



The Billionaire's Bargain

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Description: Shy little Alice Clark doesn't mean to cause trouble. She's just trying to make it through another shift, balancing plates and pouring coffee, when her worst nightmare happens—she spills an entire cup of scalding hot coffee on him.

Alexander Grant. Billionaire. Titan of industry. A man so powerful, people barely dare to look him in the eye.

But he's looking at her.

And he's not looking away.

One moment, she's apologizing, stammering, blushing furiously. The next, she's trapped in his grasp, his dark, heated gaze burning through her defenses. Alice doesn't know what she's just awakened in him, but Alexander does.

Obsession.

She's soft. She's innocent. She's his. She just doesn't know it yet.

So he makes her a deal. One month. Thirty days in his world. At his side. In his bed. In exchange, he'll make her family's problems disappear.

Alice should refuse. Alexander is intense, overwhelming, dangerous. But when he touches her? When he growls her name like it belongs to him? There's no escaping the fire that consumes them both.

But what happens when thirty days isn't enough?

When Alexander decides he's never letting her go?

Total Pages (Source): 36

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

one

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Alice

My shoulders ache as I balance the overloaded tray of coffee orders, weaving between tables like I'm performing some exhausted ballet. Six more hours of this shift to go, and the rent's still short. The café hums with morning conversations and the hiss of the espresso machine—sounds that usually fade into white noise after three years of working here, but today they scrape against my nerves like fingernails on glass. I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear and plaster on my service smile as I approach the corner booth, where the air seems to thicken around the dark-suited man waiting there.

I've been on my feet since five this morning. My second job. The first—night shifts at the convenience store—ended at midnight. Sleep is a luxury I can't afford, not with bills piling up and my student loans hanging over me like a guillotine blade. Each step across the polished floor takes effort, but I've learned to move with purpose. To make it look effortless.

"Table six, Alice." My manager, a perpetually harried woman with permanent frown lines, nods toward the back corner where a business meeting seems to be wrapping up. "Full service, these are important clients."

Translation: don't screw this up or it's your ass.

I nod and adjust my grip on the tray—five specialty coffees, all different, all obscenely expensive. The kind people order when someone else is paying. My fingertips are callused from years of carrying hot plates and cups, but the weight still strains my wrists.

That's when I first notice him.

Not because he's loud—he's anything but. It's the quiet authority that draws my attention. The way the three men in cheaper suits lean toward him when he speaks, like plants seeking sunlight. The way his presence seems to command the corner of the café without any visible effort.

He sits with his back against the wall, a position that lets him survey the entire room. His suit is different from the others—the fabric catches the light in a way that whispers of expense without shouting it. Dark hair, immaculately styled. Strong jaw, clean-shaven. I can't make out the color of his eyes from here, but I can feel their intensity even at a distance. He's older than me—mid-thirties, maybe—with lines at the corners of his eyes that speak of experience rather than age.

My stomach tightens as I approach. Not just from nerves about serving "important clients," but from something more primal. A recognition of danger, perhaps. Not physical threat, but the danger of disruption. As if this man could somehow upset the careful balance of my exhausting but predictable life.

I shake off the feeling. He's just another customer. Probably some mid-level executive with an inflated sense of importance.

"Your coffees, gentlemen," I announce as I reach the table, working to keep my voice steady and professional. "Two Americanos, one cappuccino, one latte with an extra shot, and one black coffee."

The conversation pauses. Four pairs of eyes turn to me, but only one set makes contact. His. They're gray—not the soft gray of morning fog but the hard, clear gray of steel. They lock onto mine with such sudden, complete focus that I nearly stumble.

"Thank you," he says, his voice low and rich. The words are ordinary. The delivery is not. He speaks as if he's considered every syllable, found it satisfactory, and released it with precise intention.

I nod and begin setting down the cups, working around the spread of papers and tablets on the table. My hands are steady—they always are—but my awareness of him intensifies with each passing second. The air between us seems charged, like the moment before lightning strikes.

Just as I'm placing the last cup—his, the black coffee—a businessman from the adjacent table stands up suddenly, bumping into me from behind. The jolt travels through my body, amplified by fatigue and surprise. My fingers slip. The mug tilts.

Time slows horrifically. I watch as the dark liquid arcs through the air with elegant malevolence. It splashes across the pristine white of his shirt, the perfect charcoal of his suit jacket. Droplets spatter the table, the papers, even one of his companions.

Chaos erupts. The other men jump back, napkins are grabbed, exclamations made. But he remains perfectly still, looking down at the spreading stain as if observing an interesting natural phenomenon.

"I'm so sorry," I gasp, mortification flooding me like ice water. My face burns hot enough to scald. "I didn't—I wasn't?—"

I grab napkins frantically, dabbing at his chest without thinking. It's only when my fingers press against the solid warmth beneath the soaked fabric that I realize what I'm doing—touching a stranger, a customer, without permission. I snatch my hand

away as if burned.

"I'll get more napkins," I stammer, ready to flee.

His hand catches my wrist. Not roughly, but with the same precise intention that colors his speech. His fingers are warm and dry, encircling my wrist completely.

"It's all right," he says, and the room seems to quiet around us. His gaze hasn't left my face, hasn't shown a flicker of anger or disgust. If anything, there's something like curiosity there. "Accidents happen."

I'm frozen, caught between the pull of escape and the tether of his grip. His thumb moves once across my pulse point, so lightly it might be an accident.

"I'm really sorry about your suit," I manage, finding my voice. "The café will pay for the cleaning, of course."

A small smile touches his lips. It doesn't reach his eyes, not fully, but it transforms his face from intimidating to something more dangerous—appealing.

"Don't worry about the suit." He releases my wrist slowly, as if making sure I won't bolt. "What's your name?"

The question surprises me. Customers rarely ask for my name, even though it's printed on my name tag. They see the uniform, not the person.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

"Alice," I answer. The word sounds strange in my mouth, suddenly intimate.

"Alice," he repeats, as if testing the sound of it. "I'm Alexander Grant."

The name clicks into place, and my stomach drops. Not a mid-level executive. Alexander Grant. CEO of Grant Enterprises. The man whose face occasionally graces the business section of newspapers and whose wealth is counted in billions, not millions.

I've just spilled coffee on one of the most powerful men in the city.

"Mr. Grant, I apologize for the interruption." My manager has materialized beside me, all simpering smile and fluttering hands. "We'll have this cleaned up immediately. Please, let us comp your order today."

Alexander—Mr. Grant—doesn't acknowledge her. His eyes remain on mine, steady and analytical, as if I'm a puzzle he's trying to solve.

"No harm done," he says finally, addressing her while watching me. "Though I think I'll need to cut this meeting short, gentlemen."

The other men murmur their understanding, gathering papers with exaggerated care to avoid the coffee droplets. My manager is still babbling apologies, offering free pastries, promising discounts on future visits. I should be helping clean up, but I'm suspended in the gravity of Alexander Grant's attention.

"Go easy on her," he tells my manager, and though his tone is light, there's a firmness

beneath it that brooks no argument. "The fault was as much mine as anyone's."

It wasn't. We both know it wasn't. But my manager nods frantically.

"Of course, Mr. Grant. Alice, go get some fresh towels from the back."

The dismissal breaks the spell. I nod, grateful for the escape route, and turn toward the kitchen. As I push through the swinging door, I hear one of the businessmen say something in a low voice, followed by a quiet laugh from the others.

The kitchen is mercifully empty. I lean against the stainless steel counter, my heart pounding as if I've run a marathon. My wrist still feels the phantom pressure of his fingers.

"What the hell happened out there?" Mia, another server, pushes through the door with wide eyes. "Is that really Alexander Grant?"

I nod, gathering clean towels mechanically. "I spilled coffee all over him."

"Holy shit," she breathes. "Cynthia must be having a stroke."

Cynthia—our manager—does indeed look like she's contemplating either murder or resignation when I return to the dining room. The businessmen are gone, but Alexander Grant remains, standing now, dabbing at his suit with the inadequate paper napkins.

"Here," I say, offering him the stack of clean towels. It feels insufficient, like offering a Band-Aid for an amputation.

He takes them, but his eyes are still studying my face. "Thank you, Alice."

The way he says my name—deliberate, like he's memorizing it—sends a shiver through me that has nothing to do with fear of losing my job.

"Again, I'm so sorry," I repeat, because what else can I say?

"I have other suits." His lips quirk, almost playful. "Though I'm curious what made you so distracted."

The question catches me off guard. "I—I wasn't distracted."

"No?" One eyebrow raises slightly. "You seemed miles away when you approached the table."

He noticed that? I was certain his attention had only fixed on me after the spill.

"Just tired," I admit before I can think better of it. "Long night."

Something changes in his expression—a sharpening of interest, a narrowing of focus.

"Alice, please finish clearing table four," Cynthia interrupts, her smile strained as she turns to Alexander. "Mr. Grant, please let me know if there's anything else we can do."

He gives her a polite nod that somehow manages to dismiss her entirely. As I turn to go, he speaks again.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Alice. Despite the circumstances."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

I glance back, expecting to see mockery in his expression, but there's none. Only that same intense focus, as if he's cataloging every detail of my face.

"Likewise, Mr. Grant."

The moment stretches between us, taut with something I can't name. Then Cynthia clears her throat pointedly, and I retreat to table four, feeling his eyes on my back with each step.

Only when I hear the bell above the door signal his departure do I exhale fully. I risk a final glance through the front window. He's standing on the sidewalk, speaking into his phone, his free hand in his pocket. As if sensing my gaze, he looks up. Our eyes meet through the glass.

He doesn't smile. Doesn't wave. Just holds my gaze for one beat, two, three—then turns and walks to a sleek black car waiting at the curb.

I press my hand to my chest, feeling my heart hammer against my ribs. The smell of coffee clings to my uniform, and the memory of his fingers around my wrist tingles like a promise.

Or a warning.

two

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Alexander

The numbers bluron my screen as I try to focus on the quarterly projections. Forty-eight hours since I saw her, and her face has burned itself into my mind like a brand. I've built an empire on concentration and ruthless focus, yet here I am, undone by a waitress with trembling hands and eyes that couldn't meet mine.

I push back from my desk, the leather chair whispering against the marble floor. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows of my penthouse office, Manhattan sprawls beneath me like a concrete playground. Mine to command. Mine to control. Sixty-five stories up, and I still can't escape her.

The skyline glitters with afternoon sunlight, buildings jutting like teeth from the city's jaw. From up here, people are specks, insignificant. But she wasn't insignificant. She was...everything.

I loosen my tie, feeling constricted despite the vast space around me. My fingers drum against the polished surface of my desk, Italian oak imported at a cost that could feed a family for years. The thought makes me pause. Her family. I wonder what they're like. If they're struggling. The way her uniform had been meticulously mended at the cuff suggested as much.

"For fuck's sake," I mutter to the empty room. I'm Alexander Grant. I don't wonder about waitresses.

But I do. I have been. For two days straight.

The coffee she'd served me sits bitter on my tongue even now, a memory so sharp it might as well be happening all over again. I'd stopped at the café on a whim—no, not a whim. Nothing I do is without purpose. I'd been avoiding the construction on Fifth, took a detour, and there it was. A cramped little place with foggy windows and a sign

promising "The Best Coffee in the City." A lie, surely, but I'd had fifteen minutes to kill before my next meeting.

The bell had jingled as I entered, and she'd looked up. Just a brief glance, but it stole my breath like I was some green boy and not a thirty-seven-year-old man who'd faced down boardrooms of sharks. Her hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail, wisps escaping to frame her face. Not beautiful in the conventional sense that adorns the women I usually take to my bed. No, she was something else. Something real.

When she spilled the coffee on me...the way she'd startled at her name, like no one ever used it, like it was a gift I'd given her rather than pinned to her chest for all to see—that was when I knew I was in trouble.

I shake myself back to the present, to the empire I've built that suddenly feels hollow. The coffee at that café had been terrible, but I'd drained the cup anyway, left a hundred-dollar bill on the table, and walked out without looking back. A test for myself. A failure.

Because here I am, thinking about Alice. Alice with her soft curves and gentle features. Alice with exhaustion shadowing hereyes. Alice, who'd looked at me like I was something to be afraid of.

She wasn't wrong.

I press the intercom button on my desk. "Rachel, come in here."

My assistant appears within seconds, tablet in hand, expression professionally neutral despite the late hour and the fact that I've kept her well past when she should have gone home. Her tailored suit and sharp bob are as immaculate as they were at seven this morning.

"Sir?"

"I need information on someone." I don't bother with pleasantries. Rachel doesn't expect them.

"Of course. Details?"

"Her name is Alice. She works at a café on 28th and Lexington. Waitress. Nineteen or early twenties, I'd guess." I recite the facts clinically, as if she's a potential acquisition and not a woman who's crawled under my skin.

Rachel nods, makes a note. Doesn't question why her billionaire boss is interested in a waitress. That's why I pay her obscenely well.

"I want everything. Where she lives. Family situation. Financial status. Relationship status." I pause, tapping my finger against the desk. "Debts. I especially want to know about any debts."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

"How quickly do you need this?"

"Yesterday." I turn my chair to face the darkening skyline, dismissing her. "And Rachel? Be discreet."

"Always, Mr. Grant."

The door closes with a soft click. I watch the city lights flicker on, one by one, like stars being born. Somewhere out there, Alice is existing. Working. Living. Does she have someone waiting for her at home? The thought makes my jaw clench.

I've never been a patient man. I take what I want, when I want it. But this—her—requires finesse. A different approach. I don't just want her body in my bed, though God knows I ache for that. I want...more. All of her. Every smile, every blush, every trembling exhale.

My phone buzzes with an email. The Miller deal, needing my attention. The world continues to spin, money continues to flow, and I should care. Instead, I find myself wondering what Alice is doing right now. If she's still at that café, serving coffee to men who don't deserve to breathe the same air as her. If she's thinking of me at all.

Probably not. I was just another customer to her. But not for long.

I turn back to my computer, force myself to read the email. The words register distantly, my brain processing them even as part of me remains fixated on Alice. It's this dual focus that's made me successful—the ability to multitask at a level that leaves others in the dust. Now I'll use it to plan my acquisition of a waitress while

simultaneously closing a multi-million-dollar deal.

By the time Rachel returns, night has fully descended, and the city below is a sea of artificial light. She places a folder on my desk—actual paper, because some things shouldn't exist in digital form—and stands back, waiting.

I flip it open, and there she is. Alice Clark. Twenty-four years old. Lives in a run-down apartment in Queens with her mother and younger brother. Mother chronically ill—expensive medications. Brother still in high school. Father deceased. Three jobs—the café, weekend shifts at a grocery store, and online transcription work at night. Crushing medical debt from her mother's condition. No boyfriend, no significant other of any kind.

Something dark and possessive unfurls inside me. She's perfect. Vulnerable. In need.

"The background checks were clean," Rachel says. "No criminal history, good credit despite the debt. She's..." She hesitates, choosing her words carefully. "She seems like a good person, sir."

I close the folder, meet Rachel's eyes. There's a question there, maybe even a hint of concern. I've never shown interest in someone like Alice before.

"Thank you, Rachel. You can go home now."

She nods, turns to leave, then pauses. "Will there be anything else regarding Ms. Clark?"

"Not tonight." I tap the folder. "But clear my morning tomorrow. I'll be out of the office."

"The Henderson meeting?—"

"Reschedule it."

Another nod, and she's gone. Professional to the core. I make a mental note to give her a bonus.

Alone again, I return to the window, but now I'm facing east, towards Queens. Towards Alice. In her tiny apartment, probably exhausted from her shift, maybe caring for her sick mother or helping her brother with homework. The weight of the world on her slender shoulders.

Not for much longer.

I feel a smile curve my lips, anticipation humming in my veins. Tomorrow, I'll see her again. Tomorrow, I'll begin the process of making her mine.

