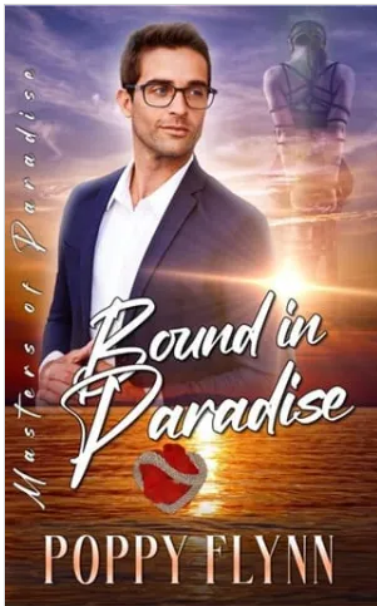




Bound in Paradise (Masters of Paradise #10)

Author: *Poppy Flynn*

Category: Romance

Description: In the sultry, secluded paradise of a private Caribbean island, dominant billionaire Zack Kincaid's thirst for control is challenged by Dani Morenos unrelenting spirit.

While their undeniable chemistry sparks a fire that neither can extinguish, her trust in him has been shattered by secrets long kept hidden.

Can Zack unlock the chains that bind Danis heart? Or will Danis childhood traumas resurface, threatening to consume the remnants of their shared history and cast dark shadows over their present desires.

With each stolen kiss and whispered command, they teeter on the precipice of surrender. But as daunting revelations surface, Danis instinct to flee is at odds with Zacks determination to make her stay. But he's determined even if it means tying her down to expose every last secret that lies between them.

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IN THE BEGINNING...

ZACK

“Hurry up, Zack. We’re on a tight schedule,” his father barked. Zack didn’t know what had crawled up his old man’s ass; normally he paid little or no attention to him, despite Zack being his only child. His only family.

The miserable fucker was usually content to palm off Zack’s care onto whoever was handy at the time, and now Zack was older, that was pretty much no one.

During term time he was at boarding school, and honestly, he’d prefer to stay there during the holidays if it was an option.

Sometimes it was, but not for the long summer months.

When he was younger, he’d had a nanny during the times he was forced to be at home.

Now he had a credit card to take care of anything he needed.

Although their housekeeper liked to make sure he didn’t eat takeout every day of the week.

His dad sure as hell didn’t give a shit, which was why Gordon Kincaid’s current insistence on Zack’s presence was so unexpected and more than a little bit disturbing.

Still, as he was rushed to the chauffeur-driven town car waiting outside, Zack knew better than to question this odd turn of events.

Even at fifteen, and almost as tall as his father, that kind of response was more likely to earn him a clip around the ear and the threat of curtailing his allowance, rather than any useful explanation.

Not that he couldn't manage perfectly well if Gordon decided to punish him by taking away his charge card.

Zack had been repurposing the generous cash withdrawals his father had authorized on the card for as long as he'd realized it was an option.

His dad had no idea how much everyday items such as toiletries cost since he never purchased them for himself, so he'd just plucked a ridiculously generous figure out of the air that he felt covered his son's needs.

In fact, Zack used less than 10% of it. The rest he put into a savings account.

One Gordon had authorized himself, albeit unknowingly, since he'd signed it without reading it through, along with a bunch of other school forms needing parental approval.

Zack didn't feel the least bit of guilt.

It wasn't like the old man couldn't have checked what he was signing, but as usual, he didn't care as long as Zack wasn't his problem to deal with.

Zack had been a surprise baby to mature parents. His aging mother had apparently thought she was going through menopause and hadn't realized she was pregnant until she was much too far along to do anything about it. Or so he'd gathered from

overhearing the staff gossiping.

He sometimes wondered whether his parents would have chosen to abort him if they'd found out soon enough.

It seemed likely. Especially since his frail mother had died shortly after giving birth to him.

Although he'd never said as much - that would require a conversation, after all - Zack suspected his father's behavior towards him stemmed from losing his wife.

If it wouldn't have looked so bad, Zack was pretty sure his father would have just left him at the hospital and walked away, but the one thing Gordon Kincaid did care about was his social standing and reputation.

So he'd hired a nanny, and when Zack was five years old, he'd been shipped off out-of-state to a residential school.

It was probably the best thing to ever happen to him, and the lack of family life meant Zack's educational attainment was way ahead of his peers.

He came out of his silent reverie as they pulled up outside an elegant colonial style building.

"Let us out here and wait in this spot until we return," Gordon instructed the driver, uncaring that they were parked in a restricted zone. "Come on, boy."

Zack was as good as dragged along as soon as they exited the vehicle, his father gripping his arm like he was afraid Zack might bolt.

It added to his unease. What the fuck was going on?

Checking out the signage, Zack realized they were in a courthouse, which only heightened his confusion.

The two of them were whisked into what he assumed was a courtroom, and Gordon deposited Zack on a seat before striding forward to shake hands with a guy in official robes.

Why did they still wear that ridiculous get up?

Try as he might, Zack couldn't make out the muted murmurs taking place across the room, and a few minutes later, his attention was caught by a woman and a girl he assumed was her daughter, coming in through a side door.

Like him, the girl was escorted to a seat away from the bench, but on the opposite side of the room.

Though in stark contrast to Gordon, it was clear how protective her mother was.

Zack dismissed the adults who huddled together, mumbling unintelligibly, and scrutinized the girl out of the corner of his eye, not wanting to appear too interested.

She had long, pale blonde hair, pulled back in a ponytail, which unlike her mother's peroxide locks, was completely natural.

She was pretty enough, but way too skinny, which made Zack think she was probably a few years younger than him and hadn't started developing yet.

He'd just started appreciating the charms of the opposite sex, and boobs were definitely the bomb.

She seemed shy too. Not even looking his way once. Or maybe she was just stuck up.

He was fidgeting on his chair, starting to get bored, when all hell broke loose.

There was a commotion outside the door, and it swung open. A middle-aged woman who was so mousy Zack hadn't even registered her presence until then, hurried forward as their privacy was interrupted.

Still, nothing could have prepared him for what happened next.

The noise was so loud it made his ears ring, and at first Zack couldn't make sense of what was happening.

But the woman collapsing in a puddle of blood, the panicked shouts, and the high-pitched scream from the bottled blonde as she grabbed her daughter, soon made him realize the stark danger that inhabited the chaos.

Gunshots sprayed heedlessly throughout the room, and it was sheer instinct that sent Zack diving to the floor, shielding himself as best he could, thankful for the heavy wooden seats which resembled church pews, and provided so much cover.

Desperately, he looked around. The woman and her daughter had scurried out of the same side entrance they'd come in through, and his father and the judge had dived through a door behind the bench, which Zack supposed went into the judge's private chambers.

Fuck! Were they all just going to leave him here?

Panic edged his thoughts towards frenzy as heavy boots stomped closer to his hiding place.

Terror had his limbs almost frozen in place, and the instinct to close his eyes and cower and pretend they might not see him was strong.

But pressing in on his incoherent thoughts was the glimmer of common sense screaming at him of the foolishness of that course of action, which would undoubtedly bring his inevitable demise.

Forcing a deep breath and ignoring the trembling that had taken root, Zack looked around his immediate vicinity with wild eyes.

No way was he popping his head up to see where the gunmen were.

So far, they didn't seem to realize he was still there, which worked in his favor, but he doubted his luck would hold out much longer.

There was no exit close to his own location.

Of the three doorways in the room, one was out of the question, since it was the one these thugs had swarmed through and secured.

The second was the one the woman had used.

That was on the other side of the room and seemed to be where their focus lay.

Which just left the door his father had gone through.

It was situated in the middle of the room behind the large, formal podium the judges used, so there was a little bit of cover, if only Zack could get there without being mowed down.

And right now, he wasn't even convinced his legs were going to work.

Except right then, fortune really did seem to be on his side.

Renewed shouting from somewhere in the corridor behind them, alerted the gunmen that security was on the way.

With their attention momentarily distracted, Zack pushed up, stayed bent at the waist and half ran, half crawled, across the space which suddenly appeared to stretch for miles in front of him, when in reality, it was no more than a few feet.

Pandemonium erupted. More shouting, more gunfire, and a streak of pain sliced across the back of his leg, almost sending Zack sprawling.

Pure adrenaline kept him moving, diving in an uncoordinated crumple behind the thankfully substantial lectern, then crawling through the door.

Zack didn't stop, even though he was desperate to check what was happening; to pause and allow his galloping heart to ease and his panic to subside, but he didn't dare.

More shots sounded behind him, spurring him on.

A desperate glance as he scuttled across the floor on his hands and knees, half dragging one leg awkwardly behind him, since it didn't want to hold his weight, showed only a single exit from this room, so there was no choice but to head for it.

The desk was solid and posed a possible hiding place, but no way he was getting cornered in here, and Zack was pretty sure he was leaving a trail of blood that would lead right to him.

Where the fuck was Gordon? Zack had never felt a whole lot of tender loving care from the guy, but Jesus Christ, this pretty much said it all. Or did his absence mean his father was injured or... worse?

The idea made his head swim. They might not be close, but Gordon was the only family he had. Fuck if he wanted to end up in the foster system; better the devil he knew.

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Finally, Zack exited into a hallway that was clearly not part of the public areas, and immediately, running footsteps hurtled towards him.

Imagining the worst and with nowhere left to go, the small child inside Zack's adolescent body curled into a fetal position and covered his head with his arms. If he couldn't see them, perhaps it wouldn't be true.

"It's okay son, we've got you." Despite the descriptor, it wasn't his father's voice. "You're safe now."

Arms reached for him, but although Zack's head was buzzing with dozens of questions, they all spun around until they turned into some murky soup of unfinished thoughts as the adrenaline which had gotten him this far crashed him into blissful oblivion.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mister Kincaid."

Zack hadn't lost his father that fateful day twelve years ago, but death had caught up with Gordon in his retirement which the old man had lived to surprising excess after being such a dedicated workaholic all his life. Zack was amazed Gordon had made it to seventy-seven.

"Thank you," Zack replied, knowing it was expected of him, even though all he really felt was ambivalence. While they'd never been close, the day of the shooting had changed things for the worse. Maybe because those events had forced Zack to grow up - fast.

Or maybe because the blinkers had finally been ripped away, and Zack's inner child, who had still desperately wanted his father's love, had finally whimpered in defeat and given up on the impossible.

Far from being injured as Zack had feared, Gordon Kincaid hadn't suffered a single scratch.

If Zack had expected sympathy, or maybe even a touch of concern when he woke up in the hospital after being treated for shock and stitched up from the graze he'd received from a glancing bullet, he was sadly mistaken.

Instead, Gordon had almost seemed annoyed that his only child was causing him so much bother.

That had been the final nail in the coffin.

Today, Zack was only here for the formalities. He didn't need his father's money - if there was any left after the way Gordon had blown through it in his final years. Despite coming from wealth, he'd built his own fortune, completely separate from his father's, and was a great deal more successful.

Aubrey Tattersall, his father's lawyer, droned on, as he listed limited assets that made it clear Gordon would have eventually faced bankruptcy if he'd lived much longer.

At this point, Zack supposed he should be grateful he hadn't been saddled with a debt.

Not that he couldn't have afforded to pay it, but the principal would have pissed him off.

"So, is that everything?" he asked, desperate to get out of there.

“There’s some paperwork that requires your attention,” the obsequious little man continued.

Zack signed several documents while the man prattled on, but he knew Tattersall was touting for business, since Zack used a different law firm for his own needs.

Aubrey was an ass-licker, someone who told you what you wanted to hear; something Zack couldn’t stand.

He needed a team who dealt in reality and told him the truth.

He’d almost zoned the pompous idiot out when the bomb dropped.

“I beg your pardon?” Zack asked, convinced he must have heard wrong since he’d barely been paying attention.

“A prenuptial agreement. Or rather, a postnuptial, in your case, since there’s nothing on record in your father’s file.”

Zack shook his head to clear it. “What the hell are you talking about? Why would I need something like that? I’m not married.”

Aubrey squirmed in his chair and suddenly looked uncomfortable. “Well, er, that’s not exactly accurate,” he hedged, looking everywhere but at Zack.

Zack sprung up from his chair and slapped his hands on Aubrey’s desk with a resounding thud. “What is that supposed to mean, Tattersall?” he thundered, shock and fury building inside him with equal force, leaving him feeling like a pressure cooker that wasn’t letting the steam out quickly enough.

Aubrey flinched and fumbled with the paperwork in front of him before eventually

pushing a document across the table.

At first, Zack couldn't even get his head around what he was seeing. This couldn't be right. It must be a forgery or something. But if it wasn't a legal document, surely even fucking Aubrey Tattersall would know it.

He scanned the contents, then collapsed back in his seat, the wind knocked out of him when he read the date.

That date would probably be ingrained in his mind forever. And now, finally, he knew what it was all about.

The courtroom. The judge. The girl and her mother.

Apparently, their parents had married them off that day, prior to the shooting.

What. The. Actual. Fuck!?

"Get it annulled," he ground out, fury winning over the shock and threatening to overwhelm him.

"Ah... that might not be p-possible," Aubrey stuttered, reading Zack's anger. He hurried on. "There's a s-statute of limitations that usually expires shortly after minors reach the age of majority, and that has long since passed."

"A divorce, then," Zack demanded, his tone positively arctic as he battled to keep himself under control.

"Um... also not possible..."

Zack's eyes narrowed on the odious little man who was about to bear the brunt of his

wrath. Aubrey's eyes widened and he hastily pushed another document across the table.

Snatching it up and reading through it, Zack felt his blood boil to volcanic proportions. "This can not be legal," he gritted out from between clenched teeth.

"I assure you, it is." Tattersall leaned back in his chair, suddenly oddly calm. "I drafted it myself, so I know it's airtight."

Not doing himself any favors!

Without another word, Zack rose from his seat in one swift, smooth movement, swept up the documents, and left, leaving Aubrey Tattersall squawking behind him. He'd take this shit show to his own legal team for answers.

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IN THE BEGINNING

DANI

“D aniella, what on earth are you doing?”

Sticking her tongue in the corner of her mouth and gripping it with her teeth, Dani carefully pressed the tiny building brick into place. She was almost done. The pictures meant she could follow the instructions, even if she couldn't understand all the words.

“Cugino Luca let me borrow some of his Lego,” she replied, scanning the final few pieces and missing the look of horror and disdain on her mother's face. It didn't matter. She'd grow used to those expressions over the coming years.

“Mamma Mia!”

Dani jumped as her mother's hand came down on the table, shattering the model she'd worked so hard on, and scattering the bricks everywhere.

“Esme?” Concetta's voice was a harsh screech as she yelled for Dani's nanny before she turned her disapproving glare back on Dani.

“Go to your room and play with your dolls, Daniella. They are far more suitable for a five-year-old girl.”

“Sì, madre,” Dani held back the tears of sadness and anger that threatened to explode

from inside her as she turned towards the pink, frilly room filled with all the boring dolls, and the itchy dresses she already hated.

Even at such a young age, she instinctively knew she shouldn't let her mother see just how much this upset her.

Closing the door to her bedroom behind her, Dani sat on the floor against the oppressive dark wood and listened as her mother shrieked orders at her nanny.

“Get this mess picked up immediately and return this abomination to Master Luca. Make sure the boy understands it is not suitable for Daniella to play with this kind of thing.”

“Yes, mistress Concetta, of course,” came Esme's subdued response.

Dani looked around the large candy pink room.

She hated pink. There was every kind of doll imaginable.

Baby dolls with bottles and feeding bowls, that pooped in their diaper, so it had to be changed.

Eww! They came with all kinds of accessories.

Prams and highchairs, rocking cribs and their own tiny bathtubs.

Boring! Why would anyone want to play with those?

Her cousin Luca didn't have any of them. He had fun stuff like Lego.

Then there were the Barbies with their fancy outfits and matching shoes. She'd seen

some that were dressed as doctors and even an astronaut, but her mother had refused to give her any of those more interesting dolls, saying they were ‘unseemly’.

Dani didn’t know what unseemly was, she only knew she’d prefer those dolls to the ones she had.

Her gaze moved to the shelf on the far wall. On it were the porcelain dolls. They were creepy and stared at her with their perfect hair and perfect faces, wearing their perfect clothes, and they didn’t do anything but stand there with their soulless eyes, looking far too perfect.

Sometimes Dani had nightmares that her mother tried to make her into one of those porcelain dolls. That her voice was gone and all she could do was exist and look pretty.

But Dani wanted to be an explorer. She wanted to go out and see the world and all the exciting things in it. That was so much more fun than dolls!

“Daniella! Why aren't you dressed? You need to leave for your Cotillion class in thirty minutes.”

Dani looked down at her dirty hands and sneakers. The horrified look was on her mother’s face again. It seemed to be there more and more, lately.

“I don’t want to go,” Dani replied, her own expression mutinous. “They’re so boring! Luca doesn’t have to go, so why should I?”

“Well, that’s where you’re wrong. Zio Lorenzo has agreed that Cotillion classes would be a good thing for your cousin too, so you’re going together from now on, Daniella.”

“Dani,” she mumbled, correcting how her mother addressed her.

Concetta shook her head. “You’re a young lady, and your name is Daniella. That’s how you will be addressed.” The words brooked no argument, and Dani knew better than to try.

Instead, she spun around and scrunched up her face so her mother couldn’t see it and lecture her on getting wrinkles. Like that was even a thing. She was only twelve. Wrinkles were for the oldies.

A heavy hand digging into her shoulder halted her progress as Concetta guided Dani towards her dressing table and pushed her to sit.

“And that contrary attitude of yours is all the more reason for you to attend these cotillion classes and learn to behave like a proper young lady. No man wants an opinionated wife.”

The words brought Dani up short. What the heck?

Wives weren’t allowed to think for themselves?

That was it. She was never having a husband!

Her mother was bad enough, but at least Dani could dream of the day she’d be able to leave home.

No way was she swapping Concetta for a man who basically expected the same things all the time!

Not that her father was around much, but Dani was aware of the way her mother behaved when he was.

“Since you’re not ready, I’ll see to you myself,” she said, decisively. “Esme, fetch my makeup bag please.”

Her nanny nodded and scurried out of the room, but Dani caught the sympathetic expression on her face. Fortunately, her mother didn’t.

Gah! Makeup. She’d managed to avoid it so far, but twenty minutes later she’d been forced to shower, and was dressed in a horrendously frilly pink frock. Now she had gunk spread all over her face and her eyelashes felt sticky.

“Ouch, Mamma, that hurts,” Dani complained as Concetta dragged a hairbrush through her damp, tangled locks.

“Well, this is what happens when you run around digging in the garden all day. I’m going to have words with Horatio. It’s simply not acceptable. If you want to mess around with plants, you can take some flower arranging classes. I’ll look into it.”

Her mother pulled and teased and blow dried. Then pulled some more and stabbed her with pins as she twisted Dani’s hair into the kind of style she normally saw on old ladies. More gunk was plastered into her hair, making it feel stiff and uncomfortable.

Dani stared at herself in the mirror, all curled and coiffed, the foundation and eye products her mother had applied making her look weirdly unnatural.

In the reflection, her eyes were drawn to the porcelain dolls that still sat on the shelf on the opposite wall.

Looking back at herself, she shuddered at how much she resembled them right now.

It was terrifying!

Her father was a married man, and her mother was his mistress .

How had she never known this?

Sure, he was never around that much, but Dani just thought he worked away. Zio Lorenzo was away a lot too. Luca had told her as much.

Things began to fall into place... like why her surname was Moreno, the same as her cousin, even though Zio Lorenzo was her mother's brother.

And all that cotillion crap? Being taught how to speak and how to behave so she could be presented to society as a debutante to find an appropriately wealthy husband? Well, fuck that shit!

That's where she was now, at a freaking debutante ball, having just been 'introduced' to society...

along with two sisters she never knew she had.

One older, one younger. Or half-sisters, she supposed.

It didn't matter, they weren't her family.

That much had been made painfully clear during the introductions her mother had made, presenting Dani to her father and his wife and daughters like he was a stranger, all while digging warning fingers into Dani's arm hard enough to leave bruises, in order to keep her quiet.

