

“No. Ethan, please...”

“I cannot be a father. I cannot play house anymore. It was irresponsible of me, and now it’s time to get back on track.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I was nothing to him all this time. I was a nanny with benefits and nothing more. Lilly Belle was nothing to him. He’s weak and scared and cold-hearted. The sooner I stop forcing him into the mold I’d hoped for the man in my life, the happier I’ll be. Ethan Townsend has left the building.

I shake my head. “I thought we were more than this.”

“You thought wrong.”

The tears spill over. I hate myself for crying in front of him. “This is not the voice of reason. Allowing yourself to be happy is the voice of reason. Being the father that little girl needs is the voice of reason. I don’t care if you let me go. I don’t care if you find happiness with another woman. I hope I taught you to believe in love, even if it’s not with me. I’d be happy with that. But don’t tell me that ending this family for Lilly Belle is what’s best for her, because I’m not buying it. You’re her father now, Ethan. Step up to the plate, and be that man.”

Shoving the curtain aside, I pace down the hallway to the stares of nurses and doctors. I’m not leaving. I would never leave that little girl unless he forced me to go, but I need fresh air. I need to get away from his negativity. Let him sit in that room stewing in his own pain, realizing that without me, without the family we created, he is nothing but a ghost of himself.

Ethan

Sitting in my office overlooking Central Park, my natural environment with gray walls and metal furniture reflects my life. Lilly Belle's accident yesterday was my fault, and there is no way I will let Penelope convince me that it wasn't. Unlike my mother, I take responsibility for my actions. I left the gate open by accident.

Part of me knows that the fall was not as bad as I made it out to be. Part of me knows this is just an excuse, a giant rationalization because I got in too deep.

But another part of me thinks that it doesn't matter. Because ultimately I always knew this was going to end badly, that I would destroy anything good that came into my life.

I grew up with a non-existent father and a mother who was withdrawn and depressed or insane and antagonistic. Love, kindness, safety—I never had or experienced these things.

Until now, that is. And unfortunately, now is far too late. I'm fully formed and I won't be able to change because some lovely young lass stole my heart away. I am who I am, that much is certain.

Penelope and Lilly Belle are better off without me.

“Mr. Townsend? The meeting is about to start.” The rhythm of Bianca's voice soothes me. It's calm and reassuring and falls back into place with the world I know. Work, my office, the world of steel and money. This is where I belong, not

pretending to be a husband and father. Lilly Belle needs a real father and Penelope needs a realman.

“Thank you, I’ll be right there.” Of course, I won’t be right there. I’ll be there when I damn well please. This is how it’s always been. I pick up the phone, take a deep breath, and make thecall.

* * *

Coming home to a quiet house,I pause in the doorway and scan around. It’s late. The baby must be sleeping. All night last night, I couldn’t sleep thinking she may have had a concussion, but Wilson has kept in touch with me all day assuring me that she’s fine. I haven’t spoken to Penelope. Her words were harsh.

I understood the meaning behind them, but she doesn’t know what I’ve been through. I am stepping up and being a man. By giving Lilly Belle to a loving family, I am doing right byher.

Entering the kitchen, I grab myself a glass of water. The faint static of the baby monitor is both comforting and a nuisance. I didn’t have that noise before Lilly Belle arrived. I didn’t have to worry about how someone else was doing. I have to go upstairs and find Penelope, tell her that they’ll be comingsoon.

Then I hear the sounds of the baby finishing up her bottle in the nursery. She’s not awake. She’s sitting with Penelope in the gliding chair, getting ready for bedtime. Then, I hear it—the singing that comes before the sendoff. “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...you make me happy when skies are gray...” The softest, most angelic voice you’ve ever heard.

“You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you,” I mouth along to Penelope’s singing. “Please don’t take my sunshine away.” I drop my head onto the kitchen

counter and fight tears. Tears don't solve anything, and anyway, I'm all out of tears. I used them all up as a child and teen. Not a single tear gave me the love I desperately needed. Not a single tear made my mother stop screaming insults, stop throwing things when she was in her manic anger, stop ignoring us during her depressive episodes.