This time, when I leave that café, she'll be coming with me.

three

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Alexander

The café looks different in the morning light—smaller, shabbier than I remembered. I arrive ten minutes after opening, when the early rush has faded but before the lunch crowd descends. Through the window, I see her moving between tables, a coffeepot in hand. My pulse quickens like I'm some lovesick teenager, not a man who's crushed competitors and built empires with the same hands now wrapped around my car keys.

I straighten my tie—Armani, worth more than a month of her wages—and push through the door. The bell jingles, announcing me like a herald. Several patrons look

up, then back to their phones and newspapers. But not Alice. Alice freezes, coffeepot suspended mid-pour, her eyes finding mine across the room.

Recognition. Shock. Fear? Something else flickering behind those wide eyes.

I select the same table as before, the corner one with the view of the entire café. Power position. I don't smile as I take my seat, just maintain eye contact with her until she drops her gaze, cheeks flushing that delicate pink I've been picturing for days.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

She finishes pouring coffee for an elderly man who doesn't even thank her, then hesitates, coffeepot clutched to her chest like a shield. I watch her gather herself, shoulders squaring under her worn uniform before she approaches my table.

"Good morning, sir," she says, her voice soft but steady. Professional. Distant. "Just coffee again today?"

"Alexander," I correct her. "My name is Alexander Grant."

Her eyes widen further, and I know my name has registered. It would be difficult not to recognize it in this city—on buildings, in headlines, whispered with equal parts admiration and fear.

"Mr. Grant," she amends, swallowing visibly. "What can I get you?"

"Coffee to start. Then a conversation."

She blinks rapidly, her knuckles white around the coffeepot handle. "I—I'm working."

"When's your break?" I lean back, crossing one leg over the other, making it clear I'm prepared to wait.

"Not for another two hours, and it's only fifteen minutes." She glances nervously toward the counter where an older woman—the manager, based on the way she's glaring at our interaction—is watching.

"When do you finish your shift?"

"Three o'clock, but then I have to get home to—" She stops herself, and I fill in the blank. Her mother. Her brother. The responsibilities that weigh her down.

"I'll wait." I open the newspaper I brought as a prop, dismissing her. "Coffee, Alice."

She retreats, and I pretend to read financial news I already know while tracking her every movement through the café. The way she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. The slight limp in her step—aching feet from hours of standing. The genuine smile she offers a young mother struggling with a fussy toddler.

When she brings my coffee, her hand trembles just like before. Our fingers brush as I accept the mug, and a jolt passes between us—static from the dry air, perhaps, but it makes her gasp, her eyes darting to mine for a split second. In that moment, I see it. The attraction isn't one-sided. Interesting.

"Thank you," I say, letting my voice drop lower, watching her reaction. The quickened breath, the dilated pupils. Oh yes, very interesting indeed.

"Can I get you anything else?" Her voice wavers slightly.

"Just your time. Later."

She nods once, sharply, then hurries away to serve other customers. I sip the mediocre coffee and bide my time. The elderly man leaves. The mother with the toddler departs. New customers arrive. I order lunch I don't want—a bland sandwich that costs less than the bottled water in my office fridge—and leave another hundred-dollar tip that makes Alice's hands shake when she clears my plate.

The café gradually empties as the afternoon drags on. I answer emails on my phone,

take one critical call, and reschedule everything else. Rachel will be managing the fallout, earning every penny of that bonus. By two-thirty, only two other customers remain, and Alice keeps shooting nervous glances my way as she wipes down tables with methodical precision.

At five minutes to three, she disappears into the back room, returning in a worn jacket over jeans and a simple t-shirt, her hair released from its ponytail to fall in gentle waves around her face. She says something to the manager, who nods curtly, eyes still darting suspiciously toward me.

Alice approaches my table with visible reluctance, clutching her small purse like it might protect her.

"Mr. Grant," she begins, her voice low. "I don't know what you want from me, and I'm so sorry again about the spill, but I need to get home. My mother?—"

"Your mother needs her medication. The expensive one that insurance barely covers. And your brother has a calculus test tomorrow that you promised to help him study for."

She recoils like I've slapped her, her face draining of color. "How do you?—"

"Sit down, Alice." I gesture to the chair across from me. Not a request.

She sits, perched on the edge of the seat like a bird ready for flight. "Are you...stalking me?" A tremor in her voice, but there's steel underneath. Not just afraid—angry.

"I'm interested in you. I had you looked into." I keep my voice matter-of-fact. "It's what I do when something catches my attention."

"I'm not a 'something,'" she says, that steel showing through more clearly now. "I'm a person, with a private life that's none of your business."

"You're in debt," I continue, ignoring her protest. "Your mother's medical bills total just over \$147,000. Your apartment building is scheduled for renovation next month, which means your rent will increase by thirty percent. Your brother wants to apply to Columbia, but even with scholarships, it would be impossible on your current income."

She stares at me, lips parted in shock, fear battling with something else in her expression. "Why are you doing this?"

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

"Because I can help you." I lean forward, lowering my voice. "And because I want something from you in return."

A bitter laugh escapes her. "Of course you do. Let me guess—it involves a bedroom and me taking off my clothes."

"Yes," I admit, enjoying her startled expression at my honesty. "But that's only part of it. I want thirty days, Alice. Thirty days where you belong to me completely."

Her breath catches. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"It means you live in my home. Sleep in my bed. Accompany me where I ask. For one month." I hold her gaze, letting her see the desire I've been controlling since I first laid eyes on her. "In exchange, I'll pay off your mother's medical debt. All of it. I'll secure you an affordable apartment in a better neighborhood, near good medical facilities. And I'll establish a college fund for your brother that will cover any school he can get into."

She's shaking her head before I finish speaking. "That's—that's crazy. You don't even know me."

"I know enough." I reach across the table, not touching her, but letting my hand rest near hers. "I know you're drowning under responsibilities that shouldn't be yours alone. I know you're exhausted from working three jobs. I know you deserve a respite."

"A respite where I prostitute myself to you?" Her voice is sharp, but there's a waver

underneath.

"A respite where you're taken care of, for once." I correct her gently. "Where you're the priority, not everyone else."

Something flickers in her eyes—longing, quickly suppressed. "Why me? You could have anyone."

"Yes," I agree simply. "I could. But none of them are you."

"You don't know what makes me different. You've spoken to me twice."

"Some things don't require lengthy investigation." I allow myself a small smile. "When you know, you know."

She looks down at her hands, twisted together in her lap. "This is insane."

"It's a business proposition. One that benefits us both."

"It benefits you a whole lot more than me," she mutters, but her resistance is weakening. I can sense the calculations happening behind those expressive eyes—the weight of her family's needs against her own discomfort.

"Does it?" I challenge softly. "Financial freedom for your family. Security for your future. And in return, you spend thirty days being pampered, protected, and yes, pleased. Repeatedly." I let that word hang between us, watching the flush crawl up her neck. "Many would consider that a fair trade."

"I'm not 'many.'" She meets my eyes again, defiant despite her blush. "And what happens after thirty days?"

"That depends." I run my finger along the rim of my empty coffee mug. "On how we feel at the end."

She bites her lip, and I have to restrain myself from reaching across the table to free it from her teeth. To taste her. She's close to yielding, I can feel it, but something's holding her back.

"What if..." she starts, then stops. Tries again. "What if I'm not...experienced enough for someone like you?"

Ah. There it is. I feel a surge of possessive pleasure at the implication.

"Are you telling me you're a virgin, Alice?" My voice roughens despite my control.

Her blush deepens and she nods.

My hands grip the table. I'm suddenly fighting the urge to throw her across the table and deflower her right here and now. Mine. She'll only ever be mine.

"What if I say no?" she asks.

"Then I walk away," I lie. There's no way in hell I'm letting her get away, but I need her to believe the choice is hers. "Your life continues as it is. Your mother's debt remains. Your brother's future stays uncertain." I keep my tone neutral, stating facts rather than threats. "But I don't think you will say no."

"You seem very confident," she says, a hint of bitterness coloring her words.

"I am. Not because I underestimate your principles, but because I can see your practical nature. This is a solution to problems that have no other immediate answer."

She's quiet for a long moment, staring at her hands. "I need to think about it."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

Not the answer I wanted, but not a refusal either. Progress. I reach into my jacket and withdraw a card—not my standard business card, but a special one with my private number, the one less than ten people in the world possess.

"My number," I say, placing it on the table between us. "Call me with your decision. But don't take too long, Alice. This offer has an expiration date."

"How long?" She doesn't touch the card yet.

"Until tomorrow night. After that, I'll assume your answer is no."

She inhales sharply. "That's not much time."

"I'm not a patient man." I stand, buttoning my jacket. "And some decisions are better made quickly, before doubt and fear cloud your judgment."

She remains seated, looking up at me with those wide eyes. "And if I say yes? When would this...arrangement start?"

"Immediately." I allow myself to reach out then, just a brief touch, my fingertips grazing her cheek. Her skin is as soft as I'd imagined, and she doesn't pull away.

A visible shiver runs through her at my touch. Not fear—desire. It takes everything in me not to pull her from the chair and into my arms right there.

Instead, I step back, giving her space. "Think carefully, Alice. But remember—this opportunity won't come again."

I turn and walk toward the door, feeling her eyes on me. Just before exiting, I glance back. She's still sitting there, my card now in her hand, her expression a complex mixture of anxiety, calculation, and something that looks remarkably like hope.

I don't wait for her to notice my gaze. I push through the door and step into the afternoon sunlight, a smile tugging at my lips. She'll call. Her practical nature won't allow any other outcome.

And when she does, when she finally belongs to me, even if only for thirty days—I'll make sure she never wants to leave.

four

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Alice

The medical bills fan across our kitchen table like a losing hand at poker. I've been staring at them for so long the numbers have started to swim, merging into one massive, unpayable sum that pulses like a second heartbeat in my temples. Mom's breathing is labored from the next room, the familiar rattle in her chest a constant reminder of why I'm even considering the business card burning a hole in my pocket.

Alexander Grant.

Even his name feels heavy, weighted with power and the indecent proposal he whispered against my ear last week when I served him coffee at the diner.

Our apartment smells like soup and medicine, the two scents permanently embedded in the peeling wallpaper. The single window in our living room lets in anemic light that does nothing to brighten the stack of unpaid notices on the counter or the worn-

through patches on our secondhand furniture. I hear Toby's video game sounds leaking from the earbuds he refusesto remove lately. At fourteen, he's retreating into digital worlds where problems can be solved with cheat codes and extra lives. I don't blame him.

I pick up Mom's newest prescription—the one the insurance won't cover—and turn the bottle in my hands. One month's supply: \$427. Might as well be a million.

"Alice?" Mom calls from her bedroom, voice threadbare. "Did you eat something?"

"Yes," I lie, placing the bottle down with trembling fingers. I've been subsisting on diner leftovers and coffee for days now. "Do you need more water?"

No answer means she's drifted back to sleep. The silence lets me continue my mental calculations, the same ones I've been running obsessively since Alexander slid his business card into my apron pocket seven days ago.

The memory of his fingers brushing against my hip still makes my skin tighten.

Now, staring at the impossible mountain of bills, I understand what he meant by practical. It's not a choice between right and wrong anymore. It's a choice between drowning and grabbing the only lifeline in sight, even if it's attached to the devil himself.

The doorbell rings, making me flinch so hard I knock a glass of water onto the bills. As I'm frantically trying to blot them dry, the bell rings again, more insistently this time. Probably the landlord, coming for the rent we're already ten days late on.

When I swing the door open, it's not the landlord. It's worse.

"Your building's security is abysmal," Alexander Grant says, stepping past me into

our apartment without waiting for an invitation. He fills the tiny entryway like a storm cloud, darkening everything with his presence. His cologne—something expensive and subtle—displaces the medicinal smell, and suddenly our apartment feels even smaller, shabbier, more desperate.

"I haven't called you yet," I say, my heart hammering against my ribs like it's trying to escape.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

"No." His eyes drift to the wet bills on the table, taking in the prescription bottles, the past-due notices, the general decay of our lives. Something like satisfaction flickers across his face. "But you were about to."

I want to deny it, to throw him out, to preserve some illusion of choice. But my hands are still wet from trying to save the waterlogged bills, and the truth is waterlogged too—soggy and falling apart.

"You don't know that," I whisper, but there's no conviction in it.

He steps closer, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his body. He's not a large man in the conventional sense—he's lean, precise, contained—but his presence is massive, sucking all the oxygen from the room.

"Your mother needs the new medication. Your brother needs stability. You need to stop working yourself to death." He says it all without emotion, just listing facts. Then his voice drops lower. "And I need you, Alice."

The way he says my name—like he's tasting it—sends an electric current down my spine that has no business being there. This isn't about attraction. This is about survival.

"My boss at the diner gave me an advance," I try, one last desperate lie.

"Three hundred dollars. Two weeks ago." His mouth curves slightly. "It's already gone."

My knees nearly buckle. How does he know these things? What else does he know?

"What exactly would this arrangement involve?" I ask, hating how my voice trembles.

"Everything." The word hangs between us, weighted with implications. "You live with me. Your time is mine. Your mother gets the best medical care. Your brother gets a proper education. Your debts disappear."

"And in return?"

His eyes darken. "You belong to me."

I should feel disgusted. I should throw him out. Instead, I feel a shameful, treacherous relief washing through me—the relief of someone who's been treading water for too long finally glimpsing the shore.

"I need to think," I say, but even as the words leave my mouth, I know I've already decided. The medical bill on the table has decided for me.

"Of course." His tone makes it clear he knows it too. He reaches into his jacket pocket and withdraws a check. Places it on the countertop. I don't look at the amount, but from the casual way he sets it down, I know it's more money than I've ever seen at once.

"For immediate expenses," he says.

And then he just stands there and stares at me expectantly.

"I'm ready," I whisper. "I'm being practical."

The triumph in his eyes is almost unbearable. He doesn't smile—I'm not sure Alexander Grant knows how to smile properly—but satisfaction radiates from him like heat.

"Let's go," he says as he reaches for me.

"But my mother—my brother?—"

"Are being taken care of as we speak." He checks his watch. "A private nurse is arriving within the hour. Your brother will find enrollment papers for Brighton Academy on his bed when he returns from school tomorrow."

Brighton Academy. The exclusive private school across town. The one with the state-of-the-art computer lab that Toby has talked about with reverent awe.

"How did you know I'd say yes today?" I ask, stunned.

Alexander's eyes flick to the medical bill on the table. "I've been monitoring your situation closely. The timing was...optimal."

The clinical way he says it makes my blood run cold, but there's no time to dwell on the implications. He's already pulling out his phone, issuing quiet commands to someone on the other end. Words like "transfer of funds" and "immediate occupancy" float through the air.

I move mechanically to my bedroom, pulling a small suitcase from under my bed. What do you pack when you're selling yourself? Clean underwear seems like a start. I add a few t-shirts, my one decent pair of jeans, the dress I wear to job interviews. Everything I own looks pathetic and childish as I fold it into the case.

I'm reaching for my toiletries when I feel him behind me. Alexander stands in my

bedroom doorway, watching me with those penetrating eyes. His gaze catches on the meager pile of clothes in my suitcase, and a slight frown crosses his face.

"Leave it," he says.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

I freeze, clutching a worn sweater. "What?"

"Don't pack anything. I'll provide everything you need."

There's something about the way he says it—like he's erasing me, like my few shabby possessions offend him—that finally breaks through my daze of desperate relief.

"I need my own things," I insist, continuing to pack.

His hand covers mine, stilling my movements. His skin is warm, dry, the nails perfectly manicured against my bitten-down ones. "Alice," he says, my name a gentle warning. "Part of our arrangement is that I take care of you. Completely."

"But—"

"Nothing from this life comes with us." His voice softens marginally. "Fresh start. Clean slate."

What he means is: no reminders of who I was before I belonged to him. No evidence of my independence, my separate existence. The rational part of me recognizes this as a classic control tactic. The desperate part of me—the part watching my mother waste away, watching my brother's future disappear—doesn't care.