Concetta didn't need to worry on that score. While Dani was often opinionated, and deliberately so, much to her mother's distress, she was so shocked right now that words failed her.

As for her father, well, he might as well be a stranger. She obviously didn't know him at all since he clearly lived this whole other life.

He'd never been overly affectionate. Dani had accepted that as being his innate character, but now, as he stared right through her while pandering to his other daughters, she felt the worst kind of betrayal tearing apart her soul.

Close on the heels of that almost overwhelming emotion, disgust shuddered through her body.

Her mother had turned into the simpering, apathetic doll she was always encouraging Dani to be, as she spoke to her padre while his wife stood right next to them!

And his wife, his real wife, Adrianna. Didn't she know?

Was she completely clueless? Or did she, too, accept this as the status quo?

Since she wore the same poise and demeanor as Concetta, it was hard to say.

Was this really how women were supposed to behave?

Well, fuck that, too! No man would ever make a fool of her the way her father was doing to both her mother and his wife.

She was eighteen, but right now she had no saleable skills and the trust fund from her nonno wouldn't come into her possession until she was twenty-one.

And while it was a decent amount, Dani was going to make sure that money worked so hard for her that she never had to rely on some stronzo man for her livelihood.

Until then, she'd have to play her cards close to her chest. Play the long game.

And as for her sexuality? She was claiming that back too.

No more of this 'gotta be a virgin on your wedding night', crap her mother kept forcing down her throat.

If she was going to choke on something, she'd rather it be a cock of her own choosing.

She was going to trade in her V card, be her own woman, and embrace a life of complete independence.

Her lying, conniving parents could go to hell.

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FOUR YEARS AGO

Daniella ‘Dani’ Moreno put the final touches on the presentation she was preparing for her uncle.

Even she knew she’d outdone herself this time. This... this, was what was going to snag her the prestigious promotion she’d been working her butt off for the last six months.

You’d think with it being her uncle’s company, she’d be a shoo-in, but her mother’s brother had never been one for blind nepotism. Even his own son, her cousin Luca, had worked his way up from pool boy in one or another of his father’s resorts.

Of course, Luca had still scaled the ladder far quicker than Dani had, but she supposed that was to be expected, since Zio Lorenzo expected him to take over the company one day.

Not that Luca wasn’t good at his job; he was.

Or that Lorenzo didn’t send Luca on some equally random assignments.

He did; like the ‘mystery shopper’ trips he insisted Luca take to check out their resorts as a customer.

But Luca was the apple of his father’s eye, whereas Dani often felt like she was a piece of lint on his custom-tailored suit. Sometimes she thought he wouldn’t have given her a job at all, if her mother hadn’t insisted Dani needed something

constructive to do with her time.

Her madre was under the mistaken assumption that Dani was going to burn through the inheritance her late grandfather had left her, so even though it went against everything Concetta believed in, she'd insisted the young Dani's time be filled to stop that from happening...

at least until it was time for Dani to settle down and have babies to occupy her time, instead.

After all, Dani's trust fund was supposed to be her dowry.

As if she'd let a man anywhere near her money!

But she had accepted the job her uncle had offered with glee.

Sure, she'd gone to college and gained her business degree. Paid for with her stronzo father's money. But it had only been deemed acceptable because, in her mother's eyes, a good education made her more marriageable, and a good college meant she got to meet a lot of eligible bachelors.

And despite Concetta's beliefs, Dani's wealth was secure.

She'd always invested the money carefully and right now it was probably worth three or four times the amount she'd been bequeathed.

Enough that she could live off of the interest alone if she chose.

It was the financial independence she'd always craved.

But damn it, she was excellent at her job. It wasn't just a filler or something she felt

obliged to do because it was family.

She loved it. The hospitality industry was in her blood.

And not only did she deserve this promotion because of her own hard work and dedication, but there was no one even close to her level of competency. As far as Dani was concerned, it was pretty much in the bag.

But that didn't mean she could rest on her laurels.

Doing an exceptional job was a matter of pride for her and she had a constant thirst to learn, to excel at every part of the business of running a resort, so she stood out as an all-rounder and could turn her hand to anything.

She was definitely a career woman, no matter what her old-fashioned family thought.

Then again, against every expectation she'd had, and every rule she'd made for herself, Dani had met a man...

Simply thinking of Zack had her heart tripping, just as it always did. She strongly suspected she was in love with him. Not that she had any means of comparison, since she'd never allowed a man close enough to battle through the barriers around her heart before.

She'd embraced her sexuality, just as she'd promised herself a decade ago, choosing to keep all her sexcapades relegated to Club Risqué, the high-class kink club she was a member of.

But Zack Kincaid had sneaked through unexpectedly.

Against the odds, she trusted him. It helped that he was a renowned billionaire in his

own right and therefore didn't need her money.

The astonishing fact that the very idea of life without him seemed like an abyss of dread, which scared her to death even more than the obnoxious notion of marriage, convinced her this must be what love felt like.

In his arms, she could actually imagine being a wife and mother for the very first time. But with Zack it would be as an equal... except in the bedroom; the only place Dani was prepared to submit.

She smiled a secret smile at the thought of seeing him that night and hurried to finish her presentation so she could leave and get ready for her evening. Because it was also true to say that Zack Kincaid was the only person who could drag her away from her work.

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Zack walked into Club Risqué and looked around for Dani as he made his way towards the bar.

He always arranged to meet her here. Anything to avoid their hook-ups from seeming too much like a date.

It wasn't that he objected to their relationship heading into deeper territory.

He would have preferred it if he were honest with himself.

He was ready to settle down and start a family, but that was out of the question right now, from a moral point of view, if not a physical one.

And he didn't want to lead her on by offering something he wasn't able to fully commit to. It wasn't fair on her.

Pushing the bitterness out of his mind, he resolved to enjoy their evening and the time they could spend together.

They were well matched when it came to kink. He'd met her here at this very club, twelve months ago, and in that time, things had evolved so they were now exclusive.

He'd resisted it at first. Didn't want to give her the wrong impression, but as time had marched on, he found himself less and less interested in entertaining other play partners.

He simply couldn't bear the thought of having sex with anyone but Dani.

Like he was being unfaithful or something, even though they didn't have any kind of genuine relationship that extended beyond hooking up for a kink scene.

And wasn't that the ultimate irony.

Zack found her talking to a couple of other submissives, and her face lit up when she saw him. She was like a balm to his battered soul.

He walked over and kissed her forehead when she jumped up to greet him. She felt like his safe place. With Dani, everything seemed simple. Oh, he knew it wasn't, but he liked the illusion. It allowed him those precious moments of peace.

She picked up two bottles of water and handed him one, then took his hand and started dragging him off towards the lounge area. Neither of them ever drank alcohol before they scened. He liked that she had the same attitude about that as he did. It was just another small way they fit.

"I wanted to talk to you about a business investment before we started," she told him, her face animated, and he could tell it was something she was enthusiastic about.

While he was ultimately a venture capitalist, he also dabbled as an investment broker, and that part of his job normally consisted of matching the right people to the right kind of investment for them. Once that pairing was successful, he took a commission, and that was the end of his involvement.

Still, he knew his stuff and he could certainly advise Dani on whatever kind of enterprise had her so excited.

It might even be something he was interested in, since their business interests were almost as compatible as their kinks.

While he generally sank his own considerable wealth into cutting edge technologies, he was always on the search for new initiatives.

And he had a knack for recognizing those which showed promise and separating the wheat from the chaff.

It was a talent that had made him a very rich man.

“So, what’s this investment you’re interested in?” he asked as they sat down, and she snuggled into the crook of his arm.

It was a habit they’d developed, which was more than just Dom and sub, but they were both comfortable with it.

“My cousin, Luca, wants to buy a private island and set it up as a resort,” she told him.

Zack frowned; he was familiar with her family business. Their resort chain was second to none. “You’ll have to tell me a bit more, pet,” he encouraged. “Because right now I’m just wondering why he’s not just running it through the company.”

“Well, the company belongs to Zio Lorenzo, and Luca wants this to be his baby,” she replied.

Still not making sense. Yes, the company might belong to his father, but Luca Moreno was set to take over and, since he was the only heir, it wasn’t like there was any doubt there.

“But mostly it’s because he wants to set it up as a kink island, so it won’t fit with the family resorts in Lorenzo’s portfolio. Not even the adults only ones.”

Okay, now it made sense. It was an intriguing idea and one that tantalized him on a personal basis.

“Okay, this island... where is it, what’s the size, the cost and the condition?” He slipped into business mode without even noticing.

Just like Dani slipped into her sales patter.

“The island is approximately five miles by three miles in size, and it’s in the Caribbean, approximately eighty miles east of Miami.

Luca’s negotiating the cost, but he’s hoping to bring it in under ten million dollars.

The island is uninhabited, completely empty, but that’s what he wants.

He’s keen to set up the infrastructure from scratch so it works for the vision he’s got for this place. ”

Zack knew Luca Moreno had both the knowledge and the contacts to pull the scheme off. There was no doubt in his mind about that.

However, building a resort from the ground up was going to take a huge influx of cash, way more than the initial seed money for the purchase of the island itself. It was going to need some very deep pockets, but Zack could see the definite advantages of setting up a kink resort that way.

“I think the big question is whether it would cover the investment with kink alone,” he told Dani after some consideration.

“Plus, you need to ask him if all those involved are going to be in the lifestyle. That’s certainly the best way to do it.

It circumvents any chance of misunderstanding between investors about the intricacies of the BDSM lifestyle.

Certainly, a project on this scale doesn't need someone pulling out because they don't understand the differences between consensual kink and abuse, and we all know that's a very real concern. ”

He scratched at the stubble he hadn't shaved, simply because Dani liked the feel of it against her skin, and continued. “If it was me, that's a condition I'd insist on to minimize the risk. It means finding the capital will take longer... but it would be worth it for that kind of peace of mind.”

Dani pursed her lips. “You're right, and he might even have already made that decision, but it's definitely something I need to find out. But what did you mean when you talked about whether the investment could be covered by kink alone?”

“I mean the outlay is going to be massive and the kink community - especially those who are going to be able to afford what I'm guessing is going to be a high-class resort - are going to be a fraction of the number of general holiday makers you and Luca are used to dealing with in your uncle's company.

That makes it a catch twenty-two situation.

The fewer visitors, the more you'll need to charge.

The more you charge, the less people can afford it. ”

Dani plucked at her bottom lip, and a crease in the middle of her eyebrows marred her smooth complexion. “I understand what you mean, but I'm not sure what the answer is,” she revealed, a hint of worry creeping into her voice.

Zack hated to burst her bubble, but there were still options. “The island is big enough that you have the option to build two hotels that could be amply distanced from each other. One could be Luca’s kink dream, the other could be a regular adults-only venue which would bring in more cash.”

“That’s a great idea,” Dani exclaimed, her excitement catching fire again.

“It also presents a number of options to create the kind of paradise even those in the lifestyle crave for more than just a kinky weekend, meaning they’d extend their breaks if there were additional facilities.”

She flung her arms around him and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. “You really should talk to Luca about this. You have so much insight,” she whispered as she nibbled on his earlobe. “The two of you would make a great team.”

The intoxicating smell of her perfume brought Zack back to the present and the fact that there was a private playroom upstairs with his name on the reservation.

He didn’t think she was necessarily trying to recruit him as an investor, but he had to admit, he was kind of tempted.

But right now, there were much more interesting things to explore. Surging to his feet, he pulled her up with him and headed for the stairs. It was time to give his little entrepreneur a reward for all her hard work.

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“ Strip off your clothing, Daniella,” Zack demanded as soon as they’d closed the door of the suspension room behind them.

While his smooth flow from social into business mode had been seamless, his swap to Dom mode was like a switch being flipped and showed a completely different side of him.

One that made Dani’s skin burst out into goosebumps and her abdomen clench in anticipation.

He took a skein of deep red rope from his toy bag.

It was his favorite color on her. He said it complemented her olive skin.

It also meant he was feeling indulgent. He usually used black or plain hemp rope when he wasn’t.

And if he was in the mood for something particularly intricate, he used white for contrast.

Dani loved the feel of the rope. It was something that almost defied explanation. It was as if being bound set her free.

She worked long, hard hours and was always on the go. Shibari forced her to stop, to do nothing. To switch off for a few precious hours and just feel.

It worked as much for her overactive brain as it did for her hyperactive habits, and

she had come to rely on it as a form of relaxation. It forced her out of her head, forced her to be still and quiet, and brought her a special kind of peace she'd never found anywhere else.

She could feel the stresses of her working week starting to drain from her at just the thought of what was to come. She finished undressing and stood with her eyes closed, soaking up the swirling, erotic atmosphere that simply being here, at Club Risqué, with Zack created.

Sometimes he blindfolded her but today was not one of those days.

Still, Dani kept her eyes closed so she could absorb every subtle nuance as he began draping her body in rope, decorating her with knots; so she could concentrate on the feel of the strands against her skin.

Sometimes rough, sometimes smooth; always tantalizing.

He took his time, making sure every single twist and loop, every ligature and fastening, was perfect.

She forgot all her insecurities about her overly curvy body; her wide hips that weren't in balance with her average breasts, or the slight paunch of her stomach.

Zack made her feel beautiful.

Each coil of the rope around her body took her deeper within herself, to that special place where nothing but calm and tranquility existed, until she felt like she was floating.

The squeeze around her breasts had her nipples pouting and throbbing like they were begging for his mouth.

And the strategically placed knots which ran down her center had already started their dastardly dilemma; rubbing against her clit and making her want to find just that little bit more friction, which would lead to the ultimate pleasure.

Except she was forbidden to come.

He didn't need to say it. It was an unspoken rule that in any scene they did, she must not climax without permission.

If she did, he'd cut things short and instead of finishing the night with the deeply drugging satisfaction and irresistible intimacy of intercourse, he'd put her on her knees and fuck her face. Taking his own pleasure since she had constructed her own without him.

She'd made that mistake once and learned her lesson.

Plus, it was never as satisfying to steal a forbidden climax as it was to struggle against the eroticism until she received the ultimate prize of their passionate, carnal coupling. Nothing came close to touching her as deeply as that, and it was so worth the wait.

When he finished with the bindings, Zack took the next step; attaching special pulley ropes with carabiner hooks fastened to them, so he could string her up and suspend her in whichever position it pleased him to fuck her in.

Today her arms were stretched together above her head, her ankles crossed and bound, connected to a rope that drew them up horizontally in front of her.

Zack pressed her knees apart, then ducked down and wedged his lean, runners' body in between so that he was enveloped within the circle of her legs.

He'd stripped naked himself and she could feel the heat of his skin against her own, the sensual rasp of flesh against flesh. Soft against hard.

She looked at his handsome face. His normally perfectly groomed hair flopped into his eyes, and he'd removed his glasses so there was nothing screening his stunning blue eyes.

It was the only time she ever saw him without them, and somehow that felt like another intimacy; something only she got to see.

His hands stroked reverently across her skin, over and in between his ropes, and she felt as cherished as if he were caressing some precious jewel.

Mere words alone could never describe the sublime sensations he brought to her world.

Perhaps that was why she'd fallen for him. He gave her so very much.

Was it selfish of her to want even more?

The thoughts scattered, washed away on the tide of desire when he leaned in and took one of her straining, pouting nipples into his mouth.

Dani choked on a gasp as pleasure flowed through her in molten rivers which swirled in her abdomen, then settled into her pussy, evidenced by the slick wetness that coated her thighs.

He took long, lazy suckles which ramped up her desire and had her writhing while the knot on her clit drove her dangerously close to the edge of a precipice she didn't want to topple over.

“Please...” she begged him, but his only answer was to nip at her sensitized flesh. The quick flash of pain was a double-edged sword. It cooled her lust on the one hand but had her bucking against the clit knot and stimulating that little bundle of nerves, unbearably, on the other.

His low chuckle told her Zack knew exactly the predicament she was in.

He took his sweet time and laved her other breast while Dani wiggled, and panted, and strained against her bonds; anything to prevent the spiral of arousal that would lead to her downfall.

Small whimpering sobs and nonsense words fell from her lips as her skin became clammy with the tell-tale bloom of lustful hunger.

“Please Master, please,” she implored. “I can’t stop it any longer.”

Still, he forced her closer to the edge, until desperation colored her voice. Finally, he took pity on her and drove into her dripping, clenching channel in a single, fluid thrust which almost forced her to topple over the precipice on which she balanced.

Dani screamed her frustration, letting out her pent-up feelings in the only other way she knew how.

Zack set up a frantic pace, using the rope suspension like a swing which allowed him to penetrate so deeply he bottomed out against her cervix with each and every powerful plunge.

The momentum meant he forced the knotted rope to rub abrasively against her clit with every driving jolt and the painful pressure had her flying even higher until she was sobbing in earnest.

She couldn't hold it any longer.

Her limbs were shaking with the effort of trying to hold back the impossible tide which was about to crash over her, and her thighs quivered.

Finally, finally, he gave her the words she was desperate to hear. "Come, Daniella. Come now!"

And those words had her shattering, the pieces of her soul flying apart before they coalesced into a shimmering light and became whole again.

Zack let out a guttural groan and threw back his head, the strong column of his throat straining as the tendons in his neck tensed and he chased his own climax.

Later, when she was freed and cleaned up, he fed her squares of chocolate and sips of water while she snuggled into him and stroked his chest. She wished they were both still naked, but that was something that never seemed to be a part of his aftercare.

He always ensured they were fully dressed before he settled.

Dani felt sated and lulled, and maybe that's why she spoke before she fully thought things through. Voicing something that had been on her mind for a while now.

"Zack," Dani began tentatively. "Do you think perhaps we could just... go out for a drink together or something, sometime? I mean nothing full on, just maybe see each other in a location, a situation, outside the club. It's just... we even discuss business here. It kind of feels awkward sometimes."

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Zack sighed. He should have seen this coming. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Dani,” he said as gently as he could.

She looked hurt and confused, and for a moment, Zack was tempted to reconsider.

“But... why not?” she whispered. “I thought things were good between us. That we had something more than just shared kink going for us. Like maybe there could be more...”

“I agree, Dani. I feel the same way, but... things are... difficult.”

She pulled out of his arms and frowned at him, her eyes narrowing. “I don’t like the sound of that. What does that even mean?” she asked, and he could hear the suspicion coloring her voice.

Damn it, this was not the way he wanted to have this conversation. He wasn’t ready. He hadn’t thought through the best way to tell her, so she’d fully understand; so he didn’t mess everything up.

But perhaps it was best to have everything out in the open. There was no way he could enter into a relationship without telling her.

He sighed and took a leap of faith.

“I’m married,” he told her, then winced.

It sounded dreadful. Too blunt. He knew he should have waited to have this

conversation until he was ready.

Sometime when they weren't both blissed out by sex and kink, and his brain was functioning on only half its blood flow because the rest had been expended by his cock.

"You're married?" she repeated in a shocked whisper, the blood draining from her face and leaving her pale, despite her tanned complexion.

"But... but you're getting divorced, right? You and your wife are finished, but the process isn't yet complete... right?" She said it with a hint of desperation, like she was clutching at straws.

Zack grimaced, and Dani's mouth fell open. "Not exactly," he told her truthfully. "It's complicated."

"How complicated can it be, Zack?" She scooted away from him now, jumping off the couch and putting a distance between them that was more than just physical.

"You're either married, or you're done with the relationship and terminating it.

So just answer me honestly: Are you getting divorced any time soon? That's all I need to know."

"I..." Zack closed his eyes and rubbed his hands over his face. This was not going to plan - not that he'd had any plan. But he'd hoped for better than this. He could already feel everything spiraling out of control.

He climbed off the couch himself. He needed to be close to her. To feel the bond they shared.

“Dani...” He exhaled a breath and took her in his arms. She allowed it, but he hated the rigidity he could feel in her frame. But she’d asked him for the truth. How could he give her anything less? “No, I’m not, but...” He didn’t get any further.

“Then you’re nothing but a nasty, lying cheat.” She pushed him away from her so forcefully he stumbled backwards.