I thought I had pushed those emotions away forever, but here they are, back and fresh as if I'm a child again. I can't live like this. I can't take feeling again.

Slowly, I head upstairs. When I reach the top, I unlatch the baby gate. Penelope is just closing the door to the nursery. Her eyes are swollen and her face looks gaunt. "You look like you haven't slept much," I tell her.

"You're a charmer." She spins on her heels and goes into her room about to close her door.

"Miss Wallach, I have to speak to you." I take steps toward her room and lean against the doorframe, pushing her door open gently.

"Yes, Mr. Townsend?" she says, voice full of spite. It's okay. She has every right to feel angry. I don't expect her to understand why it has to be this way. Crossing her arms, she faces me, straight as a stick, holding herself in the darkness of her room.

Maybe it's better that she hates me. It will make moving on that much easier for her.

"They're coming tomorrow afternoon to pick up Lilly Belle." I say the words as clearly and antiseptically as I can.

I watch her face change like the silent phases of the moon from shock to acceptance to grief then back to being stoic. "It didn't have to be this way," she says in a choked voice.

I feel my heart contract painfully and fight the urge to stroke her cheek, to tell her it will be okay, to take it all back and promise to try oncemore.

“It did have to be this way, Miss Wallach.”

“Stop calling me that. You can go on pretending that life is the same as it was before if you like, Ethan, but I will be the adult here and say that it has been my life’s greatest pleasure being with you and caring for your precious Lilly Belle.” She points to the nursery. “What you have sleeping in that room is the most beautiful, luminescent child I have ever seen, and you will miss her when she’s gone. As I will.” She turns around, controls a sob rising in her chest, then goes about the task of collecting her things off the dresser and night stand.

My arms fall to my sides. “I know you think I’m weak, but I’m not. I’m broken, Penelope. I have to fix myself before I can be anyone’s father. Do you understand?” It’s probably the most responsible thing I have ever and will ever say to anyone.

She turns and looks at me coldly. “What happened to you? What did she do to you?”

So she senses that this is about my mother. I suppose I’ve made it obvious enough.

I sigh deeply. Swallow, control the trembling shaking in my chest. “She had untreated mental illness for years. The list of abuses, both emotional and physical, are long and tedious. I’m tired of thinking about it, frankly.”

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“Or maybe you’re tired of pretending not to think about it,” Penelope replies. “You need help.”

It’s like a punch to the gut. She’s right, I realize. But it’s too late for that—too late for me, really.

“Maybe. Maybe I need help. But that’s not the time to become a father to a child in need of stability and balance and love. And you know it,” I finish.

She stares at me, through me, for a long time. After what feels like an eternity, she says, “I’m so sorry you had to go through what you went through, Ethan.”

Just hearing her say those words nearly sends me over the edge. It means so much coming from her. Still, I fight the urge to bring her close, to try and heal one another with soft-spoken words.

I nod but say nothing. It’s not going to happen. I’ve made my decision. “Thank you. You’ll be relieved from your position immediately after the agency comes to pick her up. I’ll be paying for the full four months despite the job coming to termination. That should be more than enough to—”

“Take away your guilt. Fine then, do what you need to do,” she interrupts, her gaze burning a hole into my soul.

And then she turns and walks away from me.

Penelope

Walking into her nursery on the morning I'm set to leave is the hardest thing I've ever had to do. Lilly Belle stands in her crib after her morning bottle, arms up, asking me to pick her up. I'm torn. On one hand, it'll be the last act I do as her nanny, so I should enjoy it. Savor it. On the other hand, it may be easier if I say goodbye from the door. If I can't hold her, no one will have to rip me away from her.

Wilson waits in the hallway.

Ethan isn't here, of course. He would never be able to watch this and keep a cold heart.

I've taken care of children for three different families since I started working with Le Nanny two years ago, but nobody has affected me quiet like Lilly Belle. Yes, I fell for Ethan and that made it harder, all those moments we spent together as a family, but I loved her more than the rest just the same. We had a special bond, Silly Lilly and me. She lost her parents, and I arrived right when she needed a mommy.