"I need my photo of us," I say, reaching for the silver frame on my nightstand. "My mom, Toby, and me. From before she got sick."

Something passes across his face—compassion.

"One photo," he agrees. "But only because you'll see them regularly. I'm not separating you from your family, Alice. I'm improving their circumstances. And yours."

The photo frame feels heavy in my hands. It's the only thing I'll take from my old life into whatever awaits me in Alexander Grant's world. I should feel grief, or fear, or at minimum, anxiety. Instead, all I feel is a numb sense of inevitability, like I've been moving toward this moment from the first day he walked into the diner.

"Ready?" Alexander asks, though it's not really a question.

I glance around my small bedroom one last time—the faded posters, the books from the college classes I never got to finish, the dent in the wall from when Toby threw a baseball indoors despite my warnings. Twenty-three years of life, about to be left behind.

"Yes," I lie, clutching the photo to my chest.

Alexander's hand settles at the small of my back, five points of heat through my thin t-shirt, guiding me toward the door. Before we leave, he pauses at the kitchen counter and tears up the check he'd left earlier.

"You won't need this now," he says, letting the pieces fall like confetti. "Everything will be handled directly."

Outside, a sleek black car idles at the curb, drawing curious stares from the neighbors. Alexander opens the door for me, and I slide inside, enveloped immediately by the smell of leather and his subtle cologne. As he walks around to the driver's side, I press my face against the cool window, looking up at the apartment windows where my mother sleeps, unaware that I've just traded myself for her care.

Alexander settles beside me, his presence immediately filling the car's interior. He doesn't start the engine right away. Instead, he turns to study my face, his dark eyes cataloging every detail as if he's memorizing me—or maybe assessing his purchase.

"Second thoughts?" he asks, though his tone suggests he already knows the answer.

I clutch the photo frame tighter. "Would it matter if I did?"

His mouth curves in that not-quite smile. "You made the practical choice, Alice." He reaches out, brushes a strand of hair from my face with proprietary gentleness. "And in time, you'll find it was the only choice."

As the car pulls away from the curb, I don't look back at the apartment building. I keep my eyes fixed ahead, just like Alexander does. The future rushes toward us, sleek and dark and inevitable as the car eating up the distance between my old life and whatever waits at the end of this ride.

I've made the practical choice.

God help me.

five

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Alexander

I watch Alice's eyes widen as we pull through the gates of my estate, her small hands twisting in her lap. The same hands that served me coffee, hands I've imagined on my body countless times. She looks so fucking breakable sitting there in my Bentley, swallowed by leather seats worth more than she makes in a year. Every instinct

screams at me to pull her into my lap, to taste her mouth, to make her mine in every way possible. But I grip the door handle instead, my knuckles whitening. I've waited this long. I can wait a little longer.

"This is...all yours?" she whispers as the mansion comes into view, three stories of limestone and glass perched on the edge of the cliffside, the ocean stretching endlessly behind it.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

"Yes." One word. That's all I trust myself to say right now. Something about the way the morning light hits her face makes my chest ache. I've never wanted anyone the way I want her. It's a physical pain, a constant throb that's settled in my bones since the first time I saw her nervously carrying a tray at that rundown café.

The car stops at the front entrance. My driver opens Alice's door before I can come around, and I stifle the irrational surge of jealousy when she smiles politely at him. Mine. The word pulses through me with each heartbeat. Soon, she'll understand that. Soon.

"I don't belong here," she murmurs as we step into the foyer, her worn sneakers silent against the marble floor. The chandelier above us catches in her hair, turning the strands to liquid gold.

"You belong exactly where I want you to be," I say, and immediately regret the harshness in my voice when she flinches. Softer, I add, "And I want you to be comfortable. Let me show you around."

She follows me through the house, a step behind, like she's afraid to get too close. Smart girl. If she comes any closer, I might forget all my careful plans. Her wide eyes take in the artwork, the vaulted ceilings, the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the ocean. I've never looked at my home through someone else's eyes before. Never cared to. But now I find myself watching her reactions, hungry for every small gasp, every widened glance.

"This place must have a hundred rooms," she says, her voice barely audible.

"Twenty-two," I correct her, fighting a smile. "And only one matters today."

Her face pales. Fuck. Wrong thing to say.

"The spa," I clarify quickly. "I've arranged for you to be pampered today. Starting with a massage."

Relief visibly washes over her. "Mr. Grant?—"

"Alexander," I interrupt. "Please." I need my first name in her mouth. Need to hear how it sounds shaped by her lips.

"Alexander," she corrects, and my cock stirs at the sound. "You don't have to do all this."

I step closer, unable to help myself. She smells like vanilla and coffee and something uniquely her. "I want you to relax. To understand what your life could be like."

With me. Forever. But I don't say that part out loud. Not yet.

I lead her to the spa wing of the house, where Martine, my most trusted massage therapist, is waiting. I'd been explicit on the phone. Female only. No male staff anywhere near Alice today. No way in hell I'm letting another man put his hands on her—not even a professional masseuse.

"This is Alice," I tell Martine. "Take exceptional care of her."

Alice looks between us, her cheeks flushing. "I've never had a professional massage before."

The confession sends a dart of possessiveness through me. Another first I get to give

her. I've made a list of them in my head. All the experiences I want to be the first—the only—man to share with her.

"I'll leave you in Martine's capable hands," I say, forcing myself to step back. "I'll see you in ninety minutes."

I walk out before I can change my mind. Before I can stay and watch. The thought of anyone touching her—even Martine—makes my jaw clench. I retreat to my office, trying to focus on work, but my mind keeps drifting to the woman currently being rubbed down two floors below. What sounds is she making? Are her eyes closed? Is she thinking of me?

Ninety-seven minutes later—not that I'm counting—there's a knock at my office door.

"Mr. Grant? The stylist has arrived."

I straighten papers I haven't actually been reading. "Send her up. And bring Ms. Clark to the dressing room."

The dressing room is actually an entire suite, a converted bedroom with three walls of closets, a raised platform surrounded by mirrors, and enough space to host a small fashion show. I've had it prepared with racks of clothing in Alice's size—information I obtained weeks ago, planning for this day.

When she walks in, her hair is damp at the edges, her skin flushed from the massage. She looks softer somehow, the tension drained from her shoulders. Something fierce and tender unfurls in my chest at the sight.

"Feel better?" I ask, my voice rougher than intended.

She nods, offering a small smile that hits me like a physical blow. "Thank you. That was...incredible."

"Good." I gesture to the clothes. "This is Vivienne. She's brought some options for you to try."

Alice's eyes widen as they take in the racks of designer clothing. "I can't accept all this."

"You can. You will." I step closer, unable to help myself. "Please, Alice. Let me do this for you."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

She looks up at me, and there's confusion in her eyes, but something else too. Curiosity, maybe. Or the first flickering of desire. I'd give everything I own to know what she's thinking.

"Why?" she asks simply.

Because I've watched you work yourself to exhaustion. Because I've seen the worry in your eyes when you check your phone between tables, no doubt looking for messages about your sick mother. Because your hands shake sometimes when you're tired but you never stop moving. Because I need to possess you so completely that the thought of another day without you makes it hard to breathe.

"Because I want to," is all I say.

Vivienne clears her throat, reminding us of her presence. "Shall we begin, Ms. Clark?"

For the next two hours, I sit in a chair in the corner, pretending to work on my tablet while Alice tries on outfit after outfit. Each one is more devastating than the last. A simple white sundress that makes her look like an angel. Tailored trousers that hug her ass in ways that make my mouth water. Silk blouses that drape over her breasts, hinting at the softness beneath.

I've built empires. Crushed competitors. Multiplied my inheritance a hundred times over. And yet nothing has required more self-control than sitting here, watching Alice transform before my eyes, without touching her.

When Vivienne holds up a sapphire blue dress—short, with thin straps and a neckline that dips just low enough to be tantalizing without being vulgar—I know immediately it's the one for tonight.

"Try that one," I say, the first direction I've given during the session.

Alice takes it, disappearing behind the dressing screen. When she emerges, I have to adjust myself beneath my tablet. The dress clings to every curve, highlighting the delicate slope of her shoulders, the fullness of her breasts, the narrowness of her waist. She looks uncertain, smoothing her hands down the fabric.

"Is it too much?" she asks.

"It's perfect," I manage to say, though my throat feels tight. "Wear it to dinner."

After Vivienne leaves, taking with her measurements for additional pieces to be delivered tomorrow, I show Alice to her room. Or rather, the room she thinks will be hers.

"You can rest before dinner," I tell her. "Or explore the grounds if you prefer. I'll have someone come for you at seven."

She hesitates at the doorway, looking smaller somehow despite the expensive new clothes hanging in the closet behind her. "Thank you, Alexander. For all of this."

I reach out, unable to stop myself, and brush a strand of hair from her face. Her breath catches, and I swear I can feel her pulse jump beneath my fingertips.

I force myself to walk away, to give her space. To stick to the plan.

By seven, the balcony is ready. Candles flicker on the table, the ocean stretches out

beneath us, and Chef Marco has prepared his signature seafood risotto—a dish worth the outrageous sum I pay him annually. I've changed into a simple black shirt, open at the collar, and dark trousers. Casual but expensive. I want her to see the man beneath the billionaire facade tonight.

When she steps onto the balcony, I nearly drop the wine glass in my hand. The blue dress is even more stunning in the twilight, her hair loose around her shoulders, her lips tinted a soft pink. She's wearing the diamond studs Vivienne included with the outfit—small, tasteful, but unmistakably valuable.

"Alice." Her name falls from my lips like a prayer.

She tucks her hair behind her ear, a nervous gesture I've seen a hundred times at the café. "Is this okay? For dinner?"

"You're beautiful." The words come out raw, honest in a way I hadn't intended. I clear my throat. "Please, sit."

Dinner progresses with a strange, dreamlike quality. The sun sets over the ocean, painting the sky in shades of orange and purple. Alice tells me about her mother's illness, the mounting medical bills, her brother's dreams of college. I already know all of it—I've had her thoroughly investigated—but I listen as if hearing it for the first time, captivated by the fierce love in her voice when she speaks of her family.

"You'd do anything for them," I say. It's not a question.

She nods, taking a sip of wine. "They're all I have."

"And what about you, Alice? What do you want for yourself?"

The question seems to surprise her. She blinks, setting down her glass. "I don't think

anyone's asked me that in a long time."

Something hot and protective surges through me. "Tell me."

"I used to want to be a teacher," she says after a moment. "Elementary school. I love children. But then Mom got sick, and..." She trails off, shrugging. "Dreams don't pay bills."

"They can," I say quietly. "With the right support."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

She looks at me then, really looks at me, and I can see her turning over the implications in her mind.

I lean forward, setting aside my plate. "I want to take care of you, Alice. And your family. Your mother's medical bills, your brother's education. A comfortable place for all of you to live. A chance for you to pursue teaching, if that's still what you want."

Her eyes narrow slightly. "And what do you want in return?"

Everything. All of you. Forever. "Your company," I say instead. "For now."

"My company," she repeats slowly. "You mean..."

"I mean I want you here, with me. Not as a servant or an employee. Not as a prostitute, if that's what you're thinking." I see the relief in her eyes and continue. "I want to know you, Alice. I want to give you the life you deserve."

"Why me?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper. "You could have anyone."

I don't know how to explain the obsession that's gripped me since the first time I saw her. How her gentle smile cracked something open inside me that I thought had died years ago. How the sight of her working so hard, caring so deeply for a family that depends on her, awakened a need to protect and possess that I didn't know I was capable of feeling.

"Because it has to be you," is all I can say.

The night air grows cooler. I offer her my jacket, and she accepts, drowning in the expensive fabric. We talk more—about her childhood, about the café, about safe, neutral topics that don't require me to reveal too much of the intensity of my feelings for her. Not yet. I don't want to frighten her away when I've only just gotten her here.

When her eyelids start to droop, I suggest we turn in for the night. Her nervousness returns as we walk through the house, up the grand staircase to the master wing.

"My room was back that way," she says, gesturing toward the guest wing where I showed her earlier.

"No," I say simply, opening the double doors to my bedroom. "It's here."

She freezes in the doorway, her eyes taking in the massive bed dominating the center of the room, the wall of windows overlooking the moonlit ocean, the door leading to a bathroom bigger than her entire apartment.

"I don't—" she begins, but I cut her off.

"I won't touch you, Alice. Not until you want me to." The words taste like ash in my mouth, but I force them out. "But I need you to sleep here. With me."

She looks torn between relief and confusion. "Why?"

I step closer, close enough to smell her perfume—something expensive Vivienne must have spritzed on her—mingling with her natural scent. "Because I need to hold you. Because I've dreamed of having you in my bed since that first moment you spilled coffee on me, and even if all we do is sleep, it will still be more than I had yesterday."

Color floods her cheeks. "I don't understand you."

"You will," I promise.

In the end, she agrees, disappearing into the bathroom with a silk nightgown I've provided. When she emerges, hair brushed, face scrubbed clean of makeup, looking young and vulnerable in the pale blue silk, it takes every ounce of control I possess not to cross the room and take her mouth with mine.

Instead, I take my turn in the bathroom, changing into pajama pants, forcing myself to take deep breaths. I usually sleep in the nude, but I'm sure that would scare the shit out of a young virgin, so I'll cover my goods for tonight. What good it will do.

When I return, Alice perched on the edge of the bed, looking small against the expanse of the mattress. My cock instantly jumps.

I slide under the covers on the opposite side, giving her space. "Come here, Alice."

Hesitantly, she lies down, leaving a careful distance between us. Not good enough. I reach for her, gently but firmly pulling her against my chest, her back to my front. She stiffens for a moment, then gradually relaxes as I simply hold her, one arm draped over her waist.

"See?" I murmur against her hair. "Just sleep."

She doesn't respond, but after a few minutes, her breathing deepens, her body growing heavier against mine. I lie awake, listening to her breathe, feeling the softness of her pressed against me. My cock is painfully hard, but I ignore it, focusing instead on the miracle of having her here, in my bed, in my arms.

Fuck, it feels amazing. She feels amazing.

This is just the beginning. Tomorrow, we'll talk more about arrangements, about

expectations. I'll make her understand that this isn't temporary. That I have no intention of ever letting her go. That from the moment I saw her, she was mine, whether she knew it or not.

But for tonight, this is enough. Her warmth against me, her scent filling my lungs, her life temporarily entrusted to my care. I press my lips to the crown of her head, so lightly she doesn't stir.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

"Mine," I whisper into the darkness, a promise to us both. "Forever."

six

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Alice

I tug at the hem of the borrowed designer gown, wondering for the hundredth time tonight if I'm fooling anyone. The ivory silk feels like a costume on my skin, the price tag still burned into my memory—more than three months of my rent. Alexander's hand rests at the small of my back, warm and steady, guiding me through the glittering crowd. His touch shouldn't feel this possessive already, but it does, and the worst part is how much I like it.

"Stop fidgeting," he murmurs close to my ear, his breath stirring the wisps of hair his stylist artfully arranged hours ago. "You look stunning."

I swallow hard, fighting the urge to look down at my feet. My entire body feels like it's vibrating with nerves, a tuning fork struck against the marble floor of this ballroom.

"Everyone can tell I don't belong here," I whisper back.

His fingers press more firmly against my spine. "You belong with me. That's all that matters."

The Grand Horizon Hotel ballroom has been transformed into something from a fairy tale—if fairy tales featured hedge fund managers and tech moguls in bespoke suits. Crystal chandeliers throw diamonds of light across the ceiling. Ice sculptures melt slowly on tables laden with food I can't pronounce. Women dripping in jewels eye me with thinly veiled curiosity.

"Mr. Grant!" A woman with a permanent smile approaches us, clipboard in hand. "So glad you could make it. Your usual table is ready."

"Thank you, Melissa." His voice is smooth as expensive scotch. He doesn't introduce me, and the woman doesn't ask.