“Look, I know it sounds bad, but it’s not like that.

Please, let me explain,” he begged as she grabbed her belongings and headed for the door.

He didn’t want to leave things like this.

He needed to tell her the whole story. What the hell had possessed him to start this conversation here, in a theme room of a kink club, where they were surrounded by people, and the privacy ended just as soon as she walked through that door?

Dani shook her head, her eyes a little wild and showing a tell-tale sheen of tears behind her fury.

“Save it,” she shouted as she fumbled with the latch.

“I’m not interested. Just stay away from me, Zack.

I don’t do married men, and I can’t believe you’ve deceived me all this time.

I can’t believe you cheapened what we had by making me nothing more than a mistress to a cheater. ”

Zack closed his eyes in despair as the door slammed close behind her.

None of that had gone right. The words didn't come out the way he wanted, and everything had been twisted.

This was why he'd always kept his distance. Was she right, though? Was he a cheat?

He didn't think he was, then again, maybe he was biased.

But how the hell could he be faithful to a girl he'd been coerced into marrying when he was just fifteen years old?

Not even officially an adult. And his 'bride', and he used the term with caution, had been only twelve, and had looked a whole lot younger.

He'd met her for the first time that same dreadful day, for maybe fifteen minutes, and he hadn't seen her since.

All because his father and her mother had signed some kind of contract and gave their consent for the underage marriage of their children.

And yes, it was legal!

Right here in the United States, it was legal. He'd had his lawyers check into it years ago, when the full significance of the deed had finally crashed down on him.

To this day, the USA had marriage laws which allowed children as young as twelve to be married with their parents' permission. Younger, though that was rare.

Who knew!

And the contract was legally binding as well.

He'd checked that too, hoping it could be voided on the grounds that he hadn't agreed.

But since he was a minor at the time, it seemed his father had all the rights.

Zack had to remain married to Emylyah Kincaid nee Baskov for eighteen years before he could seek an end to the charade.

And he still had another few years to wait.

Zack wondered if he should go after Dani and try to make her listen.

But truth be known, he was angry with her, too, for storming out without giving him the chance to explain.

For not having enough faith in him to realize the truth could be far more involved than the simple yes or no answer she had demanded.

If she couldn't give him at least that much, then what was the point in prostrating himself for someone who didn't want to listen?

Perhaps, despite her pretty words, she didn't care enough to want to find out. He saw it all the time in his line of business; how people said they wanted something but changed their minds when it wasn't as straight forward or as easy as they thought it would be.

But even if she did, what did he have to offer? It might be a technicality, but he was still a married man.

Dani was right in that much, at least.

Maybe it was better this way.

Better to just let things go and see if there were any pieces worth picking up when he was finally in a position to pursue her.

And if there weren't, well, he guessed it would never have worked out in the first place, and maybe they'd just saved themselves a whole lot more heartache.

But there was at least one way he could keep tabs on her until he finally became a free man.

Picking up the phone, Zack looked up the number for Dani's cousin, Luca Moreno, and dialed it.

"Moreno," the disembodied voice on the other end of the phone introduced himself.

"Hello, Mr. Moreno, my name is Zack Kincaid. I'm a venture capitalist and investment broker, and your cousin, Daniella, was telling me about your new kink resort project. She says you're looking for investors... I'd like to buy into it as a silent partner."

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Dani threw herself into her work. If there was one area where she was confident, then it was here. And what better way to prep for that promotion than to throw in a few extra hours?

Besides, if she tired herself out, she didn't have to think about what a lying, cheating bastard Zack Kincaid was.

She didn't have time to concentrate on how much her heart hurt and why she couldn't understand how she'd read him so wrong.

Because he'd never come across as someone who had a wife at home or like he was sneaking around behind someone's back.

Then again, her own parents had fooled her for eighteen years too, so maybe she was just a terrible judge.

She erased all those questions from her mind. It didn't matter. Facts were facts, and those had been established.

No point in crying over spilt milk. The damage was already done. She gave herself the pep talk at the same time as she brushed away yet another tear; one more to add to the sea she'd already cried along with all those other platitudes she'd quoted to herself.

Plenty more fish in the sea.

Narrow escape.

Every cloud has a silver lining.

Blessings in disguise.

Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. She wasn't sure if she believed that one yet.

It didn't matter though, she told herself with absolute determination.

It just meant she had more time to dedicate to her job.

She was going to need it once she got this promotion, because there was going to be a huge amount to do to launch the new marketing plan she was putting to the board this afternoon.

It was the most ambitious proposal she'd ever delivered, but she was confident it was also ingenious and would set their top line at an all-time high.

But it was complicated, so she'd be needing all that extra time to put it into action.

If she told herself that enough, she might start believing it.

Besides, hadn't she always told herself men were bad news.

Better all around to keep it to just sex.

So, she dried her eyes, touched up her make-up and dived into her presentation with the plan to knock their socks off.

And she did.

Even Zio Lorenzo was impressed, and he was always a hard sell.

“Ah! Daniella. This is truly inspired,” he congratulated, and Dani could feel his faith in her filling up all the empty places Zack’s departure had left.

She was going to be fine.

There was a babble around the room as the board members commented and complimented her, and all of it buoyed her and filled Dani with a new hope for the future.

Luca got up from his seat, right in front of everyone, and gave her a hug; told her what a brilliant job she had done.

Everything was going to be alright.

Lorenzo started talking again, and everyone settled down. “While we’re all here, this seems like the most opportune time to announce the promotions I promised.”

Dani’s heart soared. This was it. Everything she’d ever worked for. She’d delivered a presentation that had impressed everyone, and now she was going to get her reward.

She didn’t need Zack Kincaid. She didn’t need any man. She had all she needed right here.

Everything was going to be perfect.

Lorenzo announced a couple of the minor roles, and there was muted applause with each one.

Then it was time for hers. She held her breath, almost unable to contain her

excitement.

She felt like she might burst, but that would have to come later.

Right now, she needed to behave like the consummate professional she was.

“And finally, I’d like to announce the promotion for the position of Promotions Director.”

There was a hushed silence around the room.

It was the first time a directorship had become available in all the years Dani had been working here, and that was over a decade.

Well, not unless you counted Luca’s, but that had been a made-up post, because he was the owner’s son and future heir.

There wasn’t likely to be another coming up anytime soon.

“As I’m sure you’re all aware, this is a very important and prominent position, so I’ve given it a great deal of thought.” Lorenzo droned on, and Dani wished he’d just get on with it. She hated all this suspense.

“I’m sure you’ll all agree that the best person for the job is...”

He paused, smiling from ear to ear, milking the build-up before he announced, with a flourish.

“Justin James.”

There was a muted, almost awkward scatter of applause as the man in question

popped up and pumped her uncle's hand.

Dani felt like there was a loud roaring sound in her ears, while everything seemed to be happening in slow motion.

For a long, long moment she sat there, right next to the display showing what they'd said was her amazing presentation, completely stunned.

Her mouth hung open, her eyes widened in sheer disbelief, as shock coursed through her body on a surge wave of adrenaline, until her brain finally caught up with the events that unfolded before her, and the shock was replaced with the kind of fatal anger that wiped out every other emotion.

In her peripheral vision, her subconscious catalogued the uncomfortable shuffling of several other board members as they looked from her, to an oblivious Lorenzo, to Justin.

Even Luca's handsome face was a rictus of surprise, then annoyance, proving he'd been left out of this equation, too.

If looks could kill... now there was another metaphor that was going to be used today.

Dani turned her furious gaze on Lorenzo, and even he had the awareness to look taken aback by the lethal venom that must be pouring off of her.

"Is this your idea of a joke?" she asked in a voice that dripped ice as she slowly rose to her feet. And she was damn proud of how composed and calm she sounded, when underneath that veneer of surface calm she was a seething mass of boiling anger.

"I've worked all hours to bring you the best marketing plan ever, and you give my

promotion to someone who's worked here half the years I have and has a fraction of my experience?"

"Now, now dear," Lorenzo said in that obsequious tone that proved he was just humoring her.

"What's the point in promoting you into a man's job, when you'll just end up leaving to pop out babies as soon as Concetta secures you a husband?"

I know my sister's been working on finding you the perfect suitor, and we all know that will happen soon; you're not getting any younger, after all. "

"Papa..." Luca's shocked voice issued a warning to his father, but Dani didn't hear anything that was said over the eruption of shocked, murmured whispers that buzzed around the room.

She clenched her jaw as a red haze swam before her eyes. She fisted her hands and held them rigidly at her sides because the urge to lash out, physically, and transfer some of the hurt and betrayal currently overwhelming her was a very real threat.

The straw that broke the camels' back. Now there was a very pertinent idiom, because that was her.

No more.

No more would she slog her guts out just to have the rug pulled out from under her feet just when she thought she'd reached her goal.

Things crystallized for her then. She'd never be anything, in her uncle's or her mother's eyes, except a little woman who would one day marry and have babies, which was exactly what her place should be.

No matter how hard she worked, or how hard she tried, he was too blinkered to see her value, and her conniving mother simply encouraged him.

Well, so be it. If he thought he could manage without her so easily, then he could start right now.

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. That was something her uncle would do well to mind.

“I quit,” she said through gritted teeth, and suddenly the room was quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

“Now don’t be so ridiculous and melodramatic, Daniella,” her uncle reprimanded. “Concetta hasn’t found the right man for you just yet, so there’s plenty of time for you to help out.”

He just didn’t get it.

Lorenzo shook his head and looked at her as if she were a difficult child who needed to be cajoled. “I still need you to assist Justin in getting your marketing plan up and running.”

She stared at him through eyes narrowed to slits. “Well, I’m sure since you think Justin is more competent and deserving of a directorship than I am, he’ll be perfectly capable of handling it himself.” Dani sneered, derision dripping from her voice like poison.

He wouldn’t, but she’d be damned if she spent one more fraction of a second on anyone who didn’t appreciate her worth. And if her uncle came to regret it, then perhaps he’d learn a valuable lesson. One far too long in coming. And as for her mother...

Picking up her purse, she turned on her heel. She didn't bother stopping at her office. There was nothing she needed to take with her.

Instead, she walked right on out of the building for what she swore to herself would be the last time.

It was time to find something else to do with her life.

There was nothing left for her here anymore.

Not in this company; not in this city.

Luckily, she knew of a brand-new island resort that might just have an opening for someone with her skill set. And it had the added benefit of being far, far away from her mother's matchmaking schemes.

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PRESENT DAY

Four years!

It had been four long, but mostly rewarding years, during which Dani had worked hard to put the disappointments of the past behind her.

To erase the time she'd wasted not only working for her uncle, but the months where she'd betrayed her own convictions regarding men and relationships and stupidly believed Zack Kincaid was her soulmate.

While it was true she'd wasted far more of her life believing hard work and excellence would mean Zio Lorenzo would promote her in what she already knew to be a chauvinistic, male dominated business, the effort she'd put in at least meant she excelled in her job.

And there were others far less prejudiced who were happy to make the most of her drive and talent.

She now earned four times more than she had working for her uncle.

Not that she needed the money, but the accomplishment?

The appreciation? Well, that was a different thing.

By comparison, the twelve short months she'd spent falling deeper under the spell of Zack Kincaid had been far harder to get over.

Like time was somehow stretched into infinity, the pain of the implosion an endless loop that chased itself around and around without ever losing momentum.

It wasn't just because he'd betrayed everything she believed in by cheapening their connection since he had a wife; it was because she'd betrayed her own ideals by allowing him close enough to hurt her.

Like her childhood hadn't taught her anything.

The pain may have dulled over the years, but it never left. Instead, it had turned into a blunted ache that had become her new 'normal'.

Or at least it had been until now.

Dani rued the day she'd asked Zack's advice about Luca's ambitious plans for his private kink-friendly island paradise in the Caribbean.

Or that she'd given him Luca's contact details.

Because even after the acrimonious way she'd walked away from him, Zack had gone on to become an investor in the island himself - one of the biggest, at that - so whether she liked it or not, Dani was forced to send him regular updates and answer whatever queries he posed.

It made it impossible for her to ever get him fully out of her head.

Until now, he'd been a silent partner, never visiting the island after the inaugural weekend. But for some reason that had changed, and here he was. Not just on the island, but right here in her damn office where she couldn't avoid him.

Dani took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves.

She couldn't let him see how much his presence affected her.

"So, Zack," she said, aiming for a casual tone, "Luca says you're here to overhaul our mainframe, although I'm not sure why that calls for a venture capitalist, rather than our usual IT guy, Kris Warwick. He's always been thorough. "

Okay, so a smidge of irritation might have crept into her voice. Maybe more than a smidge.

Zack's liquid blue eyes met hers, that familiar intensity, even behind the lenses of his glasses, making her breath catch.

He nodded. "That's right. And yes, Warwick is very capable, but he doesn't have access to the technology I do, and since this stuff's not even on the open market, it's not something I can hand over.

However, I'm sure you'll agree, given the nature of this resort, our special members require the utmost peace of mind when it comes to their privacy. "

Dani bristled. Was there a hint of censure in his voice?

Figlio di puttana! She ran this island. Of course she knew how important it was for their kink patrons to be completely assured of the dependability of their systems!

Did he think she couldn't do her job? Was he simply a younger version of her uncle?

Someone who believed women should remain pregnant and barefoot?

Dani took a deep breath; she needed to cool her jets.

It was true that after the way her family had treated her, she was a little sensitive

when it came to that particular subject, and had a tendency to react badly when she came up against it, even if the whole thing was perceived and existed only in her own mind.

But that didn't change the fact Zack was a freaking billionaire investor, not a computer expert. How the hell did he manage to turn that around on her?

Dani felt like one of those cartoon characters where steam came out of their ears when they were mad... And this conversation was pointless.

Pulling herself together, determined not to let Zack know just how much his presence unnerved her, she waved vaguely at the computer system.

"Well, don't let me keep you from your work," she responded, her tone positively arctic.

"I'm sure you have a lot to do. It must be a novelty for you to get your hands dirty."

Porca miseria! Not quite as insouciant as she'd like. How did he always bring out the worst in her?

She sucked in a slow, deep breath to center herself, and made to leave, but Zack didn't move. Instead, he leaned against her desk, arms folded across his chest as he blocked her way. "Actually, I was hoping we could catch up. It's been a while, Dani."

She felt a flash of anger reignite at his presumption. Okay, so it already wasn't that far under the surface, but she was trying! Why was the universe against her all of a sudden? "I'm not sure that's a good idea. We didn't exactly part on the best terms, if you recall."

"I remember," he said softly. "But maybe it's time we cleared the air. We're going to

be seeing a lot of each other while I'm here."

Panic skittered up Dani's spine. Was it too late to book a holiday?

She pushed the thought aside. She'd never been a quitter. She'd never avoided confrontation. Hell, she was where she was today precisely because of those two character traits. No way Zack fucking Kincaid was chasing her out of the place which had become her home.

Instead, she straightened her spine and looked straight into those damnably beautiful eyes... before moving her gaze to hit a spot slightly over his shoulder. So, she wasn't a total badass. Sue her.

"There's nothing to say, Zack. You turned me into your mistress. You cheated on your wife. I walked away because I wasn't prepared to be that person, and any respect I had for you fled at the same time."

"And what if I told you the situation is nothing like you believe it to be? That it's not neatly black and white. You never did allow me to explain."

Dani's heart raced at the thought. Was there even the smallest chance he could say something that would change anything?

No. Absolutely not. Dani refused to let him drag her back into the past. She'd spent too long rebuilding herself, her life, her career. Her beliefs! She wouldn't let him destroy it all again with pretty words and false promises.

Steeling herself against the part of her that wanted to concede, she pushed away from the desk. "It doesn't matter now, Zack. What's done is done. We both need to focus on the present - on our jobs here at the resort."

She gestured around her office, desperate to change the subject. "Speaking of which, I have a lot of work to do. When can I expect the system to be back online?"

Zack's eyes narrowed slightly, clearly frustrated by her deflection. But after a moment, he seemed to accept it, his shoulders dropping as he finally moved out of her way, suddenly all business. "I should have everything up and running in a few days. I'll need access to the server room and your office computer to complete the installation. Then it's just a question of finalizing the data transfers. That could take a while. Luca says you have a back-up system you can use in the interim. We'll keep that completely separate until the new system is up and running. But once we know everything is working properly on the mainframe, I'll move on to that. "

Dani nodded, annoyed with herself for the sudden loss she felt at his change in demeanor. This was what she'd wanted. Wasn't it? "Fine. I'll make sure you have the necessary clearances."

"Natalie..." She called in her assistant from the outer office. "Can you show Mr. Kincaid to the server room, please?"

"Of course," Natalie responded with a bright smile, her interest in Zack clear as she looked him up and down before leading him away.

One of the downsides of living in such a confined environment; everyone knew your business. And Natalie was her friend - as good as family, since Luca was the father of Natalie's half-brother - and in a moment of frustration Dani had admitted her previous relationship with Zack to her friend group.

Collapsing back into her office chair, Dani slumped in defeat. How was it Zack still had this effect on her? She'd thought circumstance had cured her of that particular infatuation.

It had been years. Longer than the time they'd spent together. Surely, she should be over him by now. Never mind that he wasn't the man she'd thought him to be.

She was the one who'd walked away. And hindsight had shown her how Zack had always deliberately held her at arm's length. She just hadn't wanted to see it at the time.

But somehow, there was still some dratted kernel of conjecture that had her wondering if there was really anything he could say to make things right. Jeez! What was wrong with her?

Sex, she decided. That's all it was. She hadn't trusted any man since coming to Elysium, burying herself in her work, instead.

Her neglected libido simply recognized the source that had once given her unimaginable pleasure.

There was nothing more to it than a primal, animalistic response. One that could be controlled.

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Zack contained his disappointment behind a veneer of professionalism. He'd always known getting Dani to listen to him would be an uphill struggle. She'd made up her mind, but he'd hoped the passing of time would have softened her stance a little.

He'd been angry himself, after all, at her complete and utter refusal to let him explain, but that had diminished into an abiding sadness over the time they'd been apart. A longer time, by far, than they'd even been together.

Not that they'd ever really been together. Not in the true sense.

But in all that time, the memory of Daniella Moreno had never left him. It was like she'd infected his blood.

Zack had truly thought he would mark what had happened between them up to experience and move on. Find another play partner and learn from his mistakes with Dani.

Truth was, he'd become even more of a recluse in the past four years than he had been before. And that was saying something.

Oh, he'd tried all right. But somehow, whenever he went to a club, he just couldn't bring himself to scene with anyone else.

He couldn't imagine another woman bound in his ropes.

There had been the odd vanilla hook-up along the way, just to slake a need, but they'd always proved unsatisfying.

The women got off, he made sure of that, but Zack himself was always left with a deep sense of disappointment, so in the end he'd stopped bothering altogether.

He'd wondered if being here on Elysium, so close to Iniquity, the kink club the island was built around, would whet his appetite again.

That seeing Dani would prove his feelings for her were simply rooted in memories which had long since lost their power, and he'd be able to look at her like any other woman.

That maybe he could move on with his life.

Instead, it had just cemented his resolve. No way could he even consider playing with anyone else. Not with Dani so close, and yet so far away. That was something he needed to ruminate on, but not even a night tossing and turning with her on his mind had brought him to any clear conclusion.

He sighed, looking out the window at the lush tropical landscape. Somehow, the beauty only emphasized his melancholy. Four years of regret and what-ifs had led him back here, though not for the reasons he'd always imagined.

Zack forced himself to focus. He had a job to do.

Saul's identity had been compromised and now his life depended on Zack pinpointing the information that would keep him alive while he hid out in the sanctuary of this island.

Although seeing her again had been what tipped the balance when he'd agreed to come, his own drama with Dani couldn't interfere with that.

Even so, speaking to her face to face yesterday, had reopened old wounds he'd

thought long healed. He recognized that much, at least.

The way she'd looked at him - with that mixture of shock, anger and something else he couldn't quite define - played on repeat in his mind. There was still a spark there, he was sure of it. But Dani clearly had no interest in exploring it. Plus, he was lying to her again, something he hadn't properly considered when he accepted Luca's plea to help Saul.