Only I'll never be her mommynow.

I decide on the hug.

"Hey, sweet pea. Finished your bottle?" I swoop in and pick her up. She's chunky, and her soft skin smells of powder and milk and yumminess. I love her. I love her so much. Taking a deep breath, I tell her, "Listen, Silly Lilly Belle, you're going to a new family very soon. I promise you they are going to be the absolute best!"

Lilly Belle gaggles and burps, and laughs.

“And guess what? I told your uncle last night that I wanted the opportunity to see you again when you’re all settled in. He agreed, and he’s requesting for open adoption cases only. So, I will see you again. Gotthat?”

I don’t know for sure that the agency will be able to comply, but he’s at least going to put in the request. For all I know, they won’t be able to come through, and this is it. This is goodbye. Lilly Belle looks at me, those big saucer wide blue eyes. Quieted down, she seems to understand that what I’m saying is important. I don’t usually talk this much.

She gurgles at me with wide, innocent eyes.

I feel my heart tear irrevocably.

Well, this is it. If I don’t leave now, I’ll miss the next Metro North train leaving for Tarrytown at Grand Central Station. I hold Lilly Belle close to my chest, to my heart, fighting back tears. Fighting them so hard, but it’s no use, because I’m not made of titanium like some people. “I love you, Silly Belle. You be a good girl.” I kiss her chubby little cheeks and carry her out to the hallway.

Handing her over to Wilson is like handing over my arm, or my ribs, or a third of my heart. “Please make sure he does his best by her,” I tell Wilson. Pressing his lips together in sympathy, he nods and I slip Lilly Belle into his arms. Holding her chin in my fingertips and looking into her eyes one last time, I think about the alternatives. There are none.

I wish I could adopt her myself, but I know I can’t. I’m a single woman. I’m only twenty-one. I have nothing to my name but a small business that hardly brings in any income. I’m not a candidate no matter how much I’d like to be.

I turn around and leave as quickly as I can, feeling my soul empty out behind me as I go.

“Babababa!” Lilly Belle shouts.

“I love you, too, sweet pea,” I call out. No turning back.

Life, the city, moves on through blurry, watery tears.

* * *

Walking up the sidewalk to my house is more than a homecoming. It’s healing. The moment my mother opens the door and announces, “Penelope’s home!” I break down. Dropping my bag by her side, I let her envelop me with her arms, her hug, her whole aura of love.

This. This is my family, even if I do still feel like I’m missing pieces of myself. What I experienced before was only what could be. A glimpse of one possible future. Like Ethan said, we were playing house.

It feels good to be home, but also terrible all at once. I was only away for seven weeks this time, but a lot happened while I was gone. I fell in love with two different souls, and together, that made it more powerful than anything I’ve ever experienced. My mom knows nothing about it either, but I think it’s time to tell her.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” She wipes my eyes, grabs my bag, and draws me into the house. I say hello to my sisters, tell them that the Townsend Mansion was absolutely beautiful, yes, the city is amazing this time of year, and ignore my mom’s question. Once the kids skedaddle back to their rooms, I face my mom.

“You have time?”

“I make time.” Her golden eyes sparkle in the sunlight.

For the next two hours, we talk at the kitchen table like we used to whenever anything was troubling me. My mom is great at listening, but she’s extra quiet this time, wearing a worried expression, and I feel that she’s going to judge me. How could I fall for my boss, how did I not know better, how could I allow myself to fall so deeply in such a hopeless situation?

But she doesn’t judge me, only leans in and hugs me and tells me how sorry she is.

And then I cry, and cry, and cry some more.

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And she holds me and doesn't say anything, because there's nothing else to be said...

Over the next week or so, I keep myself busy with my small business, working on my contacts list, and sending out promotions while getting ready for the winter semester. I reconnect with some of my friends and try telling myself how great it is to be without Lilly Belle so I can have a social life again. None of it works, but I'm learning to live with the pain of letting go. Whether or not they were right for me, I feel like I lost my husband and daughter.