As we navigate through the crowd, heads turn. I feel the weight of their stares—some curious, some dismissive, some outright hostile. The women, especially, track our progress with narrowed eyes. I wonder how many of them have been in my place before. How many have walked these floors on Alexander's arm, only to disappear when he lost interest.

The thought makes my stomach clench.

"Champagne?" He plucks two flutes from a passing waiter's tray.

"I probably shouldn't." My voice sounds small even to my own ears. "I need to keep a clear head."

One corner of his mouth lifts. "This isn't a test, Alice. It's a date."

The word 'date' sends a flush of heat across my skin. I take the champagne to give my hands something to do.

Alexander steers me toward a table near the front of the room, populated by men in

dark suits and women in jewel-toned dresses. They all look up when we approach, conversation pausing.

"Alexander, you made it." A silver-haired man rises. "We were just placing bets on whether you'd show."

"James." Alexander shakes his hand. "You should know better than to bet against me."

"Indeed." James's eyes slide to me, curiosity evident. "And who might this lovely young lady be?"

"Alice Reynolds." Alexander's hand returns to the small of my back, fingers splayed possessively. "My date for the evening."

The simple declaration sends ripples around the table. I see raised eyebrows, exchanged glances.

He pulls out my chair, his fingers brushing the nape of my neck as I sit. The touch is brief but deliberate, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake.

I sip my champagne to hide my discomfort. The bubbles tickle my nose, but the alcohol does nothing to calm my nerves. I'm an imposter here, playing dress-up in clothes that cost more than my car.

Throughout dinner, Alexander keeps me close. His attention never wavers, even when engaged in conversation with others. He touches me constantly—a hand on mine, fingers brushing my arm, leaning in to whisper observations that make me laugh despite myself. Each touch is casual but deliberate, as if he's marking territory.

"Have you seen the auction items?" he asks during dessert. "There's a vacation

package I think you'd enjoy."

"I don't think my budget extends to charity auctions," I say quietly.

His eyes darken. "Did I ask about your budget?"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

My cheeks heat. "Alexander, you can't?—"

"I can." His voice leaves no room for argument. "I want to."

After dinner, when the dancing begins, he leads me to the floor without asking. His hand at my waist pulls me closer than is strictly proper, but not close enough to cause a scene. Just enough to make his intentions clear—to me and everyone watching.

"You're quiet tonight," he observes, guiding me through steps I barely remember from my one semester of ballroom dance in college.

"I'm...processing." It's the most honest answer I can give.

"Processing what?"

"This." I gesture vaguely with my head. "All of it. You, bringing me here. The way you're treating me."

"How am I treating you?"

I look up at him then, meeting those dark eyes that seem to miss nothing. "Like you want everyone to think I'm yours."

His hand tightens at my waist. "I do."

The music ends before I can form a response. Alexander leads me off the dance floor, his touch still firm, still possessive.

"I need to speak with some people," he says. "Will you be alright for a few minutes?"

I nod, secretly grateful for the chance to breathe without his intoxicating presence clouding my judgment.

"Don't go far." It sounds like an order. It probably is.

I find my way to a quiet corner near one of the ice sculptures—a swan with wings outstretched, already beginning to lose definition as it melts. I watch the crowd, feeling slightly less out of place now that I've survived dinner and dancing without embarrassing myself or Alexander.

"You must be a special one."

I turn to find a man beside me, younger than Alexander but with the same air of wealth and privilege. His smile is practiced, predatory.

"I'm sorry?"

"To catch Alexander Grant's attention." He extends a hand. "David Mercer. Alex and I go way back."

I shake his hand briefly. "Alice Reynolds."

"So what's your secret, Alice Reynolds?" He moves closer, invading my space. "What did you do to get our Alexander to break his no-dates rule?"

"I wasn't aware there was a rule." My voice is cooler than I feel.

"Oh yes." David's eyes travel down my body and back up, taking inventory.

I shift uncomfortably.

David laughs. His fingers brush my bare arm. "You know, if you ever want to explore other options, my company is always looking for talent."

The innuendo is unmistakable. I step back, but David follows.

"I'm quite happy where I am."

"I could make you happier." His hand settles on my waist where Alexander's had been during our dance. "I have a suite upstairs. We could discuss...opportunities."

"She's not interested."

Alexander's voice cuts through the conversation like a blade. I hadn't seen him approach, but suddenly he's there, his face a mask of controlled fury.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

David doesn't remove his hand from my waist. "Alexander! Just getting acquainted with your lovely companion."

"Take your hand off her." Each word is precise, deadly quiet.

Something in Alexander's expression must convince David, because he drops his hand and steps back. "No harm done. Just friendly conversation."

"There's nothing friendly about you propositioning my date." Alexander moves to stand beside me, his body radiating tension.

David holds up his hands in mock surrender. "Misunderstanding. Won't happen again." He looks at me with a smirk. "Lovely meeting you, Alice."

As David walks away, Alexander turns to me, his eyes burning with an emotion I can't quite name.

"Did he touch you?" he demands.

"Just my arm. And my waist." I feel oddly breathless. "It was nothing."

"It wasn't nothing." His jaw clenches. "He knows better."

Before I can respond, Alexander's hand cups the back of my neck, and then his mouth is on mine. The kiss is hard, possessive, claiming. His other hand finds my waist, pulling me against him until I feel the solid wall of his chest. His lips are demanding, coaxing mine open, his tongue sweeping in to taste me.

I should push him away. We're in public, at his company's charity event, surrounded by his colleagues and competitors. But my hands fist in his lapels instead, and I kiss him back with a hunger that shocks me.

When he finally breaks the kiss, I'm gasping for air. My lips feel swollen, sensitive. His eyes are nearly black with desire.

"Now they know," he says, his voice rough.

"Know what?" I manage to ask.

He leans in, his lips brushing the shell of my ear as he whispers, "That you're mine. And you're very, very lucky we're in public right now, or I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off you."

A shiver runs through me at his words, at the promise they contain. My body responds with a liquid heat that pools low in my belly.

"Alexander..." I don't know what I want to say. What I can say here, now.

His thumb traces my lower lip. "I want to take you home, Alice."

It's not a question, but I answer anyway.

"Yes."

seven

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Alice

The limo door shuts with a soft thunk that seals us into our own private world. The partition between us and the driver is already up. Alexander's scent—expensive cologne with undertones of whiskey and something uniquely him—fills the confined space. My heart hammers against my ribs like it's trying to break free. His eyes haven't left mine since we slid into the backseat, dark and hungry in the dim lighting. I feel more naked under his gaze now than I would if he'd actually undressed me.

"You've been driving me crazy all night," he says, his voice a low rumble that I feel more than hear.

I wet my lips nervously. "I haven't done anything."

"That's not true." His hand finds mine in the darkness, our fingers threading together. "You existed. You smiled. You blushed when I touched you."

The car pulls away from the curb, the gentle motion pushing me slightly closer to him. Neither of us moves away.

"That kiss..." I start, not sure how to finish the thought.

"Was overdue." Alexander's free hand rises to my face, his thumb tracing the outline of my bottom lip. "I've wanted to do that since the first day I saw you."

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:11 am

My breath catches.

I stare at him, and his eyes smolder down at me.

Oh god, he's going to kiss me again.

When his mouth meets mine, it's different from the kiss at the gala. That was a statement, a claiming. This is an exploration. His lips are soft but insistent, moving over mine with deliberate pressure. I respond hesitantly at first, then with growing confidence as his approval rumbles through his chest.

His tongue traces the seam of my lips, seeking entry. I part for him, letting him taste me more deeply. The sensation shoots straight through me, a bolt of liquid heat that pools between my legs. I make a small, needy sound that I've never heard from myself before.

Alexander's hand slides from my face to my neck, then lower, skimming over my collarbone. He doesn't yet touch anywhere truly intimate, but the promise is there in the heat of his palm through the thin silk of my gown.

"Come here," he murmurs against my lips, guiding me with gentle pressure until I'm straddling his lap, my knees on either side of his thighs. The position hikes my dress up to mid-thigh.

I should feel exposed, vulnerable. Instead, I feel powerful as his eyes darken further, drinking in the sight of me above him.

"Beautiful," he breathes, his hands settling on my hips.

And then I feel it—the hard ridge of his arousal pressing against the thin barrier of my underwear. My eyes widen, and I instinctively shift, trying to adjust to the unfamiliar sensation.

Alexander hisses through his teeth. "Don't move like that unless you mean it."

"I don't know what I'm doing," I confess, heat flooding my cheeks.

His hands tighten on my hips, stilling my movements. "What do you mean?"

I drop my gaze, suddenly unable to meet his eyes. "I haven't...I'm not...experienced."

His finger tilts my chin up, forcing me to look at him. "I already know you're a virgin Alice, but just how inexperienced are you?"

The question feels like a test. I swallow hard. "Very."

Something flashes in his eyes—surprise, followed quickly by something darker, more primal. "Have you ever been touched? By anyone?"

I shake my head silently.

"Kissed? Before tonight?"

"Yes, but...nothing serious. Nothing like this."

A flash of satisfaction crosses his face. "Good girl," he nods. "Glad you recognize that this is serious. I am serious about you."

I start to protest, but his hand slides from my hip to my lower back, pressing me more firmly against him. "So what you're telling me is that no one has ever made you come."

The crude word in his refined mouth sends a shameful thrill through me. I shake my head again.

"Not even yourself?"

My face burns hotter. "Alexander..."

"Answer me." His voice is gentle but brooks no argument.

"No," I whisper. "Not...not really."

The smile that spreads across his face is possessive, triumphant. "I'm going to be your first. In every way that matters."

His mouth claims mine again, harder this time, hungrier. His hands roam my body with more intent—skimming my sides, tracing the curve of my waist, brushing the undersides of my breasts through my dress. Each touch leaves fire in its wake. I'm trembling, not from fear but from want.

"I need to touch you," he breathes against my mouth. "Let me touch you, Alice."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

I nod, beyond words now.

His hand slides up my thigh, beneath the hiked-up hem of my dress. His fingers find the edge of my underwear, tracing along the seam where it meets my skin. The touch is both too much and not enough.

"You're shaking," he observes, his voice strained with restraint. "We can stop."

"Don't stop," I manage. "Please."

Something like a growl rumbles in his chest. His fingers hook into the fabric and pull it aside. When he touches me directly for the first time, we both groan.

"You're soaked," he says, his voice threaded with wonder and satisfaction. "All this for me?"

I can't answer, can barely breathe as his fingers explore me with exquisite gentleness. He finds places I didn't know could feel so good, circling and stroking with devastating precision. All the while, his eyes hold mine, watching every reaction, learning what makes my breath hitch and my hips jerk forward seeking more.

"That's it," he encourages when I unconsciously grind against his hand. "Show me what you need."

I couldn't articulate it if I tried, but my body knows. It moves against his skilled fingers, seeking something just out of reach. The pressure builds inside me, unfamiliar but undeniable.

"Alexander," I gasp, clutching at his shoulders.

"I've got you." His free hand tangles in my hair, guiding my face to the crook of his neck. "Let go for me, Alice. Let me feel you come."

His fingers move faster, more deliberately, finding a rhythm that has me panting against his skin. The sensation builds and builds until I'm certain I'll shatter from it. And then his thumb presses just right, and I do shatter—breaking apart with a cry that his shoulder muffles.

Wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me as he works me through it, his touch gentling but not stopping until the very last aftershock subsides. I'm boneless against him, dazed by what just happened, by what he just gave me.

"Perfect," he murmurs into my hair. "So fucking perfect."

I become aware that he's still hard beneath me, maybe even more so than before. His hips shift restlessly, seeking friction. Without thinking, I rock against him, pressing the damp center of my underwear against the rigid line of his erection.

Alexander's hands fly to my hips, not stopping me but guiding, setting a rhythm that makes his breath come faster. His forehead presses against mine, our panting breaths mingling in the scant space between us.

"Keep going," he urges, his voice strained. "Just like that."

I follow his lead, grinding against him in slow, deliberate circles. His hands tighten painfully on my hips, but the discomfort only heightens my awareness of his pleasure, of the power I have over this powerful man.

"Alice," he groans, the sound raw and desperate. "Fuck, Alice, I'm going to?—"

His words cut off as his body goes rigid beneath me. His hips jerk upward once, twice, three times, and then he holds me tight against him, grinding me down onto his pulsing hardness. I feel the wet heat spreading between us, soaking through the fabric of his expensive suit pants.

For a long moment, we stay like that—foreheads pressed together, bodies locked in an intimate embrace, breathing each other's air. His hands gentler now, stroke up and down my back in soothing motions.

"I made a mess," he finally says, a hint of rueful amusement in his voice.

"I don't mind." And I don't. There's something thrilling about having undone him so completely.

He kisses me softly, reverently, so unlike the heated kisses of moments ago. "You're extraordinary, Alice Reynolds."

I smile against his lips. "For someone who's never done this before?"

"For anyone." His hand cups my cheek. "And I'm going to enjoy showing you everything you've been missing."

The promise in his words sends a renewed flicker of heat through my body, even as satisfaction still hums in my veins. Outside the tinted windows, the city slides by unnoticed. Inside our private bubble, the only thing that matters is the man beneath me and the promise of what comes next.

Suddenly, belonging to Alexander Grant for thirty days doesn't seem so bad.

eight

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

Alexander

The quarterly reports blur before my eyes for the third time in twenty minutes. It's no use. My mind refuses to focus on anything but her.

Alice.

Three doors down the hallway, curled up in my library with her delicate fingers trailing over book spines as if they're precious artifacts. Three days she's been in my home, sleeping under my roof, and I'm already a man possessed. A man obsessed. A man on the verge of breaking his own carefully constructed rules.

I toss my pen onto the desk and lean back in my chair, the leather creaking beneath my weight. The office suddenly feels too small, too confining, despite the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city I've spent years conquering. None of those conquests matter now. The only territory I'm interested in claiming is five-foot-four with soft curves and eyes that widen whenever I enter a room.

The memory of her face when I showed her my library this morning still burns bright. Her mouth had dropped open, those pink lips forming a perfect O that I'd been desperate to taste.

"All of these...are yours?" she'd whispered, her voice catching.

"They're yours now too, Alice. For as long as you're here."

She'd spun in a slow circle, nearly trembling with excitement. Not over jewels or

designer clothes—over books. Used books, many of them, collected over years of travel. The wonder in her eyes made me feel like I'd given her the moon instead of merely access to some paper and ink.

"Go ahead," I'd told her, forcing myself to step back despite wanting to press her against the shelves. "Take your time. I have some work to catch up on."

A necessary lie. I'd finished my actual work yesterday, clearing my schedule in anticipation of her arrival. But I needed distance. Space to breathe air that wasn't perfumed with her scent—that clean, simple fragrance that clings to her skin despite the expensive toiletries I've stocked her bathroom with.

My phone buzzes. I glance at the screen.

Meeting in 30. Acquisition details finalized?

Jason, my CFO, expecting me to care about buying another company when my entire world has narrowed to the slender waitress who's been surviving on tips and determination.

Three days. Seventy-two hours of torture and bliss.

I haven't touched her. Not really. A hand at the small of her back when guiding her through doorways. Fingers brushing when passing coffee mugs. Each contact sending electrical currents through my body that leave me hard and aching.

My office phone rings, yanking me from my thoughts. I ignore it. What I can't ignore is the hollow feeling spreading through my chest—the growing certainty that this arrangement isn't enough. Having her in my home but not putting my cock inside her is its own special kind of hell.

I've built an empire on patience and strategic timing. On knowing when to strike and when to wait. But Alice has demolished my self-control without even trying.

The decision crystallizes suddenly, sharp and clear like everything else becomes when I set my mind to it. A change of scenery. A place where there are no distractions, no work obligations. Just Alice and me and the inevitable conclusion to this tension coiling between us.

I grab my phone and dial.