And even though the first time hadn't been intentional, he doubted she'd see things that way.

She hadn't then, and he suspected she'd be even worse now.

Things with Dani were always so cut and dried, there was no room for any shades of grey in how she thought.

It was all or nothing. If he tried to mend things and she found out he was here under false pretenses, not running security on the mainframe computer at all, but using it to scour the dark web at her cousin's request, he doubted she'd give him the time of day ever again.

He'd be lying if he said he hadn't wanted to test the waters. To see if her harsh opinion of him had lessened over the years. See if there was still anything between them.

But so far anything positive was in short supply.

No. It was a mistake to approach her. Better for everyone involved to keep things strictly professional. He'd tread carefully, get the work done and get out. No matter how much it killed him to be so close to her and yet unable to bridge the chasm between them.

He just hoped he could stick to that decision, because goddamn, the woman tempted him beyond all reason. Even when she was sending him very clear 'fuck off' vibes.

A knock at the door startled him from his brooding. "Come in," he called, turning from the window.

The door opened to reveal Dani herself, looking composed but wary.

Fuck, she was beautiful with the glossy black hair and fathomless dark eyes of her Italian heritage.

"I thought we should go over the specifics of the mainframe upgrade, so I understand it fully," she said, her tone cool and professional.

"I've scheduled a meeting with the IT team for tomorrow morning, but I wanted to touch base with you first."

Zack nodded, grateful for the distraction from his thoughts, even though her attention to detail left him with a conundrum. Why hadn't he considered how detail-oriented Dani was. He should have known it would never have been as easy as just spinning her a line and Dani accepting it.

"Of course. Please, have a seat." He gestured to the chair across from his desk, trying not to notice how gracefully she moved as she sat down. She was slimmer than she used to be, but still delectably curvy. And all business.

"I've prepared a preliminary outline of the system requirements," Dani continued, pulling a tablet from her bag. "I'd like you to review it and let me know if there are any areas we've overlooked."

As she spoke, Zack couldn't help but marvel at her composure. If he didn't know

better, he'd think their past had never happened. But there was a stiffness in her shoulders, a tightness around her eyes that betrayed her discomfort.

"I appreciate your thoroughness," he said, accepting the tablet. Their fingers brushed for the briefest moment, and he felt an electric jolt at the contact. Dani jerked her hand back as if burned.

"It's my job," she replied curtly. "The resort's security is paramount during any system upgrade." She paused, a flicker of uncertainty crossing her face.

Zack met her gaze steadily. "Of course. There won't be any weak points during the swap over. Client privacy will always be my top priority." He hesitated, then added softly, "You know that, Dani."

Her eyes flashed with a mix of emotions - anger, pain, and something that looked suspiciously like longing.

But it was gone in an instant, replaced by her professional mask.

"I know nothing of the sort," she said coolly. "And while our past association is irrelevant to this project, the one thing it taught me was caution where you're concerned. We have very different ideas of what is pertinent information."

The words stung. More than stung. They were like tiny daggers digging in just where it hurt most, but Zack couldn't deny their truth.

He had no right to expect anything from her, not after how things had ended.

"You're right," he conceded. "I apologies for the inappropriate comment. It won't happen again."

Dani nodded stiffly, but Zack noticed her hands trembling slightly as she reached for her tablet. "Good. Now, regarding the firewall upgrades..."

As she launched into the technical details, Zack found himself only half-listening.

He was acutely aware of every subtle shift in her posture, every flicker of emotion that crossed her face.

Despite her attempts at detachment, he could sense the underlying tension between them.

It was a living, breathing thing, filling the air with an almost palpable electricity.

As Dani delved into the intricacies of data encryption protocols, Zack found his mind wandering to less professional territory.

He couldn't help but remember the way she used to look at him during a scene - eyes dark with desire, body trembling with anticipation.

The contrast between that passionate woman and the coolly efficient administrator before him now was stark.

"Are you even listening?" Dani's sharp tone snapped him back to the present.

"Of course," Zack replied smoothly, though he felt a flush of guilt at being caught daydreaming. "I was just considering the potential vulnerabilities in the current system so I can evaluate them effectively."

Dani's eyes narrowed, clearly not buying his excuse. "This isn't a game, Zack. If Luca is to be believed, the safety and privacy of our guests depend on this upgrade, although I personally have never felt there was a problem."

"I'm well aware of that," he responded, a hint of irritation creeping into his voice. He didn't like the way she'd posed that last statement. Like maybe she didn't completely believe the line her cousin had weaved.

And why should she? She knew this system inside out.

Like she said, if there was an issue, she'd be the first to know.

Not Luca. And while the two of them had the best intentions to safeguard Saul, his presence was a need-to-know basis only. And Dani didn't need to know.

But jeez, she really was going to kill him if she ever found out this upgrade was all a ruse.

And from how engaged she was with the procedure, he knew he was going to have to come up with something to satisfy her on that score.

Thank fuck he had access to some state-of-the-art systems. He hadn't planned to use them here, but it was the only way he'd get through this without her eviscerating him.

And if he was completely honest, Zack didn't think he could stomach Dani looking at him again with the same disappointment, disgust, and heartbreak as she had during their last encounter at Club Risqué.

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She couldn't do this. That was the first thing Dani thought the following morning as she caught sight of Zack working conscientiously, while she waited on the remaining staff to arrive for the meeting she'd insisted on.

Why in the name of all things holy, did Zack still have such an effect on her? Four years and a boatload of betrayal surely should have crushed those first delicate sprouts of love she'd felt for him back then.

They hadn't been nurtured or enriched. In fact, they'd been brutally beaten down with the back of the spade of deceit and trampled under the boots of disillusionment before being left to rot from neglect.

So how the hell could there still be even the remotest kernel of attraction waiting to germinate into something more?

She didn't want this. Maybe she should just cancel the meeting and take some time off.

Yeah. She was due a shitload of vacation time. She should just leave Natalie in charge and go... do... something.

But if she really felt that way, then why the hell was there a part of her that wanted to completely immerse herself in Zack for as long as she possibly could?

Sex, she reminded herself. "And you've obviously got a humiliation kink you never knew about," she muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” her cousin asked, sauntering into her office.

Dani started. “Nothing,” she mumbled, giving herself a mental shake and turning the conversation around. “So, what exactly is this upgrade for?” she asked Luca instead. “Because I certainly haven’t noticed any issues with our current system. Certainly not anything requiring this level of overhaul.”

Was it her imagination, or was there a flash of guilt in his eyes before his normal suave veneer settled into place? “We have a unique opportunity,” he told her vaguely. “But let’s discuss it in the meeting. After all, that’s why you called it, I assume?”

Luca didn’t wait for a reply, just moved past her into the boardroom with a grace a man his size shouldn’t possess, where several other employees were now assembled, Zack included.

“Good morning.” Following him in, she addressed the assembled staff members.

Greg Taylor, the manager of Iniquity. Jonah Harris, the manager of the Tartarean Hotel, where all their lifestyle guests stayed.

Her assistant, Natalie, who had their general IT consultant, Kris Warwick, on video call, and Colt James, their head of security.

Dani took a deep breath, steeling herself.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice.

As you're aware, we have a major system upgrade happening, courtesy of.

.." She paused, gesturing toward Zack without meeting his eyes.

"Mr. Kincaid here. I'd like to discuss how this will impact our various departments and ensure we have contingency plans in place. "

She turned to Luca, arching an eyebrow. "Perhaps you'd like to start by explaining exactly what we can expect?"

Luca cleared his throat, his usual confidence seeming slightly strained. "Of course. We're implementing state-of-the-art security protocols and enhancing our guest management systems. This will allow for more seamless experiences across all our facilities."

As Luca continued outlining the supposed benefits, Dani couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. She glanced at Zack, who was studiously avoiding her gaze, his fingers tapping a restless rhythm on the table.

"And how long do you anticipate this process taking?" Greg asked, frowning. "We can't afford significant downtime at Iniquity."

"I assure you, the impact on day-to-day operations will be unnoticeable since Dani has the luxury of a full back-up system.

" Zack interjected, his deep voice sending an involuntary shiver down Dani's spine.

"Plus, we'll be working in phases, focusing on one area at a time to minimize disruptions when the new systems come online, so it should be quite seamless. "

Dani forced herself to meet his gaze, struggling to maintain a professional demeanor. "And what about data security during the transition? We deal with extremely sensitive information here."

A flicker of something - pride? challenge? - flashed in Zack's eyes. "One of the

companies I support has developed a proprietary encryption method specifically for projects like this. Guest privacy is absolutely our top priority."

"As it should be," Colt chimed in, his burly arms crossed over his chest. "I'd like a full briefing on these new security measures before we implement anything."

Zack nodded. Was it her imagination or did he seem a little stiff and unsettled? "Of course. We can set up a separate meeting to go over the details."

Kris chimed in over the video link. "While I understand the natural apprehension surrounding new software, I just want to reassure everyone that although it's not available on the open market, and might never be, it's been causing a big stir in the tech sector.

This system is absolutely amazing. It's revolutionary and we're lucky to have it. "

"Then how exactly do we have it?" Dani demanded, feeling unaccountably stubborn.

Zack pinned her with a gaze so intense she had to drop her eyes. "Because I bankrolled this program, and since I'm an investor in this island, I wanted it to be safe."

Dani frowned. "But if it's so new, and not readily available, how do we even know it'll be effective? It's not like it comes with any google reviews."

Luca's eyebrows raised and Zack's lips thinned, while the rest of the participants looked from her to Zack like they were watching a game of ping-pong.

"This is government and secret service level security," Zack replied, his tone cool. "I can assure you it's been very thoroughly tested."

And now didn't she feel petty. Why was she being so difficult? Even Luca, who had supported her so completely, was looking at her with dismay.

As the discussion continued, Dani found her attention split between the logistics being discussed and the man she'd once imagined, despite the odds, she might be capable of spending her life with.

Every gesture, every word from Zack seemed calculated to remind her of their shared past - and the chemistry that still simmered between them.

Dani forced herself to focus on the task at hand. "Alright, let's talk about the timeline for implementation. Jonah, how will this affect bookings and check-ins at the hotel?"

As Jonah began outlining potential concerns, Dani couldn't help but steal more glances at Zack. His jaw was set in that determined way she remembered so well, a telltale sign he was holding something back. What wasn't he telling them?

The meeting dragged on, each department head voicing their questions and concerns.

Throughout it all, Dani found herself hyper-aware of Zack's presence.

The way he leaned forward, his forearms resting on the table.

The slight furrow in his brow as he considered each point raised.

It was infuriating how easily he slipped back into her world, as if the past had never happened.

"I think that covers the major points," Luca finally announced, glancing at his watch. "Unless anyone has any other pressing concerns?"

A chorus of head shakes and murmured negatives followed.

As the room began to clear, Dani felt a surge of panic.

She didn't want to be left alone with Zack again.

Her senses were betraying her, and her body - the brazen hussy - was completely on board.

It was only her mind holding back from throwing caution to the wind and launching herself at him.

Begging him to show her the paradise she'd always felt in his arms and in his ropes.

It's just sex! She reminded her subconscious urges. And would it really be so bad to revisit the physical side of their relationship? It had been a long, dry few years, after all.

"Zack, a word?" Luca called, saving Dani from her internal struggle. She couldn't decide if she was disappointed or relieved to be saved from her own poor judgement.

Zack nodded, his eyes lingering on her for a moment before he followed Luca out. Dani let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"You okay, boss?" Natalie asked, concern evident in her voice.

Dani plastered on a smile. "Fine. Just... processing all this new information. Could you ask Kris to stay on the line, please? I want to run some other stuff past him while he's available. Patch him through to my office."

"Of course," Natalie replied, while Dani gathered her things, and slipped into the

welcome quiet of her private space. Well, private until Zack got back, so she needed to be quick.

“Kris,” she addressed their IT consultant as soon as the link was available. “I need a favor please.”

“Of course,” the blonde, bespectacled guy said with a disarming grin. “What can I help you with?”

“Ah... it’s kind of personal, so I need discretion,” she told him, suddenly second guessing herself. Did she really need to dig into this? What good could come of it?

It’ll steel your heart against the panty-melting charmer talking to Luca, she reminded herself.

“I need you to run a check on Zack Kincaid,” she finally revealed, trying not to wince at the shocked look he gave her.

“Umm... I’m not sure that’s altogether justified,” he hedged.

“It has nothing to do with this project, Kris,” she reassured him. “It’s... he’s asked me out, but I was told he’s married, and I don’t want to be the other woman.”

“From a reliable source?”

The horse’s mouth. Not that she could say that.

“Someone who knows him very well,” Dani said instead. “I’ve never seen any evidence of it myself, and I don’t want anything in depth. Just to find out if it’s true or not. Can you do that?”

“Absolutely,” Kris agreed. “Shouldn’t be too difficult. Just a records check. I’ll have it in your inbox by the end of the day.”

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It didn't even take that long. Barely an hour later her email chimed with the message she'd been waiting for.

Her hand hovered over the tab. Why was she doing this?

She already knew the answer... but it had been bugging her for all the years since he'd told her.

There was not now and nor had there ever been any sign of a wife, so Dani had made up all kinds of scenarios in her mind.

Sucking in a breath and stabbing the key, she opened the file and felt her heart drop when she found a note from Kris with a copy of a marriage certificate. Her heart cried all over again as she read the report.

'There is only one marriage on record for anyone with the name Zack Kincaid.'

With trembling fingers, Dani scrolled down the page.

While there was no evidence of Zack - her Zack - having any involvement with a woman of the same name, the certificate was proof that one Zack Kincaid had been married to an Emylyah Baskov by a justice of the peace just over eighteen years ago...

Tears pricked at her eyes and Dani blinked hard to contain them. Why was she so surprised? He'd admitted it, hadn't he?

Except...

Her mind raced as she checked and rechecked the wedding date on the document.

She didn't know Zack's date of birth. They hadn't had that kind of relationship.

But she did know his age. And eighteen years ago - over eighteen years ago - he would only have been...

fifteen! Which must mean ... this had to be another man's marriage certificate.

The relief threatening to overwhelm her should have been a red flag, but before Dani could come to terms with it, another, stronger emotion bubbled up inside her.

Anger.

If that was the only marriage listed in the name of Zack Kincaid, and the certificate wasn't his, that meant ... He'd lied to her!

And that left yet another question. Why?

Dani had already known there was no obvious spouse in Zack's orbit.

Okay, so she admitted it. After they split up, she may have gotten a little stalkerish and scoured every magazine and newspaper article she could find.

He'd been linked to other women, absolutely; the man was no saint.

But certainly never a wife, and neither was there even the smallest mention of anyone named Emylyah Bascov as far as Dani could recall. It wasn't exactly a common name.

Then again, there was nothing tying him to her, either. But then, kink partners or mistresses weren't the kind of women you paraded on your arm to grandiose functions. She knew that better than anyone.

But Dani had suspected, hadn't she? She'd suspected he'd told her the lie that he was married because he'd wanted a sure-fire excuse to keep their relationship...

what? It still didn't make sense. Or did it?

Maybe he'd assumed she'd be fine to continue as his mistress.

Never expecting anything more from him, just like her mother had never expected more from her own sperm donor.

Or maybe he really was just like her uncle with different women slotted into different categories, and kinky career women obviously weren't the right kind of wife material.

Likely too independent and headstrong. She'd seen it before.

Kink was fine for a mistress or side piece. But not the stuff wives were made of.

Both Zio Lorenzo and her mother had always had a lot to say on that subject. Not that her mother could talk with the way she lived her life.

Bastards! All of them.

Dani fisted her fingers in her long, dark hair and tugged.

She needed to get a grip. Knowing Zack wasn't married changed nothing.

He was here for business, nothing more. And she'd worked too hard to let Zack

Kincaid waltz back in and disrupt the life she'd rebuilt.

He was just as dangerous as her father and uncle.

More so, because he had the ability to sway her more than anybody else.

She had to stay strong and hold on to her ideals. Stay true to herself.

Men were cheating bastards. Even Luca, the only man she truly trusted, had a son with a married woman. He'd just gone about it in a different way, and seduced Zoe's husband, Ryan, as well.

The vicious thought brought Dani up short, shocking her.

Jesus, she needed to stop this! Neither Luca, nor Ryan and Zoe, deserved that kind of disservice from her.

They were in a consensual poly relationship and had been for years.

It was one of several among the islands' employees, and there was no cheating or deceit involved.

Such a thought was so far beneath her, she was ashamed.

In fact, she'd been overjoyed when Luca had stood up to Lorenzo's old-fashioned ideals and made it quite clear that her uncle needed to accept Matteo as his heir, because there would be no others.

Disgusted with herself, she deleted the email and closed out her computer, but as Dani left her office, the memory of Zack's intense gaze lingered. All these years later, and she was still a fool for the man. He still made her act out of character. It was

unnerving.

Dani straightened her shoulders, determination setting in. She'd survived Zack Kincaid once. She could do it again. This time, she was stronger, older, wiser. She wouldn't let her guard down, no matter how much her lady garden was begging to be watered.

That hussy could make do with BOB. Her battery-operated boyfriend had never let her down.

Unbelievable!

All day, Dani had felt on edge. Despite her pep-talk, every look, every interaction with Zack had tested her resolve and the knowledge that he wasn't married burned in her brain, frying every neuron wired for good sense. He'd lied to keep her at arm's length. She needed to remember that.

Still, she'd come home with one single goal in mind; to take the edge off the insatiable desire that had consumed her all day.

She'd come home to BOB, refusing to admit how lonely and pathetic that might be, and instead consoled herself with how reliable he was. How he could be depended on to provide a perfectly satisfying orgasm without any of the heartache and disappointment that went with a real live man.

But right now, BOB appeared to be mocking her. She'd stripped out of her office clothes, laid down on the cool sheets of her bed... and nothing.

She'd even changed the batteries.

Frustrated, Dani tossed the useless vibrator aside and flopped back onto her pillow with an exasperated groan. Her body thrummed with unfulfilled need, every nerve ending hypersensitive. She squeezed her thighs together, seeking friction, but it only intensified the ache between her legs.

Memories of Zack's strong hands and piercing gaze flashed through her mind. She could almost feel the ghost of his touch on her skin, hear his deep voice murmuring in

her ear. Dani shook her head, trying to banish the thoughts. He was her ex for a reason. She didn't need him or any other man.

But as her fingers drifted down her body of their own accord, skimming over her breasts and stomach, Dani couldn't help imagining they were Zack's.

She bit her lip, torn between giving in to the fantasy and maintaining her pride.

The throbbing between her thighs made the decision for her.

With a resigned sigh, she slid her hand lower, closing her eyes as she began to stroke herself.

Her fingers moved in slow, teasing circles, building the tension that had been simmering all day.

Dani imagined Zack's calloused hands on her body, his lips trailing hot kisses down her neck. They'd been so good together.

So perfectly in tune. A soft moan escaped her as she increased the pressure and speed of her strokes.

But it wasn't enough. No matter how she touched herself, she couldn't reach that elusive peak. Frustration mounted as her body refused to cooperate. She needed more - more pressure, more friction, more... something.

With a growl of annoyance, Dani sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Maybe a cold shower would douse this maddening arousal. As she stood, her gaze fell on her phone sitting on the nightstand. An idea - a dangerous, reckless idea - flashed through her mind.

Her hand hovered over the device as she warred with herself. It would be so easy to call him, to invite him over. To let him satisfy this craving in ways her own touch never could.

"No," Dani muttered, clenching her fists. She wouldn't give Zack the satisfaction. Wouldn't give in to temptation so easily. She was stronger than that.

But as she turned away from the phone, a wave of loneliness washed over her. The emptiness of her cabana seemed to mock her resolve. Dani wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly feeling small and vulnerable.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered, pacing the length of her bedroom. Her skin still tingled with arousal, her body wound tight as a spring. She needed release, needed to feel something other than this maddening frustration.

Before she could second-guess herself, Dani strode to her closet and yanked out a slinky black dress.

If she couldn't trust herself around Zack, she'd find distraction elsewhere.