Soon after, Mom comes into the living room one day holding an open envelope. Her hands are shaking, and the paper trembles, as she stares at it, confused. "Penelope, did you...did you pay off the mortgage on the house?"

"Mom, I don't get paid that much. Why? What happened?"

"I have to call your father at work then. And the bank. I think this is a mistake."

"Well, if it's a mistake in your favor, then don't call the bank!" I tell her. I mean, seriously. If the universe drops a huge gift in your lap, you don't give it back. Who is she, Ethan Townsend?

She walks away, scratching her head, mumbling to herself, then she pauses at the sofa and turns around. "You don't suppose...Ethan paid it off, do you?"

Ethan? I don't even know how he would do that. He would need my parents' names and mortgage number, the name of their bank, and all sorts of information in order to pay it off. I didn't give him any of that. "I don't see how, Ma."

“Can you ask him? I mean, I’m grateful. Holy shit, am I grateful...” Finally, the shock wears off and an ecstatic look comes through. Her eyes light up like she’s been given a new lease on life. “If it was him, then he’s quite possibly the most generous man in the world.”

If it is him, then he’s just feeling guilty, I think to myself.

Regardless of how it happened, we call the bank and my father and discover that the mortgage, has, in fact, been paid off. \$85,000 of debt just poof—gone. While my mother rejoices, calls every friend she can think of to tell them what just happened, and everyone runs around the house like chickens with their heads cut off, I sit outside and stare at the sky about to snow.

He’s not generous. He feels bad for what he did, and this is how he makes himself feel better. Money is no object to him—he said so himself. He’s rich. Money he can give away. It’s love that he holds onto, love that he hoards and keeps to himself.

He never spent a dime of the currency that truly mattered to him.

* * *

The next day, we’re getting ready for dinner. I haven’t slept well. All I could think about was the fact that Ethan paid off the mortgage.

I miss him terribly and half of me wants to call him and thank him profusely, while the other half wants to curse him out and tell him how much I hate him.

Do I hate him or do I love him?

Sadly, I don’t know anymore. All I know is I’m tired of aching and hurting.

I'm peeling potatoes to boil for the mashed potatoes when I hear a honk outside. My mother and I exchange glances. "You expecting someone?" she asks.

"No, who would I be expecting?" I say. Wondering if it's even meant for us, I peer out the kitchen window. Outside is a stretch limo a mile long just parked in front of our house. "What the heck?"

"What is it?" Mom moves into the space next to me, as we both peer out the blinds. "That's not who I think it is, is it?"

We all filter into the living room to stare outside as the horn continues to blare. Suddenly, a head emerges from the sunroof, then a pair of shoulders and arms, and finally, a big bouquet of sunflowers.

What in the actual fuck is Ethan Townsend doing here?

I storm to the front door and yank it open, running outside with my hands up. "What are you doing?" I yell. A few neighbors have come outside to see what the commotion is.

He smiles and tells the driver to knock it off. Dropping out of the sunroof, he opens the side door and steps out looking as amazing as I've ever seen him in blue jeans, boots, and a brown leather jacket with scarf.

My heart leaps and aches all at once.

He steps all the way up to me, as my sister behind me says, "Is that Ethan?"

I shoot her a glare over my shoulder to shut her up. I don't want anyone stroking Ethan's ego. Turning back to him, I say, "Ethan, what are you doing here?"

“I’m here to see you, Penelope.” With a sad smile, he hands me the sunflowers and leans in for a kiss on the cheek. Fragmented images come crashing into my mind like shards of glass from my memory—his stubble against my face, the smell of his skin when it’s lit by passion. Things I had pushed out of my mind all come barreling back.

“You couldn’t have come without the loud-ass limo?”

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“Go big or go home, Sweetness.” That smile. Cocky, big, and gorgeous. I hate him.

I cross my arms. “Not sure if you know this, but this is a quiet neighborhood. We...” I gesture behind me. “Are a humble family who isn’t impressed with luxurious antics.”

“Alright, so I shouldn’t have blared the horn, but I had to find you. I need to talk to you, Penelope. Come with me and we’ll go somewhere quiet.”