"Prepare the jet," I tell my pilot. "Departure for Isla Alexander in three hours. Just myself and one guest. And inform the island staff we'll be arriving tonight."

The island. My private sanctuary off the Caribbean coast, named with the particular brand of arrogance that comes from having purchased your own island before turning thirty. It's remote, secluded, and obscenely beautiful. The perfect setting to break down the remaining barriers between us.

I find her exactly where I left her, curled in a window seat in the library. The afternoon light catches in her dark hair, creating hints of chestnut and mahogany. Her feet are tucked beneath her, shoes discarded on the floor. A forgotten cup of tea sits cooling on the table beside her. She's so absorbed in her book she doesn't hear me enter.

For a moment, I simply watch her. The slight furrow between her brows as she concentrates. The way her lips move silently over certain passages. The gentle rise and fall of her chest beneath the simple t-shirt she's wearing.

Mine. The word pulses through me with each heartbeat. Not yet, but soon.

She feels my presence eventually, glancing up with a startled little gasp that sends

heat straight to my groin.

"Alexander! I—I'm sorry. I lost track of time." She starts to unfold herself, the book sliding from her lap.

"Don't move," I say, softer than my usual tone. "You look perfect right there."

The blush I've come to crave spreads across her cheeks. "I've read half your collection already, I think. I've never seen so many first editions."

I cross the room and sit on the edge of the window seat, close enough that her scent envelops me but not so close that she'll feel trapped. "I have a proposition for you, Alice."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

Wariness immediately shadows her expression. Of course it does. Women like Alice—women who've had to fight for every scrap of security—recognize propositions as potential threats.

"Nothing improper," I assure her, though the lie stings. Everything I want to do to her is gloriously improper. "I need to check on one of my properties this weekend. A small island."

Her eyes widen. "An island? Like...a resort?"

"Like a private residence. My private residence."

She sets the book aside carefully. "Just us?"

The question hangs between us, heavy with implication. I nod, watching her throat work as she swallows.

Three hours later, we're boarding my private jet. Alice clutches her hastily packed overnight bag like it's a shield. I'd offered to have my valet prepare everything she might need, but she'd insisted on bringing her own things. Her independence is as adorable as it is frustrating.

Her eyes dart around the jet's luxurious interior, taking in the cream leather seating and polished wood details. "I've never been on a plane before," she admits quietly.

Something tender uncurls in my chest. "Never?"

She shakes her head. "Never had the money. Or the reason, really."

I take her bag, handing it to the flight attendant. "Then I'm honored to be your first."

The double meaning isn't lost on her. Those expressive eyes darken slightly before she looks away.

The engines start with a low rumble. Alice jumps, her hand instinctively reaching for mine. I capture it, entwining our fingers.

"It's perfectly normal," I tell her. "Come sit."

I guide her to one of the large seats and buckle her in myself, deliberately letting my fingers brush against her hip. Her breath catches, but she doesn't pull away.

The plane begins to taxi. Alice's grip on my hand tightens painfully.

"Distract me," she pleads. "Tell me about this island."

I settle into the seat beside her. "It's small. Private. About twenty acres with a main house and a few smaller structures. White sand beaches, crystal clear water, and complete seclusion."

"Sounds expensive," she murmurs.

"It is." No point pretending otherwise. "But that's not why I love it. I love the silence. The distance from demands and expectations. No one to impress. No one watching."

The plane accelerates down the runway. Alice squeezes her eyes shut, her nails digging into my palm. On impulse, I unbuckle my seatbelt and slide into her seat, lifting her onto my lap in one smooth motion.

"Alexander!" she gasps, eyes flying open.

"Shh," I murmur against her ear. "Let me help you through this."

The plane lifts off the ground. Alice whimpers, burying her face against my neck. I wrap my arms around her, one hand stroking her back in slow, soothing circles. She fits against me perfectly, her softness molding to my harder angles.

"Focus on me," I tell her, my voice dropping lower. "Nothing else exists right now. Just you and me."

We level out. The seat belt sign dings off. Alice's breathing gradually steadies, but she makes no move to leave my lap. I don't remind her.

"Better?" I ask, my lips brushing her temple.

She nods, then shifts slightly—and freezes when she feels my hardness beneath her. A small "oh" escapes her lips.

I should apologize. Set her aside. Maintain the pretense that my interest in her is merely philanthropic.

Instead, I tighten my arms around her. "This is what you do to me, Alice. Just by existing in my space."

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

Her pulse flutters visibly at the base of her throat. "I don't understand why. I'm nobody."

"You're everything," I correct her, one hand sliding up to cup her cheek. "And I've been losing my mind having you so close without being able to touch you."

Those wide eyes search mine, looking for deception or mockery. Finding none.

"You can touch me," she whispers, the words so soft I almost miss them.

Permission granted. The thin thread of my control snaps.

My mouth claims hers, no gentleness in the first contact. Just hunger and heat and the culmination of three weeks of wanting. She makes a startled sound against my lips before melting into the kiss, her inexperience evident but her enthusiasm making up for it.

I guide her, slowing down, teaching without words. My tongue traces the seam of her lips until they part for me. She tastes like the tea she was drinking earlier and something sweeter that's uniquely Alice.

My hands can't stay still. They roam her back, her sides, her hips—everywhere except where I most want to touch her. Not yet. Not until she's ready.

Her fingers clutch at my shoulders, uncertain but eager. When we finally break apart, her pupils have dilated, the color in her cheeks deepened.

"Fuck, Alice, if you knew all the things I wanted to do to you...it's unholy," I admit, my voice rougher than usual.

She blinks, dazed. "Should I be scared?"

"Never," I vow as I press my lips to her neck, feeling her pulse race beneath my mouth. "I would never hurt you."

Her head falls back, giving me better access. "Is this why you offered me the bargain?"

I nip at her earlobe, drawing a gasp from her. "I offered you help because you needed it. This—" I roll my hips slightly, letting her feel how hard I am "—is a separate issue entirely."

"Oh," she breathes, instinctively shifting against me.

The friction sends sparks shooting up my spine. Control. I need to maintain some semblance of control.

"Tell me to stop," I murmur against her throat, "and I will."

Her answer is to tentatively rock her hips, creating delicious pressure where I'm straining against my pants. I hiss through my teeth, my hands moving to grip her waist.

"Careful, Alice. There's a limit to my restraint."

She looks at me then, something new and bold in her expression. "What if I don't want restraint?"

The challenge in those words destroys what little composure I have left. I capture her mouth again, one hand sliding beneath her shirt to find bare skin. She shivers against me, making small, needy sounds that drive me wild.

I want to strip her bare. Lay her across the seats and taste every inch of her. But her first time won't be on a plane, no matter how luxurious. That will wait for the island, for a proper bed where I can take my time unwrapping her like the gift she is.

For now, though...

My hand slides down, finding the waistband of her simple jeans. I pause, waiting for permission or refusal.

"Yes," she whispers against my mouth. "Please."

That breathless plea shatters the last of my hesitation. I unbutton her jeans with practiced ease, sliding my hand beneath fabric to find her already damp for me. The discovery pulls a groan from deep in my chest.

"So responsive," I murmur, fingers exploring gently. "So perfect."

She buries her face against my shoulder, embarrassment warring with desire. I find the bundle of nerves that will make her forget everything but pleasure and circle it lightly.

"Oh!" Her whole body jolts.

"Look at me," I command softly.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

She raises her head, eyes heavy-lidded and dazed.

"I want to watch you," I tell her, increasing the pressure of my touch. "I want to see your face when you come for me."

Her eyes widen.

I work her slowly, remembering what makes her breath catch and her thighs tremble. When I slide a finger inside her, she bites her lip to hold back a moan. So tight. So perfect. So mine.

"Don't hold back," I urge her, adding a second finger while my thumb continues its relentless circles. "Let me hear you."

Her body tightens around my fingers. She's close already, her inexperience making her hypersensitive to my touch. I curl my fingers, finding the spot that makes her gasp.

"That's it," I encourage, watching pleasure transform her features. "Let go for me, Alice."

She comes with a broken cry, her body clenching around my fingers as waves of pleasure wash through her. I work her through it, prolonging her release until she collapses against me, trembling and spent.

I withdraw my hand slowly, bringing my fingers to my lips for a taste that makes me groan with wanting. She watches with wide eyes, her chest still heaving.

"When we land," I tell her, my voice thick with promise, "that was just the beginning."

She swallows hard, but there's no fear in her expression. Only wonder and a dawning hunger that matches my own.

"Thank you," she whispers, the formality so sweetly incongruous with what just happened that I can't help but laugh.

"Believe me, Alice," I say, brushing my lips across hers, "the pleasure was mine."

And as the plane carries us toward my island—toward privacy and possibilities and the inevitable conclusion of this dance we've been performing—I know with absolute certainty that she is no longer just an obsession.

She is a necessity. One I have no intention of ever letting go.

nine

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Alice

I stand at the edge of Alexander's infinity pool, watching the line where water meets sky blur into an endless blue. His estate clings to the cliffside like it was carved from the rock itself, all glass and steel and obscene wealth. The ocean breeze lifts my hair, sending goosebumps racing across my skin. Three days ago, I was serving coffee in a dingy downtown café. Now I'm here, with him, and I can't quite remember how to breathe normally anymore.

"Cold?" Alexander's voice slides over me from behind, deep and smooth like aged

whiskey.

I don't turn around. I'm afraid my face will betray too much. "A little."

His footsteps are nearly silent on the travertine tile. Then his warmth is at my back, not touching but close enough that I feel the heat radiating from his body. Alexander Grant exists in his own gravitational field, and I'm just debris being pulled into orbit.

"I can have someone bring you a sweater." His breath stirs the hair at my nape.

"No, I like it." The tiny discomfort grounds me, reminds me this isn't a dream. "It's beautiful here."

"Yes." But he's not looking at the view when I glance up.

The intensity in his dark eyes makes my stomach drop like I've missed a step on a staircase. Three days of being whisked from my ordinary life into his extraordinary one, and I still haven't built up an immunity to the way he looks at me—like I'm a puzzle he's determined to solve, a treasure he's unearthed.

"Come inside. I'll show you the rest of the house."

It's not really a request. Alexander doesn't make requests. He issues invitations that feel like gentle commands. Yet there's something different about him here. His shoulders appear less rigid beneath his simple white linen shirt. The perpetual crease between his brows has smoothed.

I follow him into what could only be described as a cathedral to luxury. Soaring ceilings. Walls of glass facing the Pacific. Art that probably costs more than every place I've ever lived combined. But it's not cold or sterile like I expected. There are books with cracked spines on shelves, a throw blanket rumpled on a couch, a half-

empty coffee mug on a side table.

"You actually live here," I say, surprised. "I mean, it's not just for show."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

A corner of his mouth lifts. "Did you think I slept hanging upside down in a vault somewhere?"

The joke—Alexander Grant making a joke—startles a laugh out of me. "Maybe. Or plugged into a charging station."

His smile widens, transforming his face from intimidating to devastating. "I'm not actually an android, Alice, despite what the business press might suggest."

"Could've fooled me. I barely know you."

"Then you haven't been paying attention." He moves closer, his eyes darkening. "All there is to know about me that matters is I've been hungry since the moment I met you."

My heartbeat stutters, and heat floods my cheeks. Every time I think I've adjusted to the way he speaks to me—direct, possessive, intense—he says something that knocks me sideways.

"There's a private beach below," he says, changing the subject as if he hasn't just set my insides on fire. "Would you like to see it?"

I nod, not trusting my voice.

We descend a winding path carved into the cliff face, each turn revealing another stunning ocean vista. Alexander walks slightly ahead, but his hand finds the small of my back at particularly steep sections, steadying me. Each touch, though casual,

sends electricity skittering across my skin.

The beach is a perfect crescent of white sand, sheltered by rocky outcroppings on either side. No neighboring estates visible. No onlookers. Just us.

"You own this?" I ask, though the answer is obvious.

"Privacy is worth every penny." He's watching me again, gauging my reaction to his wealth.

I've learned that Alexander's money is both shield and weapon. It's how he keeps people at arm's length while simultaneously drawing them close. It's the test he sets for everyone he meets—can they see past the billions to the man?

"Want to swim?" he asks, already unbuttoning his shirt.

Panic flutters in my chest. "I didn't bring a swimsuit."

His eyes never leave mine as he shrugs off his shirt, revealing the sculpted planes of his chest and abdomen. For a man in his thirties, he's?—

"Underwear works just as well." His fingers move to his belt. "Or nothing at all."

My mouth goes dry. "Underwear is fine."

I turn away as he undresses further, fumbling with the buttons of my borrowed sundress. Everything I'm wearing was purchased by Alexander—delivered in neat packages with designer names I'd previously only seen in magazines.

The dress pools at my feet, leaving me in just my bra and panties. Plain cotton, nothing fancy. I'd been too embarrassed to wear the lacy scraps of silk and satin he'd

provided.

"Alice." His voice has dropped an octave. "Look at me."

I turn, arms instinctively crossing over my belly, eyes downcast.

"No." A single word, but with unmistakable command. "Don't hide from me."

I force my arms to my sides, feeling exposed, vulnerable. When I finally raise my eyes to his, the naked hunger there steals my breath.

Alexander stands in just his boxer briefs, his body all hard angles and defined muscle. The kind of physique that comes from deliberate discipline, not vanity. A body built for purpose, not show. Yet it's his eyes that hold me captive—dark, fathomless, fixed on me with an intensity that should frighten me but instead makes me feel powerful.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, and somehow I believe he means it.

He extends his hand. "Come."

The water is cool against my heated skin as we wade in together. I expect Alexander to maintain his usual controlled demeanor, but he surprises me, diving beneath the surface and emerging with droplets streaming down his face, hair slicked back, looking younger and more carefree than I've ever seen him.

"It's cold!" I gasp as a small wave hits my midriff.

"Best way to deal with cold water?" He grins wickedly. "Full immersion."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

Before I can protest, his hands are at my waist, lifting me as if I weigh nothing. I shriek, clutching his shoulders.

"Don't you dare?—"

He dares. We plunge together beneath the surface, his arms keeping me securely against him. The shock of cold water steals my breath, but when we surface, I'm laughing.

"You're terrible!" I splash him, delighting in his playful growl.

"Terrible? I'm a goddamn delight." He pulls me closer, our wet bodies sliding against each other. "Admit it."

The teasing light in his eyes makes him look almost boyish, despite the silver threading his temples. This is a side of Alexander I've never seen—playful, unguarded. It makes my heart squeeze painfully in my chest.

"Fine. A delight." I roll my eyes, trying to maintain some semblance of immunity to his charm.

His smile turns predatory. "Say it like you mean it."

Before I can respond, he's kissing me, salt water mingling on our lips. What starts as playful quickly deepens into something hungry. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, claiming me with a thoroughness that makes my knees weak. Good thing the water helps keep me afloat, because I'm melting against him.

His hands slide down to cup my ass, pulling me against the hard length of him. Even through two layers of wet fabric, I feel his arousal pressing insistently against my stomach. A whimper escapes me as heat pools between my thighs.

"Alexander," I breathe against his mouth.

"I love how you say my name." He trails kisses down my neck, finding the sensitive spot below my ear that makes me shiver. "Like a prayer and a curse all at once."

We're moving through the water, I realize dimly. Alexander walking us back toward shore, his mouth never leaving my skin. When my feet touch sand, he lifts me again, carrying me to where the waves just barely reach us. He lays me down at the water's edge, the warm sand cradling my back while cool waves lap at my feet.

Alexander braces himself above me, water dripping from his hair onto my heated skin. His eyes devour me, taking in the way my wet underwear clings to every curve. I should feel self-conscious—I've spent my life hiding my body, ashamed of the softness where I thought there should be angles—but the naked appreciation in his gaze makes me feel beautiful. Desired.

"I want to taste you," he says, voice rough with need. "Here. With the ocean watching."

My breath catches. This isn't the first time he's touched me. Over the past three days, he's made me come with his fingers, teaching my body pleasure I never knew existed. But his mouth—that would be new.