The resort was always bustling with attractive, willing partners.

Surely, she could find someone to scratch this itch without the complication of feelings.

Even she could admit men were sometimes necessary when it came to sex. Not often, but sometimes.

As she slipped into the dress, Dani tried to ignore the voice in her head reminding her that no one had ever made her feel the way Zack did. No one else knew her body as intimately or had ever been able to read her desires with a single glance.

"Stop it," she hissed, smoothing the dress over her ample curves. She applied a coat of bold red lipstick, the color a vivid compliment to her olive skin. She refused to think about how good it would look rimmed around Zack's cock. Nope, not going there.

With a final glance in the mirror, Dani grabbed her clutch and headed for the door. What she didn't expect was to barrel headfirst into a solid wall of muscle.

Strong hands gripped her arms, steadying her. Dani's breath caught as a familiar scent enveloped her - a heady mix of sandalwood and pure male that could only belong to one man.

"Going somewhere?" Zack's deep voice rumbled through her, igniting every nerve ending.

Dani's eyes travelled up the broad expanse of his chest to meet his piercing gaze. Her mouth went dry at the barely restrained hunger she saw there.

"I... what are you doing here?" she managed to stammer, acutely aware of how close they were standing, of his hands still on her arms.

Zack's eyes raked over her, lingering on the way the dress clung to her curves. "I think the better question is, where were you going, dressed like that?"

There was a dangerous edge to his voice that sent a shiver down Dani's spine. She lifted her chin defiantly, refusing to be cowed.

"Out," she said simply. "Now if you'll excuse me..."

She tried to step around him, but Zack's grip tightened, pulling her flush against his body. Dani gasped at the contact, her body instantly reacting to his proximity. She

could feel the heat radiating off him, smell the faint traces of his cologne mixed with something uniquely Zack.

"Let go of me," she said, but there was no real force behind the words. Her traitorous body leaned into him, craving more contact.

Zack's eyes darkened as he gazed down at her, one hand sliding to the small of her back while the other cupped her face. "You know I can't do that, Dani," he murmured, his thumb tracing her lower lip. "Not when we've both been radiating lust all day long. Not when you're looking at me like that."

"Like what?" Dani breathed, her resolve crumbling with each passing second.

"Like you want me to fuck you against this door."

A whimper escaped her at his blunt words. God, she'd missed this - missed him. The way he could set her body on fire with just a look, a touch.

"Tell me to leave," Zack said, his lips brushing her ear. "Tell me you don't want this, and I'll go."

Dani knew she should. Knew she should push him away, stick to her resolve.

But the feeling of his body against hers, the promise of pleasure in his eyes, the knowledge that he wasn't married, was too much to resist. With a soft moan of surrender, Dani pressed herself closer, tilting her head up in silent invitation.

It was just sex, she told herself. Awesome, kinky, amazing sex.

The best she'd ever had. She'd had that with him for an entire year; she could do it again for the short time he was on the island.

No harm, no foul. Just two kinky people scening together.

Better the devil she knew, surely? And she did know how good he was when it came to orgasms.

Zack needed no further encouragement. His mouth crashed down on hers, hungry and demanding. Dani melted into the kiss, her arms winding around his neck as she opened to him. Their tongues tangled in a sensual dance, rekindling the fire that had always burned so brightly between them.

Without breaking the kiss, Zack maneuvered them fully into the cabana, kicking the door shut behind him. His hands roamed her body, like he was desperately relearning every curve and dip. When he cupped her breasts through the thin material of her dress, Dani arched into his touch with a gasp.

"God, I've missed you," Zack growled against her lips as he ground his hardness into her softness. He trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses along her jaw and down her neck, finding that sensitive spot just below her ear that always drove her wild.

She could totally do this, Dani told herself once again. She could take everything Zack wanted to give her, enjoy him to the full. And then he'd be gone so she wouldn't have to worry about things getting out of hand.

That's what she told herself anyway. And right now, the way he was making her feel, she couldn't bring herself to care about the little whisper inside her head advocating caution.

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When Zack had tracked down Dani's cabana and sought her out, he really hadn't planned on sex...

he wasn't sure if he'd had any kind of plan, if he were honest. He'd just wanted to see her.

Talk to her. Try to get past the awkwardness while they had to work together.

Something to try and maintain the status quo.

But now? The way she felt in his arms, all eager and compliant... Well, he wasn't gentleman enough to turn her down. It was everything he wanted, and it was his opportunity to set things right with her.

Nothing's changed.

Fuck that little voice of conscience inside his head. He shut that bastard down. He'd explain everything properly. Even if he had to tie her down to do so. She'd understand.

Wouldn't she?

Dani moaned beneath his touch and any and all misgivings flew from his head.

Zack's hands roamed over Dani's beautiful body, reacquainting himself with every tantalizing dip and swell.

She arched into his touch, her breathy sighs spurring him on.

Her cabana layout was the same as his, and he backed her toward the bedroom, his lips never leaving hers as they stumbled into the room.

"God, I've missed you," Zack growled, nipping at her collarbone. "Missed us."

Dani's fingers threaded through his hair, tugging him closer. "Show me," she demanded. "I want to feel it all. It's been so long!"

Did she mean so long since she'd been with him, or that it had been a while in general? The thought of her with another man had him growling into her neck. The idea just hit him wrong. She was his .

Fuck! That was something he needed to unpack later. Right now, he was all too happy to oblige her.

Freed at last from the layers of past regret that had shackled him for so long, Zack put all thoughts of their years apart out of his mind and focused on undressing them with single-minded intention.

Fabric whispered against skin as they hurriedly tugged and pulled at their clothes, casting them aside like burdens too heavy to bear.

Gone were any vestiges of polite restraint as desire took over, and they frantically, eagerly, rid themselves of every last impediment, their clothing shed hastily and flung away without thought.

Dani cursed sexily under her breath as her tight dress refused to cooperate, before twirling it overhead like a lasso before launching it across the room with abandon.

He laughed, the sound ripe with hunger, tugging off his own shirt and flinging it to join it in a crumpled heap.

They were reckless, uncaring, and unbothered by anything except closing the distance between them.

The air came alive with their shared urgency, humming with what they had waited so long to feel again.

Passionate, wild, their shoes and underwear soon joined the mess of tangled fabric.

Zack knew a moment of indecision as Dani's sexy heels came off. He wouldn't have minded feeling those digging into his back. And he mourned not peeling her out of her lacy bra and panties; unwrapping her like the gift she was.

Next time.

Finally, blissfully, there was nothing left between them, not even the secrets Zack feared would soon pull them apart again.

He paused to drink in the sight of her, sprawled naked beneath him as they tumbled onto the bed in a tangle of limbs.

His cock twitched in anticipation.

"Turn over," he commanded, his voice low and husky.

Dani complied eagerly, presenting her superb ass to him and wiggling it a little. Minx!

Zack's palm came down in a sharp smack, the sound echoing through the cabana.

Dani yelped, then moaned as he soothed the reddened flesh.

"You've been a naughty girl, haven't you, Dani?" Zack growled, punctuating each word with another stinging slap. "Running away from me. Making me chase you across the ocean."

Dani whimpered, pushing back against his hand. "Yes, Master. I've been so bad."

The familiar title sent a jolt of electricity through Zack's body, even though he was well aware she was just playing it up. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed hearing it from her lips. His cock throbbed insistently, demanding attention.

"And what happens to naughty girls?" he asked, his voice thick with desire.

"They get punished," Dani breathed, her words muffled by the pillow she'd buried her face in.

Zack's hand came down again, harder this time. "I can't hear you, pet, speak up."

Dani turned her head, meeting his gaze over her shoulder. Her eyes were dark with lust, her cheeks flushed. "They get punished, Master," she repeated, louder this time.

"That's right," Zack agreed, running his hand over the curve of her ass. It was already turning a delicious shade of pink. "And you're going to take your punishment like a good girl, aren't you?"

"Yes, Master," Dani moaned, arching her back to present herself more fully.

Zack's hand came down again and again, alternating cheeks, building a steady rhythm. The sharp cracks of skin on skin filled the air, punctuated by Dani's gasps and whimpers. He could feel the heat radiating from her reddened flesh, see the way

she quivered with each impact.

"Count them," he ordered, pausing briefly.

"Four... five... six..." Dani obediently counted out each smack, her voice growing increasingly breathless. By the time they reached ten, she was squirming, her thighs rubbing together in search of friction.

"Good girl," Zack purred, running his hand soothingly over her heated skin. "Now, I think it's time for your reward."

Without warning, he plunged two fingers into her dripping core. Dani cried out, bucking against his hand. She was so wet, so ready for him. Zack groaned, his own need becoming almost unbearable.

"Please, Master," Dani begged, pushing back against his fingers. "I need you inside me. Please!"

Zack withdrew his fingers with a wicked laugh, eliciting a whine of protest from Dani. "I see you haven't learned any more patience since in all this time," he said, flipping her onto her back.

Her eyes widened with realization. "I'm sorry Sir," she spouted, hastily attempting to rectify her mistake.

She should know better. "It's just been so looong.

" She wailed mournfully as he pressed each of her hands through the decorative dowels on the wooden headboard, then grabbed his belt from the floor and wound it around her wrists so she couldn't pull them back through.

Her breathing quickened as he did so, the cool leather a stark contrast to her flushed skin. Zack traced a finger down between the valley of her ample breasts, savoring the way she shivered beneath his touch.

"Now, where were we?" he mused, positioning his broad shoulders between her spread thighs.

Dani whimpered at the first swipe of his tongue through her sopping folds, arching into him.

Zack held her down, gripping her undulating hips as he set about ruthlessly devouring her creamy nectar.

Her breaths became ragged, nonsense words dripping from her lips as she tried to squirm against his hold.

But every time she got close, he pulled back, nipping at her lush thighs, suckling on her dark, dusky nipples, denying her until she was sobbing and begging, just to do it all over again.

Occasionally, he ran the head of his cock along her slick folds, teasing her mercilessly, or rubbed at her g-spot with questing fingers.

Dani mewled and cursed, straining against her bonds. "Please, Master," she begged. "I need you."

Zack leaned forward, pressing against her from chest to thigh, his lips brushing her ear. "What do you need, pet? Tell me."

"I need your cock inside me," Dani gasped, her hips bucking futilely. "Please, Master. Fuck me. Use me. Make me yours again."

He lined himself up with her entrance, the head of his cock brushing against her slick folds. "Is this what you want, pet?" he teased, rocking his hips slightly but not penetrating.

"Yes! God, yes!" Dani cried, trying to impale herself on him.

With a growl of approval, Zack gripped her hips and thrust forward, burying himself to the hilt in one smooth motion. Dani cried out at the sensation, and Zack groaned at the tight, wet heat enveloping him and the exquisite sensation of being joined once more after so long apart.

"Fuck, you feel amazing," Zack grunted, immediately setting a punishing pace. His hips slammed against Dani's reddened ass, the impact sending jolts of pleasure-pain through her body.

Dani clenched her fingers, her knuckles white as she met him thrust for thrust. "Harder," she demanded. "Make me feel it tomorrow."

Zack was more than happy to oblige. He pulled out almost entirely before slamming back in, the force of his thrust pushing Dani up the bed. She gasped, her bound hands straining against the belt as she fought to brace herself.

"Is this what you want?" Zack growled, maintaining his relentless pace. "To be fucked so hard you can't walk straight?"

"Yes!" Dani cried out, her voice breaking on a moan. "God, yes!"

The room filled with the sounds of their coupling - skin slapping against skin, breathless moans, and the creaking of the bed frame. Zack could feel the familiar tightening in his balls, the telltale signs of his impending orgasm. But he was determined to make Dani come first.

Shifting his angle slightly, he reached around to rub tight circles on her clit. Dani's whole body jerked at the added stimulation, a keening cry escaping her lips.

"That's it, pet," Zack encouraged, his voice strained with the effort of holding back. "Come for me. Let me feel you fall apart."

She pulsed around him, body tensed, her inner walls clenching around Zack's cock as her orgasm crashed over her. She cried out, burying her face in his neck to muffle her screams of ecstasy. The sensation of her pulsing around him was too much.

"Mine," Zack snarled, with a guttural groan, struggling to maintain a smooth pace. His hands gripped her hips bruisingly tight as he finally allowed himself to let go, spilling himself deep inside her.

They collapsed together on the bed, panting heavily. Zack's weight pressed Dani into the mattress, but she didn't seem to mind, so he stayed just like that, intimately pressed into her for long minutes while he caught his breath.

As their breathing slowed and the sweat cooled on their skin, reality began to seep back in.

Zack carefully withdrew from Dani's body, eliciting a small whimper from her. Fuck! He hadn't used a condom.

Should he say something? Damn it, he was never this reckless.

A man of his wealth knew better... but the thought of Dani, round and swollen with his baby, filled him with a fierce possessiveness that he wasn't ready to examine too closely.

Instead, he untied Dani's wrists, gently massaging the reddened skin where the belt

had rubbed, and she looked up at him with wide, vulnerable eyes. "That was..." Dani trailed off, seemingly at a loss for words.

"Yeah," Zack agreed, equally speechless. He rolled onto his side, propping himself up on one elbow to look at her. The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken questions.

As a kink encounter, it had been tame. Sure, he'd spanked her and bound her wrists, but their past dynamic had been far more intense.

They'd played with impact toys and shibari; restraints that went far beyond a simple belt.

But while the fact that they'd fallen so easily back into their roles spoke volumes about the connection they still shared, the simplicity of this particular scene was somehow steeped in vulnerability.

Zack cleared his throat, suddenly feeling awkward. "Dani, I?—"

"Don't," she interrupted, placing a finger on his lips. "Let's not ruin this moment with talk, okay? We can figure everything out later."

He nodded, relief and disappointment warring within him in equal measure. Part of him wanted to hash everything out right now. The other half wanted to run so he could figure out exactly what it all meant.

In the end, Dani made the decision for him.

She stretched, wincing slightly. "I should probably go clean up," she murmured, not meeting Zack's eyes.

He watched as she slid out of bed, admiring the way the fading sunlight played across her curves. She paused at the bathroom door, glancing back over her shoulder. "You don't have to be here when I get out," she said softly, before disappearing inside.

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Dani turned the shower on and waited, biting her lip as she stared blindly at the spray while it warmed.

Okay, so she'd taken the coward's way out.

It was no big deal... well, that's what she told herself, anyway.

It wasn't the first time they'd had no strings sex.

They'd scened every week for an entire year, and while they'd quickly become exclusive, it was only because things between them had been so good.

Why settle for hamburger when you could have steak?

Now? Well, it didn't need to mean anything.

Except you're still in love with him.

Impossible! She had never been in love with him.

It had just been a serious case of infatuation that might have been flirting with the edges of love.

But thankfully, it had been stamped out early on.

She didn't even know him. Not properly. The people they'd been with each other at the club weren't the people they were in everyday life.

They'd been kink partners. Perfectly matched, maybe.

For her anyway. But clearly not for Zack since he'd felt the need to lie to her about having a wife.

She stepped into the shower, letting the hot water cascade over her body. As she lathered up, her mind kept racing with those dratted 'what ifs.'

What if she hadn't pushed him.

What if she'd let him explain like he'd wanted to.

A sliver of apprehension shivered through her when she thought back on that. He'd seemed so genuine. So insistent.

She'd thought she understood why Zack lied about being married, but now she was allowing those long-buried memories to resurface, nothing made sense. Why would he need to explain something if he was only using it as a means to stop her getting too close?

And why use something that extreme; something that was guaranteed to send her running?

The nature of their kink relationship meant he could have just told her he wanted to stop.

She'd have accepted that, no questions asked.

Sure, Dani had been in deep enough she'd have been upset, but she wouldn't have caused a scene.

That was the nature of the BDSM lifestyle.

You played, you enjoyed yourself, you may or may not hook up again.

But unless you negotiated a contract, both parties were free to walk away. No drama. No questions asked.

That's just how it was.

Dani leaned her forehead against the cool tile, letting the water beat down on her back. She closed her eyes, trying to sort through the jumble of emotions swirling inside her.

Doubt crept in, insidious and unwelcome. Had she jumped to conclusions? Made assumptions without giving Zack a fair chance to explain? The memory of his face - hurt, confused, desperate to make her understand - flashed through her mind.

Why did these things insist on haunting her?

She shook her head, sending droplets flying. No, she couldn't second-guess herself now. The evidence had been clear. Kris Warwick's report showed one single marriage with someone with Zack's name; one that couldn't possibly be him.

But a tiny, insistent voice whispered: What if there was more to the story?

With a frustrated groan, Dani shut off the water and reached for a towel. She'd made her choice. She'd had her fun and kicked him out. It was done.

Except... she hadn't actually told him to leave. Just suggested it. Just assumed he would.

Heart pounding, she wrapped the towel around herself and cracked open the bathroom door. Steam billowed out as she peered into the bedroom, half-expecting - hoping? Or would she be disappointed? - to find it empty.

She found Zack standing there, fully clothed.

"We need to talk," he said firmly, his expression stoic and waaay too serious.

"Zack! What the hell? Why are you still here?" Dani pushed an indignation she wasn't really feeling into her voice, gripping the towel to secure it properly and give herself a modicum of defense against her nakedness. This guy was far too potent.

He didn't budge. "No more running away, Dani. No more hiding. We're going to hash this out right now."

Her heart raced as she stared at him, water dripping from her hair. Part of her wanted to yell at him to get out. But a bigger part was relieved he hadn't left, that he seemed as desperate for answers as she was.

"Fine," she said shakily. "Just... let me get dressed first."

Zack's eyes roamed over her almost naked form, darkening with desire. It was enough to have her mouth go dry, even though she'd just had him...

it had been a while since she'd entertained anything but BOB, after all.

Perhaps they could just enjoy each other for a little longer before they started any 'come to Jesus' conversations that might spoil it all again.

But clearly, Zack was more determined than she was.

"Agreed," he said, his voice rough. "I'll wait outside." He turned and strode out of the room, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

Dani let out a shaky breath, her mind whirling.

What did he want to say? What could possibly explain everything that had happened?

The way he'd behaved? The things he'd said?

Or was he going to admit it was all a lie?

The chances of him having any kind of excuse she'd find acceptable was slim.

Better just get this over with; it was bound to just reinforce her contempt for his actions.

And she damn well needed that right now, before he fooled her again.

Drying off quickly, Dani pulled on a pair of comfortable cropped yoga pants and a tank top, her hands trembling slightly as she dressed.

When she opened the door, Zack was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes met hers, and the intensity in them made her breath catch.

"Sit," he said, gesturing to the lounge chairs on her veranda. It wasn't a request.

Dani hesitated for a moment, then complied, perching on the edge of her seat. Zack remained standing, pacing back and forth in the small space in front of her.

"I need you to listen to me," he began, his voice low and urgent. "Really listen. No interruptions, no assumptions. Can you do that?"

She nodded, her throat too tight to speak anyway. She didn't like the implications.

Zack took a deep breath. "I was... am married."

Dani sucked in a painful breath, bands constricting around her chest as she fought the urge to run. To rage.

"Hear me out!" Zack demanded as if he knew. Hell, it was probably written all over her face. "It's complicated."

"How complicated can it be?" Dani snapped, her patience fraying. "You're either married or you're not."

Jesus! She was having a Deja vu moment. They'd already had this conversation.

How could she have been so stupid? He'd told her he was married. Zack was many things, but a liar wasn't one of them. She'd simply justified his words however she could, to mitigate her own guilt.

And now she'd had sex with a married man... again!

Zack ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident in every line of his body. "It's not that simple. I was fifteen when it occurred. Fifteen, Dani. I didn't even know what was happening."

Dani's eyes widened, her anger momentarily forgotten, brought to an abrupt halt as she remembered Kris's report. But the reality of it was... astounding. "What are you talking about?"

"My father..." Zack spat the word like it was poison. "Arranged a marriage for me when I was fifteen. To a twelve-year-old girl I'd never met. He made some deal with

her mother I don't even understand to this day."

He paused in his pacing, throwing his head back, dislodging his glasses as he jammed the heels of his hands into his eyes, his whole body quivering with rage.