“I don’t want to see you.” My heart hurts saying that, because it’s not true. For over a week, I’ve imagined Ethan changing his mind, becoming the man I wanted him to be of his own free will. But I don’t want to hurt anymore, and seeing him makes me feel like I’m being torn open all over again.

“Wow. Cold. I’m impressed. It’s like I don’t even know you,” he says.

“Yeah, well...I learned from the best.” Suck on that, Townsend.

After a moment of looking off down the road, he says, “I deserve that. But I still need to speak to you.”

“We’re fine right here,” I say. Anything he wants to say, he can say it in front of my family. Speaking of spoiled brats, he’s used to getting whatever he wants, but he’s on my territory now. If he wants to speak to me, my front stoop is a perfectly good location. I whip around and walk back to the steps, shooing everyone back into the house. Then, I sit on the front steps.

“Alright, I guess we’re going to talk right here.” He sits next to me, and a whiff of his aftershave slides under my nose. I love that smell and fight the urges my body is beginning to feel. My body doesn’t know shit, and that’s why I got hurt in the first place.

“Did you find her a good home?” I ask, staring straight ahead at the black limo. I almost choke on the question.

“I did,” he says softly.

The moment he says it, I start getting up. “I can’t do this, Ethan. I can’t listen to anything you have to say if she’s not a part of your life. I’m sorry.”

He takes my hand and sits me back down. “I didn’t say she was adopted.”

My eyes connect with his—crystal clear and full of what I hope are good intentions. It’s so hard to tell when emotions are running amuck in my head and heart. “She hasn’t? Why, what’s wrong? I would think any family would want her immediately.”

He nods. “I’m sure that’s true. And I kept thinking that I was going to hand her over to the agency as planned. But each day I kept postponing it, to the point where Wilson finally called me on my shit. He told me that I’d fallen in love with her and with you. He told me that she’s my daughter and you’re her mother, and I knew he was goddamn right.”

I stare at him uncomprehendingly.

His eyes have teared up but he smiles a little.

My chest vibrates with a feeling I can’t even name. It’s more than happiness, it’s like elation or joy. Yes, joy. “Ethan, are you sure? You can’t just say things that you know

I want to hear. Please don't mess with me."

Swiveling toward me, he takes my hand and caresses it with a thumb. I look down at our hands. I want so much for it to work out, but I can't go through this hurt again. I just can't. Suddenly, I realize that's the same feeling Ethan had the night of Lilly Belle's accident, like he couldn't go through with the pain again. He couldn't lose yet another person he loved.

"I'm not messing with you, Penelope." And then he moves away, stands, pulls something from his pocket, and kneels down in front of me.

When he opens the black velvet box, I see the biggest diamond ever shimmering at me.

"Holy shit," I gasp, but it's not because of the diamond. I'm staring at Ethan's eyes, and his smile, and I realize this is all real.

And then he asks me, and I say yes.

Ethan

Penelope tells me she has something to talk about.

I've only just woken up and gotten my coffee, which I sip, then glance at my watch. It's early, and Lilly Belle is still sleeping.

"What's up?" I ask my fiancé, as she stands before me, beautiful as ever, no makeup necessary.

"I've been thinking a lot about a few things we need to clear up."

I make a face. Shit. I know things aren't going to just be perfect right away after everything I've put her through, but I hope to god she's not having second thoughts about marrying me. "Okay, shoot," I tell her. "I'm listening."

"Firstly, we need to talk about Wilson."

My eyebrows rise. "Wilson?"

She nods. "Ethan, the man's been your servant for almost twenty-five years. He's old. He wants to retire, but he worries too much about you. You're like a son to him so he can't stay away. But now that we're getting married, he can finally retire and start spending more time with his family. Please promise you'll let him go and give him pension so he can enjoy life in South Carolina. Please. He deserves it."

"That filthy bugger?" I scoff, relieved that's all it was, giving her a warming smile.

It's actually a great idea, and I was starting to think about suggesting this to Wilson anyway. "Fine, done. Whatelse?"

"Your mother."

"Forget it. I'm not making amends withher."