"Someone might see," I whisper, though I know it's a lie. His privacy is absolute.

"Let them." He kisses the valley between my breasts. "Let them see how I worship you."

His words send a bolt of electricity straight to my core. This powerful man, who commands boardrooms and empires, wants to worship me. Plain, ordinary me.

"Yes," I breathe, permission and plea combined.

His smile is triumph and tenderness mixed. He slides down my body, pressing open-mouthed kisses to my stomach, my hipbones. His fingers hook into my underwear, dragging the wet cotton down my legs and tossing it aside.

I resist the urge to cover myself. Alexander won't allow it anyway. He likes to look, to see every reaction he draws from me.

"Spread your legs for me, Alice." His voice is gentle but brooks no refusal.

I comply, trembling not from cold but from anticipation. Alexander settles between my thighs, his broad shoulders preventing me from closing them even if I wanted to. He looks up the length of my body, holding my gaze as he lowers his mouth to my center.

The first touch of his tongue draws a strangled cry from my throat. He hums approval, the vibration adding another layer of sensation as he explores me with devastating precision. This isn't the fumbling experimentation of boys my own age. This is a man who knows exactly what he's doing, who takes pride in his expertise.

"So responsive," he murmurs against my flesh. "So perfect."

My fingers dig into the sand as pleasure builds, coiling tighter with each stroke of his clever tongue. When he slides two fingers inside me, curving them to find the spot that makes me see stars, I arch off the sand.

"Alexander, please?—"

"Please what?" His voice is darkly amused. "Please stop? Please more?"

"Don't stop," I gasp. "Please don't stop."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

He redoubles his efforts, sucking gently on my clit while his fingers work their magic inside me. The dual assault sends me hurtling toward the edge, my thighs tensing around his head.

"That's it," he coaxes. "Come for me, Alice. Let me feel you."

Something about the command in his voice, the permission it grants, breaks the last of my restraint. Pleasure detonates through me, radiating outward from where his mouth is still working against me. I cry out his name, over and over, as waves of ecstasy crash through me, each one stronger than the last.

Alexander works me through it, gentling his touch as I become too sensitive, but not stopping entirely until the last tremor subsides. Only then does he lift his head, his mouth glistening with evidence of my pleasure. The sight should embarrass me, but it's the most erotic thing I've ever seen.

He crawls up my body, capturing my mouth in a kiss that tastes of salt and sex—of me. His hardness presses insistently against my thigh, a reminder of his unsatisfied state.

I reach between us, my hand finding the elastic of his boxer briefs. "Let me?—"

He catches my wrist, pressing a kiss to my palm. "Not yet."

Confusion furrows my brow. This is the third time he's brought me to orgasm, and each time he's refused reciprocation. "Why?"

Something complicated passes across his face—hunger tempered by restraint. "Because when I finally take you, I want it to be in a bed. Not on sand that will get in unfortunate places."

Heat flushes my cheeks at his bluntness. "But you could let me touch you."

"I could." His thumb traces my lower lip. "But I'm exercising what little self-control I have left where you're concerned."

I don't understand this man. I thought this is essentially what he paid for. Most guys would have already pressured me for sex, would have taken what I offered without hesitation. But Alexander—billionaire, powerbroker, man who always gets what he wants—is holding back.

He shifts to lie beside me on the sand, pulling me against his chest. The hard length of him still presses against me, but he makes no move to seek relief.

"Why?" I ask again, needing to understand.

His chest rises and falls beneath my cheek. "Because you matter, Alice. Because this isn't just physical for me."

The words hit me with the force of a breaking wave. This isn't just physical. For a man like Alexander Grant to say that to someone like me—it defies comprehension. And completely changes everything I thought I knew about this bargain he made with me.

And yet, as we lie there with the waves lapping at our feet and the sun warming our skin, I find myself believing him. More dangerously, I find myself feeling the same way. This isn't just physical for me either. It's becoming something frightening in its intensity.

I'm falling for him. For his contradictions and complexities. For the commanding CEO and the playful man who just tossed me into the ocean. For the lover who brings me pleasure without demanding his own.

And that terrifies me.

Because Alexander Grant is a force of nature. A man who reshapes the world to suit his vision. What happens to people who get caught in that reshaping? Do they maintain their own identity, or do they simply become extensions of his will?

I've spent twenty-two years becoming myself. Building Alice Clark from nothing but determination and grit.

Could all of that withstand the gravitational pull of Alexander Grant?

"What are you thinking?" His voice rumbles beneath my ear.

I consider lying, but something tells me he'd know. "I'm thinking that you scare me."

His body tenses slightly. "Because of what I want from you?"

"No." I trace patterns on his chest, gathering courage. "Because of what I'm starting to feel for you."

His hand finds my chin, tilting my face up to meet his gaze. What I see there steals my breath—naked vulnerability beneath his usual mask of control.

"You think I'm not equally terrified?" The confession sounds torn from him. "I've built an empire without once risking my heart. Then you looked at me with those wide eyes after you spilled coffee on me—which was just as well because it tasted like battery acid."

A startled laugh escapes me. "Your coffee standards are impossibly high."

"My standards for everything are impossibly high." His expression softens. "You exceed all of them."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

The words wrap around my heart, squeezing until it's hard to breathe. This is the danger—these moments when he makes me feel like the center of his universe. They make it so easy to forget that our worlds are fundamentally different. That the power imbalance between us is vast and uncrossable.

That this is all over with in thirty days, and this is only day four.

"We should head back." He presses a kiss to my forehead. "The sun's getting strong, and you're starting to pink up."

He rises in one fluid motion, extending his hand to help me up. I'm suddenly conscious of my nakedness, but he's already retrieving my underwear, shaking off the sand before handing it to me. The fact that he can transition so smoothly from intimate confession to practical consideration only confirms what I already know—Alexander Grant is dangerously competent in all things.

As we gather our scattered clothes and begin the climb back to the house, I feel something shifting inside me. The woman who follows him up the winding path is not quite the same one who descended it an hour ago.

I'm falling for him, yes. But I'm also recognizing the danger in that fall.

The question isn't whether Alexander Grant will catch me.

The question is whether there will be anything left of me when he does.

. . .

Alexander

The firelight flickers across her skin like it's afraid to touch her—which is fucking ridiculous because I can't stop touching her. Alice perches on the edge of my leather couch, her worn uniform replaced with the silk dress I insisted she wear, and she looks like a prayer I never knew I needed to say.

My fingers itch to trace the curve of her neck, but I force myself to wait. Tonight isn't about taking. Not yet.

"Are you warm enough?" I ask, though the fire roars high enough to heat half the mansion.

Alice nods, her fingers twisting in the expensive fabric pooling at her thighs. "It's beautiful here," she says, her voice barely rising above the crackling flames. "I've never seen anything like it."

Of course she hasn't. Just days ago, she was pouring coffee in a grimy downtown café, bags under her eyes and worry lines etched between her brows. Now she's here, on my private island, because I couldn't stand another day without claiming her.

"I wanted you to see it," I tell her, pouring us both another glass of wine. Mine remains untouched. I need clarity tonight. "All of this means nothing if I can't share it."

Her eyes dart to mine.

"Mr. Grant?—"

I don't know why, but hearing her revert to my surname again causes panic to rise within me. She's been calling me Alexander all the time, so the lapse worries me that I'm losing her already.

"Alexander," I correct, the word sharp. "When you're wearing my clothes, sitting in my home, you use my first name."

A blush stains her cheeks, and my cock stirs in response. God, her innocence is like a drug.

"Alexander," she tries again, the syllables awkward on her tongue. "I appreciate everything—the plane, the clothes, helping with my mother's medical bills—but...but..." she trails off.

I move closer, the leather sofa creaking beneath my weight. There's a significant gap between us still, but I feel her heat like a brand. At thirty-eight, I've learned patience. At twenty-two, she embodies impatience, even in her stillness.

"Because you're the first real thing I've encountered in decades." I take a sip of wine, finally. "Do you know what it's like to grow up in a mausoleum? Everything preserved, perfect, untouchable?"

Alice shakes her head. "We lived in a two-bedroom apartment. Nothing fancy enough to preserve."

"My father built this empire from nothing. Made his first million before thirty. But empires require caretakers, not children." The memory surfaces like a bruise being pressed. "When I was eight, I broke a vase playing inside. Eighteenth-century Chinese. Worth more than most people's homes."

She leans forward slightly, her eyes no longer darting away from mine. I've hooked

her.

"What happened?"

"My father didn't yell. That would have been easier." My voice remains level, but something inside me trembles. I never tell this story. "He sat me down and explained, in excruciating detail, how my carelessness had destroyed something irreplaceable. Then he had the housekeeper collect every toy from my room. Said if I couldn't respect valuable things, I didn't deserve to possess anything of my own."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

Alice's eyes widen. "For how long?"

"Six months." I smile without humor. "I was allowed books. Educational toys only, under supervision. My mother disagreed, but she never contradicted him to his face."

"That's horrible," she whispers, and the genuine outrage in her voice does something to my chest—creates a warm spot in a place I'd thought permanently frozen.

"It was effective. I never broke anything again."

Her hand reaches toward mine, then falters. I capture it before she can retreat, her skin soft against my calloused palm. Another contradiction—I've never worked manual labor, but I've spent hours in my private gym, punishing my body into submission just as my father taught me to punish my mind.

"Is that why you have all this?" she asks, gesturing with her free hand to the cavernous room with its museum-quality art and carefully curated furnishings.

I laugh, the sound breaking against the vaulted ceiling. "Perceptive. I built all this because I could, because it's what a Grant does. Then I realized I'd created my own fucking mausoleum."

Her fingers tighten around mine. It's instinctive comfort, not calculated. That's the thing about Alice—everything she does comes from a pure, uncontaminated place. It's why I noticed her in the first place, this waitress with tired eyes and a real smile, not the plastic ones I've collected from models and socialites over the years.

"Until I saw you," I continue, my thumb tracing circles on her palm. "Watching you move through that cramped space, smiling even when customers were assholes. Real smiles that reached your eyes."

"I wasn't smiling for you," she protests weakly.

"Exactly." My grip tightens. "Not for me, not for my money, not for my name. Just because that's who you are. Do you have any idea how rare that is in my world?"

The fire pops and hisses, casting dancing shadows across her face. She's close enough now that I can smell the subtle floral scent of the soap I had stocked in her bathroom, mingled with something uniquely her. Something I want to taste.

"I'm not special," she insists. "I'm just trying to take care of my family."

"Your mother's medical bills are paid." I state this as a fact, not a reminder of my generosity. "Your brother's college fund is secured. You don't need to worry about them anymore."

Her eyes flash. "I didn't ask you to do that."

"No. You would never ask." I shift closer, eliminating more of the distance between us. "That's what makes you different."

We're breathing the same air now. Her pupils dilate, her lips part. She's scared, but not of me. Of what's happening between us—this gravitational pull that defies explanation.

"I don't fit here," she whispers. "In this world."

"You're the only thing that belongs here." My hand slides up her arm, feeling

goosebumps rise in its wake. "Everything else is just...decoration."

When I kiss her, it's gentle at first—a contrast to the violence of my wanting. Her lips are soft, hesitant, then suddenly hungry. She makes a small sound in the back of her throat that shoots straight to my groin. I cup her face, angling her head to deepen the kiss, and she melts against me.

I trace her lower lip with my tongue, and she opens for me like she's been waiting for this her whole life. Maybe she has. Maybe we both have. Her inexperience is evident in the tentative way she responds, but there's nothing tentative about the way her body arches toward mine.

"Alexander," she breathes when we break apart, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

"Tell me you want this," I demand, my voice rough. "I need to hear it. Not that you're just submitting because you think you have to. Because of our bargain. Fuck our bargain. I need to know that you really want this, Alice."

Her eyes meet mine, clouded with desire but clear with decision. She hesitates for a moment before she nods. "I want this. I want you."

That's all I need to hear.. I gather her against me, lifting her onto my lap. The silk dress rides up her thighs, and I palm the soft skin revealed there. She shivers, pressing closer. Through the expensive fabric, I can feel the heat of her, the perfect weight of her body against my hardness.

I run my hand reverently over her.

"I'll take care of you," I promise, my hands roaming her body with more restraint than I knew I possessed. "I'll make it good for you."

I kiss her again, deeper, hungrier, swallowing her little gasps and moans. My hands find the zipper of her dress, slowly lowering it, giving her time to stop me. She doesn't. Instead, her fingers fumble with the buttons of my shirt, her touch burning through me.

The dress slips from her shoulders, revealing simple cotton underwear beneath—another jarring reminder of the worlds between us. I groan at the sight of her, soft curves and pale skin glowing in the firelight.

"Perfect," I murmur against her throat, trailing kisses down to her collarbone.
"Fucking perfect."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

Her head falls back, exposing more of her neck to my mouth. I suck gently at her pulse point, feeling it race under my tongue. My hands cup her breasts through the thin cotton, thumbs brushing over hardened nipples. She jerks against me, a small cry escaping her lips.

"Sensitive," I observe, repeating the motion and watching her squirm. "I'm going to learn every inch of you, Alice. Every spot that makes you gasp, every touch that makes you beg."

"Please," she whispers, though I'm not sure she knows what she's asking for.

I stand, lifting her with me. She weighs nothing in my arms. I could carry her upstairs to one of the many bedrooms. That's been the plan. To take her in a bed, but dammit, I can't wait that long. Instead, I lay her on the plush rug before the fireplace, the flames casting golden light across her skin.

My shirt joins her dress on the floor, then my pants. Her eyes widen at the sight of me, equal parts fear and fascination in her expression. I lower myself beside her, not on top of her—not yet. My hand strokes down her body, from sternum to navel, then lower, over the cotton barrier between us.

"I'm going to touch you now," I tell her, my voice barely recognizable. "Tell me if you want me to stop."

She shakes her head. "Don't stop."

I slip my hand beneath the elastic, finding her wet and ready. The knowledge that she

wants this—wants me—as badly as I want her nearly undoes me. I circle my finger against her, watching her face as pleasure overtakes her. Her hips rise to meet my touch, instinctively seeking more.

"That's it," I encourage, increasing the pressure slightly. "Let yourself feel it."

Her hands clutch at my shoulders, nails digging into skin. The slight pain grounds me, reminds me to go slow. This isn't about my pleasure—not yet. I work her with my fingers until she's panting, trembling on the edge of release.

"Alexander," she gasps.

"Let go," I tell her. "I've got you."

She comes with a cry, her body arching beautifully, inner muscles clenching around my fingers. I watch her face, memorizing every detail of her surrender. This is mine now. She is mine.

Before she can fully recover, I remove the last barriers between us, positioning myself between her thighs. The head of my cock nudges at her entrance, and her eyes fly open, locking with mine.

I'm dripping precum, my cock kissing her entrance, salivating at the thought of finally being inside her.

"This will hurt," I warn her, stroking her face. "But then it will be good. I promise."

She nods, trust in her eyes that I've done nothing to earn except be honest about my wanting. I push forward slowly, feeling the resistance of her body, the incredible tightness. She winces, and I pause, dropping kisses across her face, her neck, her breasts.

"Breathe," I instruct, and when she does, I thrust forward in one smooth motion, breaking through the barrier.

She cries out, tears springing to her eyes. I hold perfectly still, though every instinct screams at me to move, to claim, to possess.

"The worst is over," I murmur, kissing away a tear that escapes down her temple. "Stay with me."

Gradually, the pain in her expression eases. I begin to move, shallow thrusts that allow her body to adjust to mine. The feeling is indescribable—tight, hot, perfect. Better than anything I've ever felt. When her hips start to move with mine, I know she's ready for more.

I increase the pace, driving deeper, watching her face transform as pain gives way completely to pleasure. Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me closer, deeper. I'm lost in her, drowning in sensation, and I never want to surface.