"The girl, her name was - is - Emylyah, I didn't even find that out until years later. Even then it was by accident... something my father's lawyer brought up after his death when he asked if I had a prenuptial agreement to protect my assets."

He clenched his fists so his knuckles turned white, his anger palpable. "We saw each other for fifteen minutes in a judge's chambers, and that was it. I haven't seen her since."

Dani sat back, stunned. "But... how is that even legal?"

"Believe it or not, even today minors can be married in California. It simply needs judicial and parental agreement."

Dani shook her head in disbelief. "But surely no judge..."

"Money," Zack interrupted bitterly. "Wave enough money in front of the right judge, and it's a done deal. Hell, some just consider it a valid point of law!"

Dani's mind was reeling. "But why?"

Zack's jaw clenched and he shook his head, defeat evident in every line of his body. "I don't even know. My father died without ever mentioning it, in life or in any paperwork. It was only because the lawyer holding my father's will was the same one who'd overseen the original agreement that the subject even arose, otherwise I'd still be clueless. Can you believe that?"

Dani took several deep breaths and rubbed her hands over her face. “I don’t understand...”

Zack laughed, but there was no humor in it. “Join the club,” he replied, drily.

“How could you not know? Surely you must have questioned why you were there?”

Zack turned to stare out onto the tropical vista of sea and sky and scented flora, but his eyes looked back into the past.

The beauty of the setting was clearly lost to him, and he was swallowed by memories he obviously wished he could forget, if his expression was any indication.

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you,” he mused.

“I remember so many things about that day...”

Standing outside the judge's chamber, my father's hand on my shoulder in an iron grip that made me uneasy. The smell of cigars and expensive cologne, cloying and inescapable. If I close my eyes, I can almost hear the murmur of voices, hushed and conspiratorial, discussing terms and arrangements. But I wasn’t really listening.”

He dragged his fingers through his hair and collapsed onto the lounge chair as if the weight of his memories were too heavy for him to stay upright. Dani had the overwhelming urge to go give him a hug, to take away the confusion and pain that ravaged his features.

Absently, Zack removed his glasses and polished the lenses on his shirt, his gaze still distant, focused on a single day so long ago.

“I remember the girl. She was pretty. All blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale skin. And I

was a fifteen-year-old boy, so of course I noticed her, although I pegged her as younger than she really was.”

Dani tried to keep the grimace off her face. This unknown woman Zack was married to was the very antithesis of her own typically Italian looks.

“Of course, I wondered why we were there, and I expected to be told when the adults had finished their discussions.”

Something troublesome and unsettling wreathed across his face. “But in the end, none of it seemed important.”

Dani held her breath for his next words, already knowing they were going to be bad.

“The doors to the judge’s chambers burst open and a bunch of men - thugs - surged through. They weren’t discriminating, they just fired sub-machine guns and sprayed the room with bullets.”

His face crumpled a little, and she could imagine innocent, young Zack, terrified for his life.

He could have been injured. He might have been killed. The thought made Dani's blood run cold. She might have lost him before she ever knew him. Her heart rejected the idea. It didn’t bear thinking about.

That’s when she knew she was already in too deep with Zack, even though they’d only just reconnected, despite all her arguments to the contrary.

“What happened?” Dani whispered, not sure she really wanted to know.

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Damn! It had been so long since he'd thought about this. Did he really want to relive it all again?

Zack allowed his eyes to run over Dani, her familiar expressions, her beautiful body, and he knew for her, he would.

He swallowed, his throat dry, and Dani instinctively got up and fetched them both a glass of iced water.

Zack was glad of the reprieve.

He took a sip, then focused on a bead of condensation as it dribbled down the glass before he continued the harrowing tale.

"The clerk ran forward when the doors opened, before anyone really knew what was going on. She was a mousy, middle-aged woman, no threat to anyone, just doing her job to ensure our privacy, and they mowed her down like she was an animal. One minute she was alive, the next she was on the floor, riddled with bullets, her eyes open and sightless while she lay in a puddle of blood. I had nightmares about her for a long time." His voice was barely a whisper and Dani leaned forward like she had to strain to hear.

"I dived onto the floor and from the corner of my eye I saw the woman pull the girl out of the room. That was the last time I saw her. Building security stormed in seconds later, the gunmen started defending themselves, and it all became one big, terrifying eruption of chaos and disorder. The judge and my father had rushed out through his private quarters, so I followed them." He couldn't bear to admit they'd

left him behind.

“Adrenaline took over and I barely even realized I was bleeding.”

Dani sucked in a shaky breath. “You were hurt?”

He swiped his thumb over the sweating glass, watching the mayhem play out in his mind. Remembering how scared he’d been. How he ached to forget. How he pretended none of it had ever happened. Something remarkably easy since it was clear his father wasn’t interested in discussing it.

“Zack?” she prompted when he’d been quiet too long.

He roused himself, suddenly remembering their conversation. “It was just a graze through the fleshy part of my calf,” he replied, making out like it was nothing. Just like his father had.

Reaching out to him, Dani’s fingers brushed his arm. “Oh my god, Zack. I’m so sorry. That must have been terrifying.”

He nodded, still distancing himself from the harsh reality.

It was the only way he could deal with it.

“It was. And afterwards, everything was a muddle of chaos; almost unreal.

I was in the hospital, and the police wanted statements, but my father's security team insisted on whisking us away in case there were repercussions.

The reason we were there just wasn't important anymore. Or maybe I blocked it out. I sure as hell didn’t want to talk about it. ”

Saying it all out loud. Retelling the story of that awful day for the first time, it all sounded so fantastical, even to his own ears. Yet the pain and resentment Zack still felt was real on several different levels.

"But surely as you got older, you must have wondered..." Dani pushed.

Zack's laugh was hollow. "As I got older, it seemed like a strange dream, something I'd rather forget. Besides, my father wasn't the most approachable man.

The one time I brought it up, the only information I got was that the woman and her daughter made it to safety.

And honestly, I was a rebellious teenager with other things on my mind.

My relationship with my father wasn't good, and it only got worse.

By the time I really needed those questions answered, he'd died and taken his secrets with him.

It wasn't until his lawyer showed me the marriage certificate that I realized the date of my supposed 'wedding' was the day all that had happened. "

He leaned forward, his eyes locking with Dani's.

"I fought it, as soon as I found out. Demanded an annulment, just to be told that option had expired an entire nine years before I even found out.

I tried everything I could to have it terminated, but there was an additional contract with clauses making that impossible.

I've spent the intervening years trying to track her down.

That's why I was so insistent about explaining.

Yes, I'm married, but not in any real sense, and not in any way that matters. Hell, it's never even been consummated. "

He knew Dani was struggling. Knew it was almost too much to take in. A child marriage. A shooting. A decades-long contract. It sounded like something out of a movie, not real life.

"I... I don't know what to say," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Zack's eyes softened, and he reached out to take her hand. "You don't have to say anything. I just needed you to know the truth; to understand why I said what I did that night at the club, and why I've been so desperate to explain ever since. I didn't want you thinking the worst of me."

Dani squeezed his hand. "But why didn't you just tell me all this at the beginning?"

He sighed heavily. "Honestly? At first, I didn't think it mattered. Our relationship was casual, no strings attached. I won't lie. I did my best to keep it that way, knowing I couldn't offer you any more until my situation was resolved."

She gave a small grimace, and Zack knew it was her turn to cast her mind back to the past.

"By the time I realized things were getting serious between us, I was afraid.

Afraid you'd run if you knew the truth, afraid you wouldn't believe me.

But when you finally asked about taking our relationship to another level, I knew I had to tell you the truth.

But you stormed off before I could explain. "

Dani nodded slowly, and Zack could see her processing everything he'd told her, undoubtedly trying to reconcile the man she thought she knew with this new information. She took a deep breath, before speaking again.

"Okay, I understand why you didn't tell me," she said softly. "Even though I firmly believe honesty is crucial, especially in our lifestyle. However, if I look at it purely logically, instead of emotionally, I know it wasn't pertinent. But it's hard to untangle that from my emotional response."

Zack's grip on her hand tightened. "I know. And I'm sorry. I should have trusted you with the truth from the beginning."

"Maybe, maybe not. It's not exactly a regular situation." Dani replied, her tone reserved, but not unkind. "But I appreciate you telling me now. It can't have been easy to relive all of that."

Zack's eyes clouded with remembered pain. "It wasn't. But you deserved to know. And I wanted you to understand."

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of Zack's revelation hanging between them.

Finally, Dani spoke. "So, what happens now? With your... situation?"

Zack rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the familiar frustration that always encroached whenever he thought about Emylyah Baskov and the predicament he found himself in.

"I'm still trying to track her down and my lawyers are working on an official

termination. Unfortunately, because of the unusual circumstances, it's not as simple as simply filing for a divorce, especially since I don't know her location to serve the papers.

"There was more to it than that, but Zack didn't want to get into the finer details of the contract his father had signed, in case it sent her running again.

"But I want you to know," Zack continued, his voice low and urgent, "that regardless of my legal status, my heart belongs to you, Dani. Only you."

Dani's eyes widened at his declaration. She obviously hadn't expected such raw honesty from him, especially after everything he'd just revealed.

"Zack, I..."

"You don't have to say anything," he interrupted gently. "I know this is a lot to process. But I needed you to know how I feel. How I've felt for a long time now."

He leaned closer, his gaze intense. "I've been fighting this battle alone for so long, Dani. And I realize now that was a mistake. I should have let you in, should have trusted you with the truth as soon as we started being exclusive, instead of trying to keep you at arm's length."

Zack's thumb traced circles on the back of her hand, sending shivers up her arm which made him smile even through the bleakness. Despite everything, at least he knew she wasn't immune.

"I spent a long time trying to convince myself what happened between us was for the best. Holding onto my anger at you for refusing to hear me out, for judging me without knowing the whole story. But it was a hollow denial. A feeble attempt at protecting myself. And I've realized, since seeing you again, it's not what I really

want. ”

He held his breath as he waited for her to absorb everything he was saying.

Finally, she took a shaky breath and turned cautious eyes to him. “And what do you really want?” she asked in a whisper.

“I want a future with you, Dani. A real future. No more secrets, no more half-truths. Just us, building something together. It’s one of the reasons I agreed to come here.”

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Dani felt her heart contract. Part of her wanted to throw caution to the wind, to believe the sincerity she saw in Zack's eyes. But another part held her back, reminding her of the pain and betrayal she'd experienced in the past. Of how her mother debased herself as the mistress of a married man. Okay, so Zack's situation wasn't quite the same as her father's, but a few sweet words couldn't make up for the ingrained, visceral rejection she felt towards the institution of marriage.

Not that they were quite there yet, but Dani had a feeling that's where Zack might be steering this relationship.

Then again, it couldn't happen without her consent, and caution was still her middle name.

"I... I don't know, Zack," Dani whispered, her voice trembling. "This is all so sudden. We only just reconnected."

Zack shuffled closer, his presence both comforting and overwhelming. "I know it's a lot to take in, Dani. But I need you to understand what happened with that girl was never real. It was a business arrangement through our parents, nothing more."

Dani's brow furrowed. "But you're still married."

"In name only," Zack insisted with a wince.

"My father organized it all without my knowledge or permission, and yes, I've been bound by certain conditions ever since, but now.

.." He reached out, gently taking her hand in his, and she tried not to feel how right it was.

"Now, terminating my farce of a marriage is simply a formality.

I'm free to make my own choices. And I choose you. "

The intensity in his gaze made Dani's breath catch. She wanted to believe him, was uncharacteristically tempted to throw herself into his arms and never let go. But doubt still nagged at her. Sure, she understood, technically, but the dilemma was real. It didn't matter that he didn't know this Emylyah Baskov.

He was still married to her in the eyes of the law.

So where did that leave Dani? Not to mention her own long-held beliefs, which most certainly didn't gel with this situation in any way, shape, or form.

"Zack, I..." She hesitated, struggling to find the right words.

"I want to believe you. I do. But this is so complicated, and it flags up some pretty deep reservations of mine.

How can I be sure you won't change your mind once you track down this woman?

What if meeting her stirs up some weird protective instincts you didn't know you had? "

Zack's grip on her hand tightened, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Dani, listen to me. I saw her once across a room, we've never been introduced, never had a conversation.

She's a stranger to me, nothing more than a name on a piece of paper. I could pass her on the street and not even know who she was."

Dani bit her lip, still uncertain. "Okay, then what about the legal implications?

"Like I said, I have a team of lawyers working on it, and more than enough money to throw at it," Zack assured her. "It might take some time, but I'm committed to making this right. For us."

The sincerity in his voice made Dani's traitorous heart flutter.

Against her better judgement, she wanted to believe him, wanted to take a chance on the connection they'd forged. But years of disillusionment and betrayal had left their mark... And Dani had consoled herself with the knowledge that her decision to distance herself from any relationship, whether family or otherwise, that required her to rethink the way she lived her life - as a financially independent woman who didn't need a man or a family to complete her - was the right one.

She'd wavered from that mind set when she fell for Zack. Had compromised her ideals, and look where that had gotten her. Nothing but disappointment and hurt. Did she want to go there again?

"I need time," she said softly, her eyes searching his face. "I need to process all of this. It's a lot to take in."

Zack nodded, disappointment flashing in his eyes before he schooled his features. "I understand. Take all the time you need. I'm not going anywhere, Dani. I'll be right here when you're ready."

She didn't know if she believed him. He might think it was possible, but Zack was a billionaire venture capitalist. There was no way he could stay holed up on a tiny

island in the middle of the Caribbean indefinitely.

Lifting her hand to his lips, he pressed a gentle kiss to her knuckles.

The tender gesture sent a shiver down her spine, and she had to resist the urge to pull him closer, but Dani knew she needed clarity.

A clear head to make sense of things. And that wasn't going to happen with him around, distracting her.

"Thank you," she whispered, reluctantly withdrawing her hand. "I - I think you should probably go now."

Zack frowned, but he stepped back, giving her space. "Of course. Perhaps... Could we have lunch tomorrow?"

Dani shook her head. "No, I... I think I need some time alone." She knew she did. He could turn her head so easily. In close proximity, he'd have her all worked up without even trying and Dani would be thinking with her lady bits instead of her common sense.

Zack nodded, his expression so sad as he turned to leave that her mind whirled with conflicting emotions. Just as he reached the door, he stopped. "Dani?"

She looked at him, her heart clenching at the vulnerability in his expression.

"I meant what I said. You're the one I want. The only one."

With those words hanging in the air, Zack slipped out the door, leaving Dani alone with her tumultuous thoughts. She sank onto the lounge, her legs suddenly feeling weak.

Part of her wanted to run after him, to throw caution to the wind and take a chance on what they could have together.

But the more rational side of her brain held her back.

This was all so complicated, so messy. How could she be sure Zack's feelings were genuine and not just a product of their intense physical connection? They hadn't been together for years, after all.

They both still had so much to learn about the other.

Their entire relationship had been backwards.

Getting to know each other had barely been a thing outside their limit lists and a few business conversations.

They'd thrown themselves into an intense, sexual, kink-based relationship which only took place in a club.

It was nothing like normal couples. They hadn't gone on dates to restaurants, or movies, or even enjoyed a simple coffee together.

They hadn't shared any deep, meaningful conversations, never even had breakfast together where they might talk about their wants, their dreams, their plans for the future.

It had always been more about pleasure than emotion.

And that had been fine at the outset. Expected.

Until she'd gotten caught up in her feelings.

But what were those feelings based on, really?

There was nothing solid. Nothing substantial in what they'd shared. Just desire, attraction, and a healthy kink compatibility.

Four years ago, the idea of Zack as a partner by her side, fulfilling every wild fantasy, had been intoxicating, taking her by surprise and making her question what she wanted from life.

She'd reconciled taking things a step further.

Convinced herself she wanted more. More than a fantasy.

More than the bone-melting sex and the mind-blowing scenes that left her breathless.

More than playing games in dark corners.

He'd turned her head, muddled her thoughts, and had her dreaming of husbands and babies and white picket fences. All the things her family had planned out for her. All the things she'd resisted and rejected.

And when she'd finally compromised her ideals and stepped up to accept a different future, it had all crumbled to ashes at her feet.

Now, with the benefit of hindsight and maturity? Now she wasn't sure if it was enough. What chance did the two of them have of stitching together a relationship from the ragged patchwork of their past?

Dani flopped back with a groan, staring up at the calm, cerulean sky. She needed to clear her head and find some perspective. Even here, in the privacy of her home, she could feel him everywhere, woven into the fabric of her cabana by his mere presence.

Maybe a long walk on the beach would help.

As she changed into a bathing suit and cover-up, determined to make the most of the warm evening as it turned to dusk, Dani's mind kept replaying Zack's words. The raw emotion in his voice when he'd said she was the only one he wanted. It made her heart race even now.

But could she really trust what they had?

It wasn't exactly the most solid basis. It was way too early for Dani to be sure she was ready to take the risk that Zack wouldn't seduce her senses in that effortless way of his, and have her ready to throw away years of hard work again.

And yet, as much as she hated it, the thought of walking away repelled her.

She stood at a crossroads, uncertainty weighing heavy on her shoulders, torn between indecision and longing, while her thoughts swirled in a maelstrom of doubt and desire.

The weight of past expectations that had little to do with her own autonomy and the shattered hopes from the one time she'd capitulated to them clung to her like a heavy shroud, making her hesitant to step into the unknown once more.

Her heart yearned for connection, for the warmth of companionship and the promise of something more.

She wasn't getting any younger, after all.

And while she considered herself 100% a businesswoman, that didn't keep her warm at night.

Her work would never provide the devotion and intimacy of a life partner.

But her mind, scarred by past wounds, whispered warnings of potential pain and heartbreak.

Could she truly afford to take another chance, to open herself up to the possibility of being hurt again?

Especially with a man who was already married, even if it was merely a technicality.

A breeze rustled through the palms as she made her way to the beach, carrying with it the soft scent of blooming flowers, a reminder of the fleeting beauty of life and the endless cycle of beginnings and endings. Dani closed her eyes, letting the gentle touch of the wind soothe her troubled soul.

In that moment of quiet introspection, a sense of clarity washed over her.

She realized that while the future was uncertain and the road ahead fraught with challenges, she couldn't let fear dictate her choices. Life was too short for regrets and what-ifs. Wasn't that what she'd lived with since she walked away?

The thought of years of the same stretching into her future was just... sad.

So, with a resolve that felt like a spark igniting within her, Dani took a deep breath and made her decision. For in that moment, she knew the choice to trust, to love, was a risk worth taking.

But caution was an ingrained part of her makeup, so she wouldn't be rash. She'd sleep on it, and if the morning brought the same conviction, then tomorrow she would turn towards the source of her turmoil, and face whatever was to come with an open mind.

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Feeling mildly frustrated, Zack sat at his laptop the following morning and checked on the searches he was running for Saul.

Not much to do or see there, so that just left him with too much time to sit and think.

He'd spent a sleepless night tossing and turning after Dani's reaction to his confession, and as much as he wanted to go to her and demand she give them a chance to explore what was very obviously more than simply a fleeting attraction, he was determined to give her the space she'd asked for.

Dani was stubborn and guarded, something he was certain had its origins in her upbringing, though he frustratingly didn't know what.

He did, however, know pushing her was the wrong thing to do.

That was guaranteed to make her bolt, so he was resolved to stay away.

But surely even she could see that this thing between them had outlived both the distance and the acrimony she'd put between them after she'd fled to this private island.

Sure, she'd devoted her life to her work and succeeded impressively.

He'd done the same, had that same drive to succeed when he was younger.

But age had made him realize there was a lot more to life than working yourself into an early grave without the joys and comforts of someone to share your life with.

Now, Zack wanted more than the sterile monotony of the workplace.

He wanted companionship and laughter... children.

And he wanted them with Dani.

He muttered to himself, his voice breaking the heavy silence pressing in around him. "Fucking hell, Dad! Why didn't you at least leave me some kind of correspondence, so I know what's going on?"