"I wasn't going to suggest that," she says. "I was going to say that if having her in your life remains a toxic situation, then I don't want her anywhere near Lilly Belle. However, if you think you can go to therapy with her, sort things out, and make room for her in your life, I'm fine with that, too. I'll support whatever you want to do, but I want you to make a decision one way or another on whether or not to include her in yourlife."

I stay quiet. I don't ever want to see my mother again. Yes, the five-year-old in me still yearns for her approval. It's driven everything I've done in my life, but at some point, I have to accept that situation for what itis.

"I'm still not sure about my mother. A lot depends on her," I say. "But I promise she won't be around Lilly or you unless she has changed from the way she used tobe."

"And finally," Penelope says, sighing, "we need to deal with the mess your contractors made of the baby's room. It's a mess, Ethan."

"Shit. Really?" I put my coffee mug down. I was so busy at work the last few days, I didn't have a chance to look at their progress, but they always did great stuff for me in thepast.

When we get to Lilly Belle's room, I get ready to be furious. Then we open the door and...holy pixie dust. Her room is a wonderland full of painted vines and trees and flowers. Tiny sparking lights stretch across the space, and her crib lies underneath the

big branch of a tree. A glow in the dark resin model of Tinkerbelle pokes out from inside the constructed tree.

“Welcome to Neverland,” my fiancé laughs. “I was just messing with you. It’s incredible.”

“You’re going to wake her,” I whisper, realizing how loud we’re being.

“She’s waking up anyhow,” Penelope replies, then pads over and picks Silly Belle up and starts cooing and cradling our child.

Our baby.

I swallow my tears, but this time they are happy tears.

I shake my head and pick up the remote control on top of the dresser. “And this?” I ask. “It actually works?”

Penelope smiles broadly. “Go on, press it and see.”

I press the button and Tinkerbelle flies out of the tree and over to the papier-mâché blueberry bush on the opposite end of her room, making a fairy dust sound as she goes.

“Look, Lilly!” Penelope cries.

Lilly Belle’s eyes are round and huge as she tries to grab for the little flying fairy. She laughs hysterically.

“Holy crap, that is awesome,” I say, and a true belly laugh explodes from my throat. I realize in that moment it’s never happened before. I’ve never truly laughed like this

in my entire life.

I feel something in my chest give way and suddenly, it's like I can breathe for the first time.

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And then Penelope's arms snake around my middle and she hugs me tight.

"I love you so much, Ethan."

"And I love you, Sweetness. You are my world, my sun and my stars. And our little girl is the air I breathe."

My hands immediately go to her waist, feeling the way they fit perfectly right where her hips begin. I love this woman.

Later that morning, Lilly goes down for a nap.

"Fuck, I've been dying to have you to myself," I say, as soon as Penelope puts the little one in her crib.

"Calm yourself," Penelope says as I grab her.

"Fuck that," I growl in her ear, and then hoist her over my shoulder.

She squeals but manages not to wake the baby.

Carrying her back to my room, I drop her on the bed, looking down at her in awe.

This amazing woman will now be by my side, all because I threw caution to the wind and decided to get my shit together. This. This perfect woman, making me the happiest man alive, is what life is all about. I'm sure we'll have fights and I'm sure I'll be an asshole to her at some point, but I'm going to do my best to cherish her

always and not be a jerk, and she has full rights to knock sense into me if ever I should need it.

She pulls me onto the bed, and suddenly, I'm looking down at an angel with a ginger halo spread out all around her on our gray comforter. "Kiss me," she says. I do, and once I start, I can't stop. Everything about those first days of making love to her and more come rushing back.

I feel more love for her every moment. It just builds and builds.

I have to slide her out of her outfit, and her body is so smooth to the touch. After undressing, I kiss every inch of her body, loving the way that she arches her back to meet my mouth, moaning softly when my tongue takes in one of her breasts, sucks hard and plays with her nipple between my teeth.