"You're mine," I growl against her ear, unable to contain the possessive words bubbling up from some primitive part of my brain. "Do you understand? Mine."

"Yes," she gasps, her body tightening around me as another orgasm builds. "Yes, Alexander."

The sound of my name on her lips as she comes undoes me completely. I follow her over the edge, emptying myself inside her with a roar that sounds torn from my soul. In that moment of complete vulnerability, of total connection, something shifts in me—a tectonic movement that rearranges everything I thought I knew about myself.

Afterward, I gather her against me, unwilling to break our physical connection. She's dazed, trembling slightly, her body bearing the marks of my passion. I trace them

with gentle fingers, a strange mixture of pride and tenderness filling me.

"I'm obsessed with you," I confess, the words emerging raw and unfiltered. "You're perfect. Everything about you is perfect."

She blinks up at me, uncertainty creeping back into her expression. "Alexander, I don't know what this means. What happens now?"

"Now?" I laugh softly, kissing her forehead, her cheeks, her swollen lips. "Now I take care of you. Forever. You never have to worry about money again. You never have to wait tables or wear out your shoes walking to work or count pennies for groceries."

"But—"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

"No buts." My tone hardens slightly. "You're mine now, Alice. I worship you. I'll give you everything you need, everything you want. But you can't leave me. Ever."

Fear flickers in her eyes, but beneath it is something else—a recognition of the truth between us, this inexplicable bond that formed the moment I saw her across that dingy café.

"I should be scared of you," she whispers.

"But you're not." I stroke her hair back from her face. "Because you feel it too. This isn't normal. This isn't something that happens to people like me, people with my resources, my control. I've never needed anyone. But I need you."

She doesn't respond with words. Instead, she curls closer, her head finding the hollow of my shoulder as if it was made for her. In the glow of the fire, with her breathing evening out into sleep, I make plans. Plans for us, for the empire I'll rebuild with her at its center. She doesn't realize it yet, but she's just become the most powerful woman in my world—the only person who can touch me, the only one who can see past the wealth and name to the damaged man beneath.

I watch the firelight play across her peaceful face and feel a strange sensation in my chest—a warmth that has nothing to do with the flames. I've acquired companies, destroyed competitors, built skyscrapers bearing my name. But this—this slip of a girl from nowhere—is my greatest possession. And unlike that vase from my childhood, I will never let her break.

. . .

Alice

Alexander's mansion swallows me whole. I trail my fingers along marble countertops and silk drapes that probably cost more than everything I've ever owned combined. The luxury should feel suffocating, but instead, it's starting to feel like a cocoon—dangerous in its comfort. A week here and I'm already forgetting what my real life feels like. Seven days of Alexander's hands, his mouth, his commands that somehow make me feel more like myself than I ever have before.

"Come here," he says from across the kitchen, a simple command that sends heat spilling down my spine.

I obey without thinking, crossing the endless expanse of Italian tile to where he leans against the counter, suit jacket discarded, sleeves rolled to expose powerful forearms marked with a light dusting of dark hair. His eyes track my movement—they always track my movement, as if I might disappear if he blinks.

"Are you getting used to it?" Alexander asks, pulling me between his spread legs, his hands settling on my hips with that casual possessiveness that makes my breath catch.

"To what?"

"To being mine." His thumb traces the sliver of exposed skin between my borrowed shirt and jeans. "To all of this."

The truth burns my throat. "Yes. That's what scares me."

A smile curves his mouth, smug and knowing. "Good girl for admitting it." His hand slides up my back, cups my neck. "Don't be scared. I'll take care of everything."

My phone vibrates in my pocket before I can respond, the harsh buzz an intrusion in this perfect bubble we've created. I never get phone calls, so I almost ignore it, but something—intuition maybe—makes me pull away just enough to check the screen.

Unknown number.

"Hello?" I answer, Alexander's eyes never leaving my face.

"Is this Alice Montgomery?" A clinical, unfamiliar voice.

"Yes..."

"I'm calling from Mercy General Hospital. Your mother was admitted an hour ago."

The world tilts sideways. "What? Why? What happened?"

Alexander straightens, his body tensing in response to the change in my voice.

"She collapsed. The initial assessment suggests severe dehydration and possible pneumonia. She's currently stable but asking for you."

Mom. My stomach drops through the floor. I haven't called her in days, too busy playing princess in a tower with a man I barely know.

"I'll be right there," I manage, ending the call with trembling fingers.

"What is it?" Alexander's voice has gone sharp, all traces of playfulness evaporated.

"My mom's in the hospital. I need to go. Now." I'm already backing away from him, mentally calculating how long it will take to get an Uber, how much it will cost to get across town. Money I don't have because I've been living in this fantasy instead of

working.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

Alexander's already pulling out his phone. "I'll have the car brought around. Which hospital?"

"Mercy General." The words come automatically before I process what he's saying. "Wait, you don't have to?—"

"I'm coming with you." It's not a question or an offer. His tone brooks no argument as he's already speaking to someone on his phone, issuing rapid-fire instructions about the car.

"Alexander, this isn't?—"

"Ten minutes and we'll be on our way." He cuts me off, sliding his phone back into his pocket. "Do you need anything before we go?"

I shake my head, feeling strangely hollow. This isn't how billionaires in romance novels act, is it? They don't drop everything to rush to dingy public hospitals with girls they've known for less than a week.

But then, nothing about Alexander has been what I expected.

The ride to the hospital is a blur of city lights and my own spiraling guilt. Alexander sits beside me in the back of his sleek black car, so close our thighs press together, but might as well be miles away. My mind races with terrible possibilities. Mom's been working double shifts at the diner for years, ever since Dad left.

Up until she got sick, that is. Then, she's been at home sick a lot, so I picked up the

slack. Took over her shifts.

I was supposed to be helping her, not disappearing into a billionaire's bed while she got even sicker.

"She's going to be okay," Alexander says, his deep voice cutting through my panic.

I turn to him, suddenly angry. "You don't know that. You don't even know her."

His face doesn't change, but something flickers in his eyes. "You're right. I don't. But I know hospitals, and I know doctors, and I will make sure she gets the best care possible."

"Why?" The question bursts out of me. "Why are you doing this? We had a deal. Sex for money. This wasn't part of it."

His jaw tightens. "Is that what you think this is?"

I look away, unable to bear the intensity of his stare. "I don't know what this is anymore."

The car pulls up to the hospital entrance before he can respond. Alexander is out and opening my door before the driver can, his hand extended to help me out. I ignore it, stumbling past him toward the entrance, needing to put distance between us and the questions I'm not ready to face.

The hospital smells like industrial cleaner and misery. At the front desk, I give my mother's name with a voice that doesn't sound like my own. The receptionist directs us to the third floor, and Alexander silently follows me to the elevator.

"You don't have to stay," I say as the doors close, trapping us in the small space.

"I do." Two simple words, but they land like stones in still water.

When we reach my mother's room, the sight of her small form in the hospital bed knocks the breath from my lungs. She looks old and frail, her skin gray against the white sheets, an IV dripping steadily into her arm. Her eyes are closed, her breathing shallow.

"Mom?" I whisper, moving to her side.

Her eyelids flutter but don't open. A doctor enters behind us, clipboard in hand. "Ms. Montgomery? I'm Dr. Patel. Your mother is stable, but quite ill. She's suffering from pneumonia and severe exhaustion. On top of the cancer."

The words hit me like physical blows. "Yes, I know about the cancer—" My voice breaks.

"And you are?" The doctor turns to Alexander, who stands like a sentinel near the door, his powerful presence incongruous in the sterile room.

"Alexander Grant." He doesn't elaborate, but the doctor's eyebrows rise slightly in recognition of the name.

"I see. Well, your mother needs rest and antibiotics. We'll be keeping her for observation for at least a few days."

After the doctor leaves, I sink into the chair beside my mother's bed, taking her thin hand in mine. Her fingers are rough from years of carrying plates and wiping tables, her nails short and unpolished. So different from my own hands now, softened by days of luxury.

Alexander places a gentle hand on my shoulder. "I'll be right outside. Take all the

time you need."

But as he turns to go, something breaks loose inside me. All the confusion, the guilt, the anger—it surges up like a tidal wave.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

"This is your fault," I hiss, standing so abruptly the chair scrapes against the floor. "You took me away from her when she needed me. You made me forget everything that matters with your money and your mansion and your—your—" I gesture helplessly at all of him, this impossible man who's turned my life upside down.

His face goes completely still. "Alice?—"

"No, don't 'Alice' me in that voice that makes everything fuzzy. I was supposed to be helping her, not playing pretend girlfriend to a billionaire. She's killed herself to keep a roof over our heads, and I left and now she's here and I wasn't there for her..." I break off on a sob and turn away from him, not wanting him to see me cry.

The words are cruel, reducing what's happened between us to something tawdry and transactional. I know it even as they leave my mouth, but I can't stop. The guilt is eating me alive, and he's the easiest target.

I expect anger. I expect him to remind me of our arrangement, to throw my willingness in my face. Instead, he looks...crushed. His shoulders, always so straight and proud, seem to bow under an invisible weight.

"You're right," he says quietly. "I am selfish. I wanted you all to myself. I didn't think about what—who—you might be leaving behind." He runs a hand through his dark hair, a rare gesture of uncertainty from a man who always seems so sure. "But you're wrong about one thing, Alice. This—us—it's not pretend for me."

My breath catches.

"I'm sorry about your mother. Truly. And I understand if you hate me right now." His eyes, usually so commanding, look almost pleading. "But I'm not going anywhere."

The sincerity in his voice disarms me. This isn't the response of a man who sees me as a transaction or a toy. This is...something else entirely.

"I don't hate you," I whisper, the fight draining out of me as quickly as it came. "I hate myself for not being where I should have been."

Alexander crosses the small room in two strides, his hands coming up to frame my face. "Don't. Don't do that to yourself. You're allowed to have a life, Alice. You're allowed to want things for yourself."

I shake my head, tears spilling over. "Not at her expense."

He wipes a tear with his thumb, his touch unbearably tender. "We'll figure this out. Whatever she needs—whatever you need—it's yours. No strings, no bargains. Just let me help."

I should refuse. I should maintain some boundary, some dignity. Instead, I collapse against his chest, soaking his expensive shirt with tears while he holds me together with strong arms and whispered promises.

Later, when I've cried myself out, Alexander guides me back to the chair beside my mother's bed. "I'll be right outside," he says again, pressing a kiss to my forehead before leaving the room.

And he is. For three days, he's right outside. While I sit with Mom, while she drifts in and out of consciousness, while nurses come and go, Alexander Grant—billionaire CEO, man who could be anywhere in the world doing anything—sits in an uncomfortable hospital chair outside her room. Sometimes working on his laptop,

sometimes on his phone, but always there when I emerge, bleary-eyed and exhausted.

He brings me food I don't eat, clothes I change into mechanically, coffee I gulp down. He doesn't push, doesn't crowd, doesn't demand. He just...stays. A fixed point in a spinning world. And slowly, despite my best efforts, I feel myself falling deeper into dangerous territory—beyond attraction, beyond infatuation, into something I've never felt before.

On the fourth day, Mom's eyes open—really open—clear and alert for the first time since I arrived. Her gaze finds mine immediately, then shifts to the empty chair beside me, the one I've piled with Alexander's suit jacket and the remains of the coffee he brought me this morning. "So," she says, her voice raspy but stronger, "are you going to tell me about the man who's been sleeping in that awful chair outside my room for three days straight?"

My body goes rigid. "You know about him?"

She gives me a look that's so familiar—the one that says I'm not fooling anyone. "The nurses talk. Apparently, he's quite the topic of conversation. Not every day Alexander Grant camps out in a hospital hallway."

I glance at the closed door, imagining him out there, probably on a call worth millions while sitting on a chair worth nothing. "It's complicated."

"Most things worth having are." She shifts slightly, wincing, and I immediately adjust her pillows. "You disappeared for days, and then showed up with a billionaire in tow. I'd say that qualifies as complicated."

Heat rushes to my face. "I'm sorry I wasn't here when you needed me."

She waves this away with a frail hand. "Stop that. I'm a grown woman who happened

to get sick. That's on me, not you."

"But—"

"No buts." Mom's voice might be weak, but her resolve isn't. She pats the bed beside her. "Now tell me about him. And don't leave out the good parts."

I perch on the edge of her bed, not sure where to start. "He hired me to be his date." The simplified version seems safest.

"And?"

"And things...evolved."

A smile plays at the corners of her mouth. "I bet they did. He's very handsome. In that intimidating way your father never was."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

The comparison startles me. Dad was charming and unreliable—the complete opposite of Alexander's steadfast intensity.

"He's been here the whole time," she continues. "Every time I've woken up, even in the middle of the night, I've seen him through the door window. Either pacing or working or just...waiting."

I swallow hard. "He feels responsible."

"Is that what you think this is? Responsibility?" She studies my face with the kind of perception that only mothers possess. "Honey, a man like that doesn't sit in hospital waiting rooms for days because he feels responsible. He writes a check and sends flowers."

My heart thumps painfully. "Then what?"

"You know what." Her hand finds mine, squeezing with surprising strength. "I've seen how he looks at you when you're not watching. Like you're water in a desert."

"We barely know each other," I protest weakly.

She laughs, the sound turning into a small cough. "I knew I loved your father the second day I knew him. Time doesn't mean much when it's right. And sometimes..." her voice softens, "sometimes it's right even when it doesn't work out in the end."

I think about that—how she's never regretted loving my father despite how he left us. How she's never closed herself off despite the hurt.

"He scares me," I admit, the truth finally emerging. "Not because I think he'd hurt me, but because...because I could get used to him. To his world. And then what happens when he's done with me?"

Mom shifts again, her expression serious. "That man out there isn't someone who throws people away when he's done. Trust me, I've watched enough people come and go in that diner to know the ones who stay from the ones who don't."

"But we're so different. His world is?—"

"His world is wherever you are right now." She cuts me off firmly. "He's proved that. Question is, what are you going to do about it?"

I stare at her, this woman who raised me alone, who worked double shifts and never complained, who taught me to stand on my own feet. "I don't want to need someone like that. Like you never needed anyone after Dad left."

Something like sadness passes over her face. "Oh, honey. Not needing someone isn't the same as not wanting them. I didn't need your father, but I wanted him every day he was gone." She reaches up to touch my cheek. "Don't make my mistakes. If you want him, if he makes you happy—reallyhappy—don't push him away because you're afraid of what might happen."

Her words sink into me like stones into still water, rippling outward. All this time, I thought her strength came from not needing anyone. Maybe true strength is being brave enough to want someone despite the risks.

"Go talk to him," she urges, settling back against her pillows. "I'm feeling much better, and these medications are making me sleepy anyway."

"Are you sure?" I'm torn between staying with her and the magnetic pull toward the

man waiting outside.

"Very sure. Besides," she smiles, her eyes already drifting closed, "I want grandchildren someday, and he has excellent bone structure."

"Mom!" I hiss, scandalized and amused all at once.

She laughs softly, eyes closing. "Go on. I'll be here when you get back."

I check her monitors once more, adjust her blanket, and press a kiss to her forehead before slipping out of the room.

Alexander is exactly where I expected to find him—in the same uncomfortable chair he's occupied for days. His head is tipped back against the wall, eyes closed, laptop open but idle on his lap. Even in sleep, there's a tension to him, a readiness to wake at the slightest provocation. His jaw is darkened with stubble, his usually immaculate clothes wrinkled from too many hours in the same position.

I pause, taking him in. This powerful man reduced to human vulnerability because of...me? Us? Something tight uncoils in my chest.

As if sensing my presence, his eyes snap open, instantly alert. When he sees me, his entire body shifts forward, laptop nearly sliding off his knees.

"Alice. Is everything okay? Your mother?—"

"She's fine," I assure him quickly. "Better. She's sleeping now."

Relief visibly washes over him. He runs a hand through his hair, which is already standing in uncharacteristic disarray from previous repetitions of the gesture. "Good. That's good."