He knew it was pointless to berate a dead person with 'what ifs and whys', but it gave him an outlet for his frustration if nothing else.

While Zack was overjoyed to have reconnected with Dani, and their shared time together - not just the recent intimacy - had cemented his feelings, he was pretty sure Dani herself was just scratching an itch.

One that hasn't been scratched for a good long time. That's surely got to mean something.

It wasn't like he could blame her for being cautious. The way things stood, he wasn't much of a catch, and regardless of the circumstances, he knew his marriage was a major stumbling block, even now Dani knew the truth.

Zack ran a hand through his hair, sighing heavily.

He understood Dani's hesitation, but it didn't make the situation any less frustrating. He wanted to prove to her that his feelings were genuine, that their connection was more than just physical attraction or convenience. That the relationship they'd shared, while years ago, and based purely in a kink club setting, still had meaning and depth.

Fingers racing over the keys, he opened up the file platform he shared with his legal team to see if there were any updates on their search for Emylyah Baskov.

Maybe not the best use of his time, considering his current mindset.

Still nothing.

How could a woman simply disappear off the face of the earth?

He typed out a message to his team leader.

Have you checked death certificates?

While he'd been assured the girl and her mother had escaped the shooting at the judge's chambers, that could be the reason. It wasn't like Zack had good reason to believe anything his father said.

First thing we did, the response came back immediately. Nothing official has come up in her name except a birth and marriage certificate.

Zack sighed. He knew all this.

Widen the search parameters. Cross check family members, see if that leads us anywhere.

Saul had hinted at something, and Zack was doing the guy a pretty damn big favor. Perhaps it was time for a chat.

Zack pushed away from his desk, the chair wheels squeaking in protest. He needed to clear his head, get some fresh air, blow the cobwebs away.

As he made his way outside to his veranda, the warm Caribbean breeze caressed his face, carrying with it the salty scent of the ocean.

The sun was beginning to dip towards the horizon, painting the sky in vibrant hues of orange and pink.

It was beautiful, but Zack barely noticed, his mind still racing with thoughts of Dani and his convoluted circumstances.

Pulling out his phone, he dialed Saul's number. After a few rings, the other man's suave voice answered.

"Zack, how's it going?"

"All your searches are up and running. It's a process of elimination now. In the meantime... you mentioned you might have some ideas about my, ah... situation," Zack said, cutting straight to the chase. "I could use a little insight right about now."

Saul chuckled, a low, rumbling sound. "Ah, yes. Well, what I have is more like speculation, but it has its basis in a lot of inside information. Sadie's at work right now, so if you come over here, I'll explain. I think you'll find what I have will at least put you on the right track."

Zack didn't wait, hurrying out of the house as soon as he ended the call.

A short while later, Saul strode onto the veranda of Sadie's cabana, his usual confident swagger on full display, despite his recent injury. Zack accepted the drink Saul offered with a nod of thanks.

"So, what's this insight you have?" Zack asked, leaning against the railing, too antsy to sit down.

Saul took a sip, savoring the cool liquid. "I think I have a lead on your wife, or should I say, the woman who's technically your wife."

"I still don't understand how you know all this," Zack muttered. Although they were both co-owners and investors in Elysium and the Eden Resort, this was only the second time he'd met the man.

Saul shrugged easily. "Like I said, I work for several alphabet agencies. I check out anyone who comes into my circle with knowledge of my own - ah - extracurricular activities. My life often depends on it."

"And how does that help me?" Zack asked with a frown. How could Saul Stevens possibly know things Zack himself hadn't been able to find out?

"Well, you see," Saul began, wiping the condensation from the side of his glass. "The operation - I call it that loosely, since it was really a favor for a friend - that led me to the little issue I have now..."

Not such a little issue, Zack considered, since the guy's secret identity was literally about to be auctioned off with video proof, placing a massive target on his back.

"...Involved the kidnapping of one Gabriella Preston, the now wife of Marcus Mountbatten, Duke of Buckingham. You may know him better in lifestyle circles as Marcus Thorne."

Zack pursed his lips. "I know who you mean. He and his sister are also investors in the island."

"That's right." Saul nodded his agreement.

"As you know, the video up for auction shows me charging to Gabi's rescue, after

she was abducted by Vito Rossi.”

Zack shook his head in confusion. “That’s not the guy who set up the auction.”

“No. He got the evidence out, somehow, but the man himself has already met his end.”

“So, I don’t understand. How does he figure in all this?”

“Well, this story goes back eighteen years... does the time scale seem familiar to you?”

Zack narrowed his eyes on Saul, but stayed silent, sipping at his own drink.

“You see, Gabi’s father got into a spot of bother with Rossi - otherwise known as the Viper - in his role as consigliere to La Cosa Nostra.”

“Jesus! The mafia?” Zack exclaimed, dragging his fingers through his hair.

“The same.”

Fuck!

“So where does Emylyah fit into all this?”

“Well, you see, Gabi wasn’t the original target. That would have been her sister, who Gabi’s father had promised in marriage in exchange for his debts. Except...”

Saul paused, and Zack had to curb the urge to snap at the man to get on with it.

“Her mother wasn’t having it, so the story goes that the sister was married off to

someone else, real young, and then she disappeared.”

Zack sucked in a breath that caught in his throat.

“Apparently, the girls had different mothers, so different names, different households. But eventually, the Viper got wise to it and decided to set his sights on Gabi instead, since the sister had slipped through his fingers. Gabi spent years on the run, trying to stay under the radar while Rossi pursued her. That’s how she ended up here at the Eden Resort, working as Greg Taylor’s assistant at Iniquity. ”

“Y-you think...” Zack stuttered, barely able to get the words out.

“I don’t know her name, but the mother of Gabi’s sister was Russian. And I think there’s a good chance she’s the woman you’re looking for.”

Zack collapsed onto the seat, his mind reeling as he processed Saul's words. Could it really be that simple? After years of fruitless searching, had the answer been right under his nose this whole time?

"So, you're saying..." Zack began, his voice hoarse with disbelief, "That Emylyah might be Gabriella Preston's sister?"

Saul nodded, taking another sip of his drink. "It's a strong possibility. The timeline fits, and the circumstances match up too well to be mere coincidence."

Zack leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, head in his hands. "The fucking mafia! Christ. If that's true, it changes everything... but it sure as hell makes a lot of sense."

"It certainly complicates matters," Saul agreed. "But it also gives you a new avenue to explore. Maybe you should consider reaching out to Gabriella directly."

Zack's head snapped up. "Do you think she'd be willing to talk to me about it?"

Saul shrugged. "It's worth a shot. She's a sweet and compassionate woman. If she knows anything about her sister, I'm sure she'll tell you, although before you get your hopes up, I believe, through past necessity, they keep away from each other. But that may have changed now the Viper is dead. Either way, she should be able to at least confirm the name, and as luck would have it, she's on the island right now. "

Zack stood, strode over to Saul, and clapped him on the shoulder, pulling his hand back fast when Saul winced.

"Shit, sorry, man," he apologized, having completely forgotten about Saul's shoulder wound.

He took his hand and pumped it, instead.

"Thank you so much, my friend. If nothing else, it's somewhere to start," Zack breathed, trying not to let the tiny seed of hope take root, in case it came to nothing, but it was there, regardless.

"And it's so much more than I had before. "

"You're doing so much for me, Zack," Saul's voice cracked with unexpected emotion. "The least I can do is reach out to Gabi and Marcus, pave the way, and see if they're prepared to talk to you."

"No one's supposed to know you're here," Zack reminded the other man, as excited as he was at the prospect, Saul's life was in danger.

Saul nodded. "Yeah, but they were there. They deserve to know about the threat against me in case it has repercussions for the two of them, as well." He squeezed

Zack's hand. "I'll let you know what they say."

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Dani was second guessing herself all over again.

This morning she'd stood by her decision and since Zack hadn't been in the office, she'd headed off to his cabana to tell him. Disappointed had filled her when she discovered he wasn't home.

After spending what seemed like every available second haunting her office, he was suddenly conspicuously absent. Had he changed his mind? Had he gotten what he wanted and left? Had he decided she was just too much trouble? Too much drama for someone as quiet and reserved as he was.

It was true, they'd been polar opposites in the past, but Dani felt she'd matured a great deal since moving to Elysium.

Or maybe life, and the events therein, had just ground her down. Either way, she wasn't the same carefree, effusive girl she used to be. Disappointment and betrayal did that to a woman.

She had access to his phone number, of course.

It was on file since he was one of the co-owners and investors in the resort, and it was entirely possible that she'd memorized it some time ago, though she'd never admit that out loud.

And she wasn't going to use it, because the other thing she had was pride.

She was done chasing anyone or anything which didn't prove its merit, whether it be

a man, or a job, or anything else.

If there was one thing she'd learned over the years, it was to be true to herself first. That if she didn't believe in her own worth, then sure as hell nobody else would.

And while it might hurt at times, at least she didn't live feeling like she was less in any way.

No matter what happened, she was good with that.

No way was she chasing a guy who didn't show up for her. Zack knew where she was.

Dani sighed, pushing away from her desk and the pile of paperwork she'd been staring at for the last hour. Her mind was too preoccupied to focus on work. She needed a distraction, something to take her mind off Zack's sudden withdrawal and what it might mean.

Since it was almost lunch time, she grabbed her bag and headed out of her office towards the pristine shoreline of the private bay which was out of bounds to tourists because of the turtle colony that nested there.

The warm sand between her toes and the salty breeze in the air usually helped clear her head.

But today, even paradise couldn't shake the nagging doubts plaguing her thoughts.

Why did he always do this to her?

Dani's eyes instinctively scanned the resort grounds as she walked. Part of her still hoped to catch a glimpse of Zack's tall frame striding across the property. But the

familiar ache of disappointment settled in her chest when she saw no sign of him.

"Get it together, girl," she muttered to herself. "You're stronger than this."

Continuing to the cove, determined to enjoy her impromptu beach break, she settled on the sand and pulled out her book so she could lose herself within the pages.

But after reading the same paragraph three times without absorbing a word, she tossed it aside and stared out at the hypnotic turquoise ocean, tracking the waves as they lapped gently against the shore.

The rhythmic sound usually soothed her, but today it only emphasized the hollow feeling in her chest.

A flutter of movement caught her eye. She turned to see a sea turtle laboriously making its way up the beach. Dani watched, transfixed, as the creature struggled against gravity and soft sand. Its determination struck a chord within her.

"At least someone knows what they want," she murmured.

The turtle's single-minded focus made Dani's own indecision feel even more pronounced. She'd spent so long building walls, protecting herself from hurt, that she'd forgotten how to let anyone in. And now that she'd finally decided to take a chance, Zack had vanished.

A vibration from her phone startled her. Heart racing, she fumbled to retrieve it from her bag. But it was just a work email, not the message she'd been hoping for. Dani let out a frustrated groan and flopped back onto the sand.

"This is ridiculous," she said aloud to the empty beach. "I'm acting like a lovesick teenager."

“Well, that makes a change,” a modulated, feminine voice commented from behind her. “I was beginning to think you’d forgotten how to enjoy yourself.”

“Mia, hi,” Dani greeted her friend, happy to have someone to take her mind off her futile introspection.

“So, you want to talk about it?” Mia asked, settling herself onto the warm sand next to her.

Dani gave her the side eye. “What makes you think there’s anything to talk about?”

Mia shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. The fact you missed out on lunch with the gang. The fact you’re sitting here on the beach talking to yourself. The fact you’re not in your office, working yourself to the bone. All of which is pretty out of character. Take your pick.”

Dani sighed, absently drawing her finger through the sand. “It’s that obvious?”

“Only to those of us who know you,” Mia replied gently. “So, spill. What’s got you so wound up?”

For a moment, Dani considered deflecting, but the concerned look in her friend's eyes broke through her defenses. “It’s Zack,” she admitted reluctantly. “He came over yesterday and... explained everything. I finally decided to give him a chance, and now there’s no sign of him.”

Mia's eyebrows shot up. “Zack? As in, your ex-fuck-buddy Zack? The one who's been hanging around you like a lovesick puppy?”

“The very same,” Dani confirmed, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice.

"We... reconnected, then I got a little freaked out and told him I needed time, but..."
Dani heaved out a sigh.

"I thought it all through and went to tell him I was ready to try again but couldn't find him. Now I haven't seen him all day."

"Hmmm," Mia mused, her brow furrowing. "Did you try calling him?"

Dani shook her head vehemently. "No way. He didn't officially give me his number, and I'm done chasing after men who don't appreciate me."

"Fair enough. Ahhh..." She paused and eyed Dani critically. "Can I ask - does 'reconnecting' mean you had sex with him?"

Dani glowered, turning her gaze back to the undulating surf. "Maybe..."

"So that's a yes, then," Mia surmised. "I take it he must have convinced you about the marriage thing."

Sadie flopped back in the sand and stared up at the endless blue sky. It was so peaceful. A complete contrast of the turmoil in her mind, but it didn't make her feel any better. Maybe talking would. God knows, she needed a second opinion. Dani fucking hated not being certain in her own thoughts.

"Yeah," Dani admitted reluctantly. "He explained everything. It's not my story to tell, but it's pretty damn wild." She let out a bitter laugh. "And like an idiot, I believed him."

Mia reached out and squeezed her hand. "You're not an idiot, Dani. You're human. We all want to believe the best in people, especially those we care about."

Dani turned her head to look at Mia, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "But that's just it. I do care about him. I thought I was over it, over him. But seeing him again, hearing his explanation... it brought everything back, and I thought maybe there was a chance..."

"So, what are you going to do now?" Mia asked gently.

Dani shrugged, her gaze drifting back to the clear blue expanse above her. "What can I do? Surely if he wanted to be with me, he'd be... available."

"Maybe," Mia said thoughtfully. "It's difficult to say without knowing the details, but maybe there's a reason for his absence now? I mean, I don't know Zack well, but why would he go to all the bother of trying to win you back if he didn't mean it?"

"To get in my pants?" Dani asked, humorlessly, pushing herself to sit again.

"Hmm... I don't know. Seems like a lot of trouble to go to just for a quick lay. Especially when he could find someone with a lot less effort at Iniquity, if that's all he wanted. And you did say you told him you needed time. Perhaps he's just giving that to you."

The truth of Mia's words brought Dani up short. What she and Zack had shared in the privacy of her cabana was a far cry from the complexities of the intricate rope kink Zack preferred. And the resort was the perfect place to practice such a thing. He hadn't wanted to leave, either.

However she looked at it, Dani couldn't deny Mia had a point.

But where did that leave her?

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The wait had been excruciating. Both in giving Dani the space she'd demanded, which kept Zack away from her office as a mark of respect, and the stomach churning tenterhooks he experienced as he stayed with Saul, trying vainly to concentrate on the auction search, while he waited to find out if the woman who might hold the key to his past would grant him an audience.

Finally, things seemed to click into place, and he'd been offered a time and a place to meet up. Zack left Saul, his nerves skittering as he forced himself to walk down to Iniquity, instead of riding the ATV, in an effort to calm himself.

He knew Marcus Mountbatten, Duke of Buckingham, well enough.

With wealth and influence such as theirs, they often frequented the same circles.

As he approached their table, it was also obvious how possessive and protective the man was about his new wife.

However, one look at Gabriella Mountbatten nee Preston and Zack saw a blonde beauty with a deceptive air of fragility coating a core of pure steel.

"Well, Zack, this is a surprise. I didn't think you and Gabi knew each other."

There was a proprietary edge to Marcus' voice which made Zack want to smile. The guy was smitten.

"Actually, we don't," Zack agreed. "But I'm hoping your wife can help me with something."

Marcus' eyes narrowed, but Gabi gave him a serene smile which lit up the room and pressed a sweet kiss against her husband's cheek before turning back to Zack. "I'm intrigued, Mr. Kincaid. What is it you think I can help you with?"

"Please, call me Zack," he began, gesturing to the bartender and asking for a bottle of his favorite Luminous Hills Pinot Noir.

For ease and a modicum of privacy, they sat in a quiet, semi-private corner of the bar area. Zack soaked up the atmosphere. They'd done a great job with this place, but it was a stark reminder of everything he was missing.

Pushing aside the melancholy that had taunted him since Dani sent him away, Zack focused on the task at hand. He poured the wine, offering glasses to Marcus and Gabi since none of them were scening tonight and didn't need to worry about alcohol consumption.

He took a sip, and the rich, velvety liquid coated his tongue, steadying his nerves.

"I'm looking for someone," he began, his eyes fixed on Gabi. "A woman named Emylyah Baskov. I have reason to believe you might know of her."

Gabi's serene expression faltered for a moment, a flicker of surprise crossing her face before she regained her composure. Marcus tensed beside her, his hand moving protectively around her shoulder.

"Lyah?" Gabi's voice was soft, tinged with a mixture of curiosity and caution. "How do you know about her?"

Zack leaned forward, his heart rate quickening, even though the name Lyah was unfamiliar. Then again, so was everything about his child bride. "So, you do know her?"

Gabi nodded slowly, her blue eyes studying him intently, before she threw a questioning look at Marcus who narrowed his gaze on him and squeezed his wife's shoulder before she could continue.

"Before Gabi says anything else, I'm afraid you're going to have to tell us why you want to know. This is some... sensitive stuff, Zack."

Zack hesitated. He was a private man and didn't really want to go through all the details of his personal affairs all over again. Then again, this was his best lead so far, and if what Saul suspected was true, then Gabi was technically his sister-in-law.

Taking a deep breath, he related the story to them both, watching carefully for Gabi's reaction.

When he finished, she shook her head, her gaze far away in the past. "I always wondered how Lyah's mother managed to keep her safe..."

There was a wistful note to her voice which made his gut wrench, even though he wasn't privy to her story. "I'm sorry..." Zack felt compelled to apologies, even though he didn't know what for.

Gabi shook her head, clearly affected, but it was Marcus who spoke.

"Gabi and Lyah have the same father. He's dead now, but when he was alive, he bartered his twelve-year-old daughter in exchange for his debts."

Marcus' disgust was palpable. "When Lyah's mother managed to get her out of it, the guy she was promised to set his sights on Gabi instead, even after their father's death."

"She's my half-sister, but we don't really keep in touch. It's never been safe..." Gabi

explained.

Zack rubbed his temple and forehead with one hand. “So, your half-sister, Lyah, is Emylyah?” he asked, needing to clarify. “Emylyah Baskov?”

“That’s right,” Gabi confirmed, but she shook her head and frowned. “But there’s something I don’t understand. You say you’re looking for Lyah so you can get an annulment?”

“That’s right.” Zack nodded.

Gabi pursed her lips. “You see, that’s where I’m confused,” she admitted. “Because I was under the impression Lyah’s married to a man named Nikolai Radaeva. I certainly never heard about her being married to anyone else.”

Zack digested that nugget of information. Shit, could this be another dead end after all? Digging in his pocket, he took out his wallet and unfolded the photocopy of his marriage certificate, pushing it across the table to Gabi.

She studied it carefully before passing it back to him, her expression troubled. “I can’t believe parents conspired to marry off their children so young. I don’t... I don’t think Lyah ever knew about this... or understood what happened that day.”

“That’s entirely possible,” Zack agreed with a nod. “I didn’t appreciate the situation myself until years later, and Emylyah’s even younger than me... So do you still think the girl I’m married to is your sister?”

“I believe so.” Gabi bit her lip. “I mean, we didn’t live in the same household, and of course I was only about ten years old at the time.

But I came to understand the situation as soon as it affected me, and I made a point of

trying to piece together the reasons why I was being targeted.

Although I never knew how or why Emylyah's mother got her off the hook, I knew she did since it affected me so catastrophically.

Both the facts and circumstances sync too well to be coincidence.

And this..." Gabi tapped a line on the paper in front of her. "Is her date of birth."

The seed of hope Zack had buried sprouted and grew to magical beanstalk proportions. He leaned forward, eyes intense. "Do you know where I can find her, contact her?"

Gabi exchanged a glance with Marcus, who gave a slight nod. She turned back to Zack, her expression guarded. "I'm not sure..."