She's moving fast today, urging me to the other breast, pushing me down between her legs, and giving me her sweet pussy before I can even move her up the bed. Her legs hang over the edge, so I pull her to me and take in that delicious pussy, licking her lips and sliding my fingers into her, slathering her clit with her juices. I'll never get enough of licking on that either, and I don't even care that she comes all over my face or that she seems satisfied, I keep on licking her through her orgasm. Because I adore her, fucking worship the ground she walks on, and I'll make her come again if she'll let me.

"God, you're so amazing, Sweetness. And I'm never going to stop loving you, never going to stop being the man you want and need me to be."

"And I'm not going anywhere either, Ethan. If you didn't get rid of me before, you'll never get rid of me now."

"I hope that's a promise," I whisper.

“Enough talk, Mister Townsend. Come up here and slide your cock into my pussy,” she says. I’ve never heard her speak this way, and my cock cannot possibly grow any harder. Her voice telling me what to do does something to me that no woman has ever been able to achieve—drive me insane. Suddenly, all I want is to do her bidding, slide into her and buck hard against her, ram my steel into her cunt, and make that fucking pussy mine forever. She’s my queen, my new direction, my love and my life.

She reaches back with her arms, holding onto the bars of the headboard, giving her tits up to me to suck on as I drive into her. Holding onto her waist, I kneel up and impale myself into her body, my cock up to the hilt, my balls slapping her ass. I want to give her everything I am, every part of me. I’m simply not afraid anymore. Before I lived in a black and white world, but now with Penelope in it, everything glows in multidimensional colors.

With a great buildup, I let it all go and spill my seed deep into her, claiming her. She crests another orgasm at the exact same time. We are meant for each other. This pure, radiant woman is ready to be my wife and a mother all at once. Holy fuck. My pulse takes forever to come down. All I can think of is my fortune. My real fortune—her.

I collapse on top of her and take all the gratitude within me and give them to her in the form of a long, deep and passionate, kiss. Our eyes close. It takes someone special. It takes someone gifted to deal with me. It takes a super nanny to fill the position of Mrs. Ethan Townsend. Winds from the east brought her to me, and now she’s here to stay.

Position of hot, smart-as-balls, amazing wife—filled.

Epilogue

It's a cold February morning, the kind when you're so toasty in bed cuddled up next to your husband that you could stay there all day long. The house is quiet, the snow is falling, and Ethan's skin is imprinted with our mixed scents. Maybe I can sleep the day away. But then I remember that we're parents. Not just any parents, but the parents of a little girl who's turning two today.

"Mama!" Silly Belle calls from the magical forest of Neverland.

"You gether."

"I got her last time," he mumbles. "Plus, she's calling for you." Ethan's smartass smile is enough to make me pinch his side. "Ow, what was that for?"

"Come on, we have a party to get ready anyway."

"Didn't we hire people to do that?"

"No, we rented a cupcake shop for several hours so we can hold our party but we do the rest ourselves. We're involved in our daughter's life. We actively participate, remember?" It's not meant to be a dig at his mother's past negligence; it's just fact. This is how we've chosen to parent—completely and whole-heartedly. I swipe the comforter off his smoking hot body. "Let's go, Captain Hook."

We tiptoe into our fairy princess's neck of the woods and both sing at the same time, "Happy Birthday, Lilly Belle!" Ethan swoops in on our bouncy curly-haired blonde

and picks her up in the air. Her feet kick like she's swimming in the air, sprinkling pixie dust everywhere.

"Guess who's having a party today?" I tickle her and take her from Ethan's arms.

"Par-dee?"

"Yes, you, my little goddess. In just a couple hours. Let's get you dressed!"

* * *

Gardenia's midtown bustles with smiles, sparkling lights, and joyous conversation. The cupcake bakery's courtyard garden is a magical place to hold a party, like an enchanted fairyland for toddlers. All of Lilly Belle's friends from the park are there, a few of her friends from swimming lessons, all my family, and even friends of Ethan's from work.

Wilson is there with his wife and older daughter, and watching Wilson swirl icing on a cupcake then sprinkle edible glitter all over it is priceless. "Hey, you're pretty good at that," I tell him, handing him a mimosa in a champagne glass. "I should've hired you to make them all."

"Bite your tongue, Mrs. Townsend. This here cat's retired." He laughs, turning to his wife and giving her a peck on the cheek.