An awkward silence falls between us, weighted with everything unsaid. Three days ago, I was in his bed, certain of nothing except how he made me feel. Now I'm standing in a hospital hallway, certain of nothing except that I've never seen anyone look at me the way he's looking at me now.

"You're still here," I say finally, stating the obvious.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

Something flickers in his eyes—hurt, maybe. "I told you I wasn't going anywhere."

"People say a lot of things." I drift closer to him, drawn by some invisible force.

"I'm not people." His voice drops lower. "Not to you."

No, he's not. He never has been, from the moment he singled me out in that crowded diner.

"My mother thinks you love me," I blurt out, immediately wishing I could snatch the words back.

Alexander doesn't flinch, doesn't look away. If anything, his gaze intensifies, pinning me in place. "Your mother is very perceptive."

My heart lurches. "Alexander?—"

"I do love you." He stands abruptly, the laptop sliding onto the chair as he steps toward me. "I've loved you since the moment you spilled that cup of coffee on me."

I can't breathe. This isn't how it's supposed to go. Men like Alexander Grant don't fall in love with girls like me. They don't sit in hospital waiting rooms for days. They don't look at me like I'm the answer to a question they've been asking their whole lives.

"That's not possible," I whisper. "You don't even know me."

"I know enough." His hands come up, hovering near my shoulders without touching,

like he's afraid I'll bolt. "I know you're loyal and brave and stubborn. I know you light up when you talk about books. I know you curl into a ball when you sleep and you take your coffee with too much sugar. I know you're scared of needing anyone but you'd walk through fire for the people you love." His voice breaks slightly. "And I know I want to be one of those people, Alice. For as long as you'll let me."

Tears blur my vision. "This is crazy. We had an arrangement?—"

"Fuck the arrangement." The rare profanity startles me. "It was never about that. Not really. It was about seeing you again, keeping you close until you could see what I saw."

"And what was that?" My voice trembles.

"Us." He steps closer, and this time his hands do touch me, gentle on my shoulders. "What we could be together."

I should step back. I should remind myself of all the reasons this can't work—our different worlds, the power imbalance, how fast this is happening. Instead, I sway toward him like a flower seeking sunlight.

"I can't leave my mom," I say, as if this is a sensible objection to the confession he's just made. "She needs me."

A smile touches his lips, tender and knowing. "I know. That's why I've already spoken to the hospital administrator about transferring her to a private room in the best recovery facility in the city once she's stable."

My jaw drops. "You what?"

"She'll have the best care, the best physical therapists, everything she needs." His

thumbs trace small circles on my shoulders. "And you can visit her as often as you want. Or we can bring her to live with us when she's recovered, if that's what you both prefer."

"Us?" I repeat, dazed.

Alexander takes a deep breath, and for the first time since I've known him, he looks uncertain. "I want you to marry me, Alice."

The hallway seems to tilt. "What?"

"Marry me." His hands slide up to frame my face. "Be my wife. Let me take care of you and your mother. Let me show you every day how much I love you."

"But we—it's only been?—"

"I know how long it's been." His eyes are fierce now, burning with conviction. "I know it seems fast to you. But I've never been more certain of anything in my life. And I think...I hope...you feel something too."

Something? I feel everything—terror and exhilaration and disbelief and underneath it all, a wild, impossible joy.

"You could have anyone," I whisper.

"How many times do I have to tell you? I don't want anyone, you stubborn girl. I only want you." He leans his forehead against mine. "Only you."

Our breath mingles in the space between us. I think about what my mother said—about strength being the courage to want someone despite the risks. About how Alexander has proven where his world is.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

"Yes," I breathe, the word escaping before I can second-guess it.

His body goes completely still. "Yes?"

I nod, tears spilling over. "Yes, I'll marry you."

The smile that breaks across his face is like nothing I've ever seen—raw and triumphant and so full of joy it steals my breath. His arms wrap around me, lifting me off my feet as his mouth finds mine in a kiss that feels like coming home and embarking on an adventure all at once.

When he sets me down, he keeps me close, as if afraid I might vanish. "I promise you won't regret this. I'll spend every day making sure of it."

I lean into him, marveling at how perfectly we fit together despite all our differences. "Just promise you'll be patient with me. This is all...a lot."

"We have all the time in the world." He brushes a strand of hair from my face. "And I'm not going anywhere."

For the first time, I truly believe him. Whatever comes next—whatever challenges we face as we build this improbable life together—he'll be there. And so will I, not because I need him, but because I choose him. Because some risks are worth taking, some bargains evolve into something far more valuable than either party ever anticipated.

I think of how this all started—a simple transaction that somehow turned into the

greatest gift of my life—and I laugh softly against his chest.

"What is it?" he asks, pressing a kiss to my temple.

"Nothing," I murmur. "Everything. Just...thank you for waiting."

His arms tighten around me. "I would have waited forever."

And standing there in that sterile hospital hallway, wrapped in the arms of a man who has upended my entire existence, I know with bone-deep certainty that this is exactly where I'm supposed to be.

epilogue

. . .

Five years later

Alexander

I watch my daughter sleeping in her princess bed, her dark curls splayed across the pillow just like her mother's. Five years. Five years since I claimed Alice as mine, and every morning I wake up stunned that this is my life now. The shy waitress who spilled coffee on my custom suit gave me something I never knew I wanted—a family. And tonight, I plan to tell her I want to make it bigger.

"Daddy?" Isa's voice is sleepy, her little hand reaching out from beneath her sparkly pink comforter. "Is it morning?"

"Not yet, princess." I lean down and press my lips to her forehead. "I'm just checking on you."

She smiles, eyes already drifting closed again. At four years old, she's the perfect blend of Alice and me—my determination, her mother's gentleness. The combination is lethal. I've never stood a chance against either of them.

I close Isa's door softly and pad down the hallway of our penthouse. Five years ago, I promised Alice I'd take care of her family. It was the easiest promise I've ever made. Her mother, Diane, occupies the east wing guest suite—though it stopped being a "guest" area long ago. The best specialists in the country have her cancer in remission and her autoimmune condition is well-managed now. Down the hall, her brother Toby has his own space. He's seventeen now, excelling in school with the tutors I hired, already talking about college applications.

And Alice...my Alice is probably in our bedroom, waiting for me.

The kitchen light is still on. I find Diane sitting at the island counter, sipping tea.

"Alexander," she smiles, looking up from her book. "Checking the perimeter?"

I chuckle. She teases me about my nightly rounds, but she understands. When you've lived without, you guard what's yours with obsessive vigilance. "Just making sure everyone's tucked in."

"Isa went down okay?" She looks better than she has in years. No more hollow cheeks or shadowed eyes. Alice cried the first time her mother was strong enough to cook Sunday dinner for all of us.

"Out like a light after two stories and a song." I lean against the counter. "Toby home?"

"Got in an hour ago. That study group at the library." She gives me a knowing look. "I think there might be a girl involved."

"Smart kid." I push off from the counter. "Need anything before I head up?"

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

She shakes her head, eyes soft with emotion. "We have everything we need, Alexander. More than we ever imagined possible."

Five years ago, those words would have made me uncomfortable. Gratitude always felt like a transaction to me—something people offered when they wanted more. Now I just nod, recognizing the simple truth in her statement. I gave them security; they gave me belonging.

"Goodnight, Diane."

"Goodnight, son."

The word still catches me off guard sometimes. Son. A family connection I never had, casually bestowed like it's the most natural thing in the world.

I take the stairs two at a time, eager now. The master suite spans the entire top floor of the penthouse. I find Alice in our bathroom, wrapped in a towel, her damp hair clinging to her neck. Steam rises from her skin, pink from the hot shower. She hasn't heard me come in yet.

I could stand here forever, just watching her. Five years, and the sight of her still kicks me in the chest.

"You planning on dropping that towel anytime soon?" My voice comes out rough.

She startles, turning with wide eyes that quickly warm with recognition. "I didn't hear you come up."

"I'm a man on a mission." I stalk toward her, watching her pulse jump in her throat. That shyness hasn't completely disappeared, even after all this time. It drives me fucking wild.

"Isa asleep?" she asks, clutching the towel a little tighter. As if that flimsy barrier could stop what's about to happen.

"Everyone's settled." I reach her, trapping her against the marble counter. "Which means I finally have you all to myself."

Her lips part, breath quickening. It amazes me that we can still do this to each other—create this crackling tension with nothing but proximity. I slide my hand up her arm, feeling goosebumps rise in my wake.

"You're cold."

She shakes her head. "Not cold."

I know. I know exactly what's happening to her body. I've made a five-year study of Alice Clark Grant. I know every curve, every sensitive spot, every sound she makes when I touch her just right. The knowledge doesn't diminish my hunger—it sharpens it.

"Five years today," I murmur against her neck.

She melts against me. "You remembered."

"The day you became mine? I'll remember it on my deathbed." I nip at her earlobe, feeling her shiver. "Though I'm not sure which anniversary we're celebrating—the coffee spill or the first time I had you on that rug at our island estate..."

Her cheeks flush darker. "Alexander..."

"I like both options." My hands find her waist, fingers dipping beneath the towel. "The moment I knew I had to have you, and the moment I finally did."

The towel drops. Five years of comfortable living hasn't changed her essential softness. She's still all gentle curves and delicate skin. The only differences are the silvery stretch marks on her belly and fuller breasts—battle scars from carrying our daughter that I worship with reverent fingers.

"You're staring," she whispers.

"Damn right I am." I lift her onto the counter, stepping between her legs. "My wife is fucking gorgeous."

Her arms wind around my neck, pulling me closer. We kiss deep and slow, like we have all the time in the world. In a way, we do. I made sure of it, restructuring my entire empire to ensure I'm home for dinner most nights, present for weekends, available for the moments that matter. My father built his fortune by sacrificing everything else. I've learned there's another way.

I carry her to our bed, still kissing her, unwilling to break contact even for the few seconds it takes to cross the room. She's working at my shirt buttons, fingers fumbling in her eagerness. I help her, stripping off my clothes until there's nothing between us.

"God, look at you," I breathe, taking in her body spread across our bed. Her hair fans out on the pillow, still damp from her shower.

"Look who's talking." Her eyes roam over me with open appreciation. Gone is the shy waitress who could barely meet my gaze. My Alice has grown bold in our marriage bed.

I cover her body with mine, savoring the little gasp she makes when our skin connects. "You know what I was thinking about today?"

"What?" She arches as I trail kisses down her throat.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

"That first night. How you trembled when I touched you." I demonstrate, running my palm down her side, feeling the slight quiver of her muscles. "How you looked at me like I was something out of a dream."

Her fingers thread through my hair. "You were. I still wake up sometimes and can't believe this is real."

"It's real." I nip at her collarbone, soothing the sting with my tongue. "And it's never going away."

I take my time with her, relearning the landscape of her body even though I know it by heart. Her breasts are fuller now, more sensitive since she nursed Isa. I lavish attention on them until she's squirming beneath me, breathless pleas falling from her lips.

"Alexander, please..."

"Please what, baby?" I'm already moving lower, tasting the salt of her skin.

"I need you now." Her hips lift in invitation. "It's been three days."

I chuckle against her stomach. "Business trips are hell." My hands grip her thighs, spreading them wider. "But I'm home now. And I'm going to make up for lost time."

I settle between her legs, breathing in the scent of her arousal. "Mine," I growl, before tasting her with a broad stroke of my tongue.

She cries out, back arching off the bed. I hold her hips firmly, keeping her in place as I devour her. This—her pleasure, her surrender—feels like power no business deal could ever match. I work her with deliberate precision, using every trick I've learned over our years together until she's trembling, right on the edge.

"Not yet," I command, pulling back. "I want to be inside you when you come."

Her whimper of protest turns into a moan of satisfaction as I slide up her body and thrust into her in one smooth motion. The feeling of being enveloped in her heat nearly undoes me. Five years of marriage, and it still feels like coming home.

"Fuck, Alice." I grip the headboard with one hand to keep from crushing her, setting a relentless pace. "You feel so good around me."

Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me deeper. "Don't stop."

As if I could. As if there's any force on earth that could make me stop when she's looking at me like this, when her body is gripping mine so perfectly. I slide my hand between us, finding the spot that makes her see stars.

"That's it, baby. Let go for me."

She comes with a cry, her body clenching around mine. The sight of her undone—flushed cheeks, parted lips, eyes glazed with pleasure—pushes me right to the edge. But I'm not finished yet.

I roll us, keeping us connected, until she's straddling me. Her hair falls forward like a curtain as she catches her breath, hands braced on my chest.

"Keep going," I urge, gripping her hips. "I'm not done with you yet."

She starts to move, finding her rhythm. The view from beneath her is spectacular—the sway of her breasts, the ripple of pleasure across her face, the place where our bodies join. I guide her movements, helping her find the angle that makes her gasp.

"You know what I want?" I ask, voice rough with restraint.

She nods, already guessing. We know each other too well now.

"Say it," I demand, slapping her ass lightly. "Tell me what I want."

"Another baby," she whispers, moving faster. "You want to put another baby in me."

The words ignite something primal in my chest. "That's right." I thrust up to meet her, hard enough to make her yelp. "I want to see you round with my child again. Want to watch you grow bigger each month, knowing I did that to you."

Her movements become erratic, her breathing shallow. "Yes," she hisses. "I want it too."

I flip us again, needing to control the pace, to drive us both toward that edge. "I need to breed you. Need to see you pregnant again. Got to fill you up with my cum. Fucking glowing.Mine."

I'm pounding into her now, all finesse gone, replaced by raw need. Her nails rake down my back, adding just the right edge of pain to my pleasure.

"Alexander," she gasps, "I'm close again."

"Come with me this time." I can feel my control slipping. "Come with me, Alice."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:12 am

She shatters around me, my name a prayer on her lips. I follow her over, emptying myself deep inside her with a guttural groan. For a moment, the world narrows to just this—our joined bodies, our synchronized heartbeats, our mingled breath.

I collapse beside her, pulling her against my chest. Her skin is slick with sweat, her breathing gradually slowing to normal. I brush damp hair from her forehead, pressing my lips to her temple.

"I meant it," I murmur against her skin. "About another baby."

She turns in my arms, studying my face. "I know you did." Her finger traces the line of my jaw. "I want that too. Isa would be a wonderful big sister."

The thought fills me with unexpected emotion. "She takes after her mother that way."

Alice smiles, soft and knowing. "Toby adores her. Says she's the little sister he never knew he needed."

"Your brother's a good kid." I pull her closer, resting my chin on top of her head. "He's going to do great things."

"Because of you," she whispers against my chest.

I shake my head. "Because of who he always was. I just removed the obstacles."

She leans back to look at me properly. "Five years ago, would you have said that?"

I consider this. "Five years ago, I thought money was the answer to everything."

"And now?"

"Now I know it's just a tool." My hand slides down to rest on her belly, imagining the possibility growing there. "The real wealth is this. Us. The family we've built."

Her eyes shine with unshed tears. "I love you, Alexander Grant."

"I love you, Alice Grant."

She settles against me, her body molding to mine perfectly. Outside our window, the city glitters, a reminder of the empire that once seemed like everything to me. Now it's just the backdrop to what really matters.

"So," I murmur into her hair, "how soon can we start trying for that baby?"

She laughs, the sound vibrating against my chest. "You just did."

"Again," I clarify, already feeling desire stirring once more. "I want to make absolutely sure."

Her hand slides down my stomach, finding me already half-hard for her again. "Now who's being impatient?"

"Five years hasn't changed everything about me." I roll her beneath me again, capturing her laugh with my mouth. "I still take what I want."

Her eyes darken with renewed desire. "And what do you want right now?"

I press against her, leaving no doubt about my intentions. "Everything, Alice. With you, I want everything."

And as I sink into her again, slower this time, savoring every sensation, I know it's true. The shy waitress who crashed into my life gave me everything I never knew I needed. And I'm going to spend the rest of my life making sure she knows exactly how grateful I am.