"You've done a beautiful job with this party, Penelope," his wife tells me, giving me that look some people do when they want to express just how special they think I am for taking both Ethan and Lilly Belle into my life. What they don't understand is that my husband and daughter enrich my life just as much.

Going to school part-time to study business never would've been possible without

those two. They made me want to do better, aim higher, push for more than just a small start-up company. Being Lilly Belle's mom means transcending regular life and going beyond.

It does take a special person to care for a child who wasn't born to you, but that doesn't mean she doesn't teach me things every day. I'm a harder working, happier person now than I was before, and having Ethan help watch her while I work to make my dreams come true is a blessing.

My mom takes the train into the city about once or twice a week to help out when Ethan has to work or I'm at school. She adores her time alone with Lilly Belle. It gives her an excuse to get away from home while my siblings are in school, a mini adventure a few times a week.

In the meantime, Ethan is going to therapy. Most of the time, he goes alone, but every once in a while, I'll go with him and help him put feelings he's having a hard time with into words.

He's a changed man. I would say, liberated.

When I met him, he thought he'd moved on from the pain, but in truth, he'd only hidden his demons. It's dangerous, sweeping demons under the proverbial rug. They'll only come out one day and bite you in the ass. It's way better to deal with them the right way, slaying them with any weapon necessary until they eventually begin to fade into harmless ghosts. Now, he is caring, so loving, and he never yells at us for being in his space. He's all too happy to share his space, because it means he's not alone anymore.

He'll never be alone again.

"Alright, everybody, gather round!" I call to our guests to come around the cupcake

tower filled with pink and green sparkly sugary confections. “It’s time to wish Lilly Belle a magical second birthday!”

Ethan sweeps her up and carries her to the table, while I light the top cupcake with the fondant number 2 on top, and our friends and family gather round. A beautiful sight, seeing all these smiling faces, people we adore, toasting to the birthday girl under a glass atrium of warmth, as the NYC cold hovers outside.

“Ready?” I hold her hand and stare at her luminous blue eyes, as they soak in the entire scene, the marvel of so many people giving her attention at once. “One...two...three...”

As we sing Happy Birthday, I think about how quickly life has changed for me—for us—in such a short time.

It’s enough to make me realize that dreams do in fact come true. And that even when things look bleak, you can still have hope.

Yes, I decide, hope is exactly the word. Our future is bright, especially with the icing on this cupcake. While everyone is clapping, I pick up the little gift box at the end of the table and hand it to Lilly Belle. “Open this present first, Silly Belle.”

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“Yay!” she cries, her favorite phrase for anything happy these days. Everyone laughs, as she rips the present open. Throwing pink tissue paper in the air, she picks up a little T-shirt. I help her hold it up, while Ethan narrows his eyes to read the printed message on it. My stomach is in knots, as he reads the words aloud.

“World’s Best Big Sister,” he says. It takes him a moment to process, but the minute everyone starts cheering and hollering their congratulations, he turns to me, Lilly Belle locked between us. “Are you serious?” he whispers.

“Heck yes, I’m serious. That would be a super weird joke,” I whisper back in reply. “So get ready for baby number two. Congratulations, Daddy.” Noting the blend of shock and pure joy in his eyes, I hug my husband using all the positive energy my heart can muster forth.

“You hear that, Silly Belle?” Ethan’s glossy eyes turn to his tiny girl. “You’re going to be a big sister. Mommy has a baby inside her.” He rubs my tiny baby bump that’s not even showing yet at ten weeks.

“Baby?” she questions. When we both nod and drop her a notch to kiss my belly, she raises her fist in the air and cries, “Baby, yay!”

I laugh so hard, I’m crying. Or maybe I’m crying because I’ve never been filled with so much happiness all at once. My mother and father are crying, my little sisters are crying...hell, I think even Wilson’s crying. “Yay!” I echo her enthusiasm and kiss my husband before turning and taking a family photo.

Yes, it’s all real, I think, still in shock sometimes myself.

Life is strange, and miracles do, in fact, happen.

THEEND