"I really need to get in touch with her," Zack insisted, cutting off the objection he could hear coming, his voice low and urgent. "This marriage, even if neither of us knew about it, is holding me back from..." He trailed off, thinking of Dani.

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "From what, exactly?"

Zack sighed, running a hand through his hair. "From moving on with my life. From being with the woman I love."

Gabi's eyes softened. Zack knew she was friendly with Dani. It was entirely possible she'd heard Dani's version of their past relationship.

"I understand, but I can't just give out her details.

Like I said, she's married to someone else now, even if that's technically bigamy.

I can't let you just barge into her life and destroy everything for her. ”

“Gabi...”

She held up a hand to stop him.

“But I will contact her myself and see if I can...” She huffed out a frustrated breath.

“See what I can find out, on both your behalves.”

Zack clenched his fists in frustration, then made a deliberate effort to relax. This was more than he'd had thirty minutes ago. As much as he wanted to take immediate action, he needed to focus on that.

He'd waited eighteen years after all. He could be patient a little longer.

And at least he now had some positive news to reassure Dani with.

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“Damn, Dani. Who's made you look like they peed in your cornflakes?”

Dani jolted from her thoughts and let out a small squeak of surprise as she lifted her head from where she'd been staring unseeingly at the ground on the walk back to her cabana, after an unproductive afternoon in the office.

“Jeez, Beth, you scared me!” Dani exclaimed, pressing her palm to her racing heart.

“Girl, you were off with the fairies. Good job we're on a nice secure island because you could have walked into anything and not even known it.”

Dani protested. “I'm not that bad!”

“Yes, girl, you are,” Beth countered, jamming her hand on her ample hip.

She was the company accountant but normally worked from her home on the sister island of Syèl la, so she could be with her two young children.

Dani didn't see as much of her as the other girls, but they were still good friends.

“If I hadn't stepped out in front of you, you'd have face-planted that tree.

” She moved to one side and gestured to the massive banana palm behind her. It was hard to miss.

“And if this was the city, you might have face-planted right into the back of some pervert's van. Now what's plaguing you?”

Dani shook her head and apologized. “Sorry, I’ve been looking for Zack Kincaid, and was just trying to work out where he might be.”

Beth’s eyes brightened and a wide smile lit up her face.

“Oh, I’ve just seen him! I swung past the bar to see Sawyer.

” Her eyes became dreamy and unfocussed as she mentioned the one of her three husbands who was the bar manager at the club.

Her preoccupation masked the visceral pain Dani felt stab at her chest as Mia’s recent words came back to haunt her.

He could find someone with a lot less effort at Iniquity, if that’s all he wanted.

Was that what he’d done?

“Zack’s at Iniquity?” Dani asked, just to be certain, her voice slightly hoarse even to her own ears.

Beth gave her an odd look, then shrugged. “I mean, I don’t know Zack that well, but I’m pretty sure it was him.”

“Thanks,” Dani responded, pretending her heart wasn’t crumbling. “I’ll go check it out.”

She spun on her feet and started heading in that direction. “And look where you’re going this time,” Beth called after her, but all Dani could hear was an angry buzz in her ears.

Fucking bastard! He’d fed her a bunch of pretty lines, then searched someone out at

the club the minute she didn't give him what he wanted?

Dani stormed towards Iniquity, her mind racing with scenarios of what she might find. Each imagined scene fueled her anger further. By the time she reached the kink club's discreet, understated entrance, her fists were clenched at her sides, and her nails dug into her palms.

She burst through the doors, barely even nodding at the receptionist, and scanned the dimly lit interior. The thrum of bass vibrated through her body as she pushed past writhing bodies on the dance floor. Her gaze darted from face to face, searching for Zack's familiar features.

What if he was already in the dungeon or a private room? What if he was in the suspension room, tying his beautifully crafted ropes around another woman?

She was only slightly relieved when she spotted him near the bar, leaning in close to a petite blonde. Dani's breath caught in her throat. She watched as the woman laughed at something Zack said, placing her hand on his arm.

White-hot jealousy coursed through Dani's veins. She marched over, ready to unleash her fury as she drew up behind the two of them. "I should have known this was where I'd find you," she bit out, her voice dripping venom.

"I'm just surprised you moved on so fast..."

but on past association, maybe I shouldn't have been. "

The woman turned, her eyes wide and shining with confusion and Dani wanted the floor to open up and swallow her as she realized the blonde wasn't some random hook-up after all. It was Gabi, the club's former assistant manager, and wife of Master Thorne, who - now Dani dropped the blinkers and actually looked around -

was sitting right next to her with his arm wrapped proprietorially around her shoulders.

Zack's eyes widened when he saw her, a mix of surprise and something else flickering across his features. "Dani? What are you doing here?"

She faltered, her righteous anger deflating as quickly as it had built. "I... I was looking for you," she managed, suddenly feeling foolish and exposed.

Gabi's smile turned knowing as she glanced between them. "I think we'll leave you two to talk," she said, tugging on her husband's arm. Marcus nodded and excused himself, his piercing gaze assessing Dani then flicking towards Zack before he allowed himself to be led away.

Zack's brow furrowed as he turned to face Dani fully. "You were looking for me? I thought after our last conversation, you needed space."

Dani bit her lip, fighting the urge to flee. She'd come this far; she couldn't back down now. "I did. I mean, I thought I did. But then I realized..." She trailed off, struggling to find the right words.

"Realized what?" Zack prompted gently, his eyes never leaving her face.

Taking a deep breath, Dani steeled herself. "I realized I was being a coward. That I was letting fear hold me back from something potentially amazing." She met his gaze, vulnerability shining in her eyes. "I was wrong, Zack. I do want to give us a real chance."

Zack's expression softened, a glimmer of hope lighting his features. "Dani, I-" He paused, glancing around the crowded club. "Maybe we should talk somewhere more private?"

She nodded, suddenly hyper-aware of the pulsing music and the intrinsic sounds and scents of the club. Zack gently took her elbow, guiding her towards a secluded alcove near the back of the club. The noise faded to a dull thrum as they settled onto a plush velvet loveseat.

"I've been looking for you all day," Dani admitted, twisting her hands in her lap. "When I couldn't find you, I started to doubt myself again. Then when Beth said she saw you here, I jumped to conclusions."

Zack's lips quirked. "You thought I was here to hook up with someone else?"

Dani flushed, averting her gaze. "It crossed my mind," she mumbled.

He reached out, tilting her chin up gently with his fingers, forcing her to meet his eyes.

"Dani, I meant what I said before. I want you - all of you. I'm not interested in casual hook-ups or scenes with anyone else. Hell, I've barely indulged since you walked away from me, even when I knew we were over, because it wasn't with you. "

His words were pretty, and his touch sent a shiver down her spine, but they were still just words and talk was cheap.

Plus, Dani had spent a long time thinking the worst and trying to convince herself she'd had a lucky escape.

She couldn't just turn those feelings off overnight, no matter that she'd decided to give them a chance.

"Then why are you here?" she asked, unable to keep the hint of suspicion from her voice.

Fuck! Why did she ask that? It was already obvious he was just having a drink with friends.

But why here? Why not in one of the many regular bars?

Zack sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I was trying to get details about Emylyah. I received some... information that Gabi might be able to help me."

Was he a bit cagey in the way he said that? Like there was more to it he didn't want to say? Dani narrowed her eyes at him.

"What kind of information?" she pressed, her suspicion growing again. "And why would Gabi know anything about Emylyah?"

Zack hesitated, his jaw clenching slightly. "It's... complicated. I don't want to say too much until I know more."

Dani felt her stomach twist, everything was always complicated! "Zack, if we're going to give this a real shot, we need to be honest with each other. No more secrets or half-truths."

He met her gaze, conflict evident in his eyes.

After a long moment, he exhaled heavily.

"You're right. I owe you the full truth. But some of this is not my story to tell and I don't know if it will go anywhere yet. I still don't have any direct way to contact Emylyah, and it seems like my presence may impact her current life, so I need to tread carefully. "

Dani pressed her lips together, still not happy with his response. Why couldn't he just

tell her? Didn't he trust her? If he didn't, then what chance did they have?

Like you trust him? A little voice in her head mocked.

"Did you find out anything at all?"

Zack sighed. "I do have a promising lead. As yet though, it's nothing concrete. But that's not important right now." His gaze softened as he looked at her. "What matters is that you're here, and you want to give us a real chance. Can't we focus on that?"

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Zack cursed at the suspicion and uncertainty he saw in Dani's eyes.

This wasn't the way he'd wanted to tell her he'd finally gotten a lead on Emylyah's whereabouts, and of course, his girl wanted to know more than he was at liberty to tell her.

More than anything, he wanted to confide in Dani, but he couldn't risk his loose lips scaring away the only opportunity he'd had in all the time he'd been searching for his child bride.

Already the link was tenuous. Zack had a feeling it wouldn't take much to spook either Gabi or her sister.

He wanted to find Emylyah Baskov, or Lyah Radaeva, or whatever name she went by these days, and finally free himself so he could commit to Dani fully.

Surely, she understood that? Wanted that?

Dani had, after all, placed so much importance on his marital status that she'd walked out on him without even allowing him to explain.

And for his own part, Zack wanted to be untangled from this weight that was dragging him down and preventing him from moving forward with his life.

Carefully, he maneuvered the subject away from Emylyah and focused on the other stuff Dani had said. That was far more important right now, anyway.

He'd hardly dared to believe it when she'd said she wanted to give their relationship a chance, and now he latched onto that hope with the desperation of a drowning man clinging to a piece of driftwood.

Dani's admission flooded him with something that felt so much like relief he felt close to losing it.

While Zack had been prepared to fight for her, he'd barely allowed himself to entertain the possibility that she might still want him after everything he'd put her through, after the secrecy and his obsession with finding the wife who stood between them and who had left him unavailable in more ways than just the legal.

Yet here she was, offering a glimmer of what he wanted most in the world, and she was offering it to him now despite her fears and uncertainties.

Far more important in this moment to work on cementing that, rather than pursuing a lukewarm trail that might never lead to the freedom he longed for.

If Dani was prepared to take him as he was, then he could work on the rest, no matter how long it took.

As long as he had Dani by his side, it seemed like anything was possible.

They could make it work; he was certain of it.

"Dani," he breathed, reaching out to cup her face gently. "You have no idea how much that means to me. I swear I'll do everything in my power to be worthy of this second chance."

His thumb brushed across her cheekbone, savoring the softness of her skin. Dani's eyes fluttered closed at his touch, a small sigh escaping her lips. The tension in her

shoulders eased slightly.

"I want to believe you, Zack. I really do," she whispered.

"Then believe me," he murmured, leaning in closer. "Let me show you how much I've missed you, how much I need you."

Their lips met in a tentative kiss that quickly deepened, years of pent-up longing and desire pouring out; a well their previous joining had barely touched. Perhaps because neither of them had allowed it.

Zack's hands slid down to Dani's waist, pulling her flush against him as her fingers tangled in his hair.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing heavily, Zack rested his forehead against hers. "God, I've dreamed of this for so long," he admitted hoarsely.

Dani bit her lip, a familiar mischievous glint in her eye. One he suddenly realized had been missing until now. "Well, we are at a kink club. Why don't we make some of those dreams a reality?"

Zack's breath caught in his throat, and his eyes flicked to the bottle of wine he'd ordered.

It was still more than half full and the glass he'd been drinking from wasn't finished, he'd only had a couple of sips, so he'd had nowhere near the two-drink limit enforced for scening.

Still... "Are you sure? I don't want to rush things. "

"I'm sure," Dani said firmly, taking his hand and leading him towards one of the

private rooms. A very specific private room. The suspension room. "I've missed this - missed us - too much to waste any more time."

As they entered the dimly lit space, Zack's dominant side surged to the forefront. He turned to Dani, his voice low and commanding. "Strip for me, pet."

A shiver ran through her at the familiar endearment. Slowly, teasingly, she began to remove her clothing, never breaking eye contact. Zack's gaze raked hungrily over every inch of exposed skin.

When she stood naked before him, he circled her appraisingly. "Beautiful," he murmured. "Now, hands behind your back and clasp your elbows."

Dani complied instantly, her breath quickening as Zack retrieved a brand-new length of red rope from a nearby shelf and scanned it on his phone to charge his account.

He ran the silky material through his fingers, savoring the anticipation building between them. With practiced ease, he began weaving intricate patterns across Dani's skin, the rope hugging her curves and accentuating her feminine form.

"What's your safe word?" Zack murmured against her ear as he worked.

"Red," Dani whispered, her voice breathy with arousal.

"Good girl," he praised, continuing his meticulous work, even though his heart dipped a little that she'd chosen to use the traffic light system, rather than the unique safe word they used to use. Clearly, they had a little way to go before the trust was completely rebuilt between them, but that was okay. She was giving him a chance. That's all he could ask for.

The rest he was more than happy to prove to her.

The familiarity of the rope in his hands, the silky lengths drawing through his fingers, calmed Zack's mind. Each movement was deliberate, precise, his practiced touch working with an almost meditative focus as he began constructing the sinuous weave.

He'd missed this. The intricacy of the knots, the beauty of the filigree pattern he began to construct, the way the bright red hugged her flesh and contrasted so beautifully with her olive skin—all of it took him to his own happy place.

It had been too long. Far too damn long.

Where once they had known each other's every kinky secret and every dark desire, now there was so much uncharted territory for them to explore.

Above all, he'd missed her. Missed the undeniable connection they shared.

He'd half expected never to have this again. Yet here they were, and Zack was determined not to let anything stop him from savoring Dani this time around.

As he worked, he watched her closely, noting the way her eyes fluttered closed in submission.

She'd missed this too if the look of absolute peace on her beautiful face was anything to go by.

He knew it from the way a small sigh escaped her lips and the way she surrendered each time he extended her bindings.

That sigh was sweeter to him than any words she could speak. That sigh was the promise he'd hardly dared to hope for. The promise that they could make things work.

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As the minutes ticked by, Dani felt herself slipping into that blissful headspace she'd missed so desperately. The outside world faded away until there was nothing but the sensation of rope against skin and Zack's steady presence behind her. She'd never had this with anyone else. Hadn't wanted it after her split with Zack.

It was something so innately theirs, she couldn't bring herself to share it with anyone else.

Now though, the years, the hurt, the disappointments; all of it slipped away.

Zack's fingers danced across her skin, sending shivers down her spine as he adjusted the complex web of knots and loops. With each tug and twist, Dani felt herself sinking deeper into submission, surrendering completely to his expert touch.

"How does that feel, pet?" Zack's voice was low and husky in her ear.

"Perfect, Master," Dani breathed, her eyes fluttering closed. "I've missed this so much."

A soft groan escaped Zack's lips as he pressed a kiss to her shoulder. "Me too, baby. More than you know."

With the final knot secured, Zack stepped back to admire his handiwork. The red rope crisscrossed Dani's voluptuous form in an elaborate diamond pattern which pushed her breasts forward enticingly.

"You're a work of art," he murmured, circling her slowly. His fingertips traced the

lines of rope, barely ghosting over her sensitive skin. Dani whimpered at the teasing touch, her body trembling with need.

Zack reached out to cup her face, tilting her chin up to meet his gaze, and the intensity in his eyes made Dani's breath catch.

"I want to suspend you," he said, his voice low and commanding. "Will you let me do that?"

Dani nodded eagerly, her pulse quickening at the thought. "Yes, Master. Please."

With a satisfied smile, Zack guided her to the center of the room where sturdy hooks hung from the ceiling. He worked swiftly, attaching additional ropes to the harness already adorning her curves. Dani felt herself being lifted, her feet leaving the ground as Zack carefully adjusted her position.

Soon she was floating, her body held securely in an elaborate latticework of red rope. The sensation was intoxicating - weightless yet completely under Zack's control. She could feel the rope biting deliciously into her skin with every small movement.

Zack circled her suspended form, drinking in the sight. "God, you're beautiful like this," he murmured, trailing his fingers along the taut lines of her skin. "So perfect. So mine."

A whimper escaped Dani's lips at his possessive tone. The words sent a thrill through her, rekindling a fire she thought had long since been extinguished.

"Yes," she breathed. "Yours."

Zack's eyes darkened with desire. He leaned in close, his breath hot against her ear. "I'm going to make you feel so good, pet. Remind you of everything you've been

missing. That we've both been missing."

His hands traced her curves, teasing and caressing. Dani gasped and writhed in her bonds, the ropes creaking softly as she moved. Zack's touch was electric, igniting every nerve ending.

He circled behind her, his chest pressing against her back. One hand snaked around to cup her breast, while the other trailed lower, ghosting over her abdomen.

"Tell me what you want," he commanded softly.

Dani's mind was hazy with lust, coherent thought slipping away. "You," she managed. "Please, I need you."

Zack chuckled, the sound sending shivers down her spine. "Not good enough, pet. Be specific."

His fingers dipped lower, barely grazing her most sensitive area before retreating. Dani whimpered at the loss of contact.

"Please," she begged, her voice breathy with need. "Touch me. Make me yours again."

Zack's grip tightened on her hip. "That's my good girl," he purred. His fingers finally slid between her thighs, finding her slick and ready. "So wet for me already. I've missed how responsive you are when you truly let yourself go like this."

He began to stroke her slowly, teasingly, building her pleasure with expert precision. Dani moaned, instinctively trying to arch into his touch but finding herself deliciously restrained by the ropes.

"That's it," Zack encouraged, increasing the pressure. "Show me how much you've missed this."

His thumb circled her clit as two fingers curled inside her, hitting that perfect spot. Dani cried out, her thighs trembling as the first waves of orgasm washed over her.

"Zack!" she gasped, lost in sensation. A sensation that was ripped from her when he landed a sharp, punishing swat to her pussy, causing her to cry out and buck within her bonds.

"What did you call me?" he asked, his tone harboring a dangerous edge.

Dani gasped and panted as the unexpected edge of pain sent her senses into overdrive, her mind scrambling helplessly to understand what he wanted from her. What did she say? Shit, she was too far gone to remember.

"How do you address me here?" Zack prompted, making her realize she'd garbled it all out loud.

"M-master!" she stuttered, her mind reeling once again as he soothed the tiny ache with his tongue, forcing her towards another climax.

"That's right, pet. Don't forget again," Zack murmured against her sensitive flesh before resuming his ministrations with renewed vigor.

Dani's mind spun as pleasure built rapidly once more. The contrast of pain and pleasure, the tight embrace of the ropes, and Zack's commanding presence overwhelmed her senses. She teetered on the edge, desperate for release. A release he denied.

"Please, Master," she whimpered. "May I come?"

Zack's fingers stilled, drawing a frustrated moan from Dani. He stood, moving to face her suspended form. His eyes raked over her flushed skin and heaving chest.

"Not yet," he said, voice low and gravelly. "I want to savor this moment."

He cupped her face gently, thumb brushing across her lower lip. Dani's tongue darted out instinctively, tasting the salt of his skin. Zack's breath hitched.

"I'd forgotten just how exceptional this is with you. Only you," he whispered, leaning in to capture her lips in a searing kiss.

Dani melted into the embrace, surrendering completely. Giving herself over to him wholly and unreservedly.

Zack's hands roamed her suspended body once more, reigniting the fire within her. "Now, pet," he growled, "I'm going to make you come so hard you see stars."

True to his word, Zack's skilled fingers and wicked tongue soon had Dani writhing in ecstasy, her cries of pleasure echoing through the room. Wave after wave of intense sensation crashed over her as Zack expertly pushed her to her limits and beyond.

"One more," Zack demanded gruffly as Dani hung limply within the confines of his ropes. She shook her head. "I can't," she croaked.

"You can," Zack disagreed, holding a water bottle to her lips and encouraging her to drink. She swallowed thirstily, the cool water reviving her just a little, but she was still spent.

"I want to feel you come all over my cock like the good girl you are."

And she did want to be his good girl. So, so bad. But Dani was as limp as a wet

noodle and certain she didn't have the energy to reach yet another climax.

She was wrong.

"I'm going to fuck you hard, and fast, and deep," Zack growled, positioning himself behind her suspended form. "And you're going to come for me one last time."

With one powerful thrust, he buried himself to the hilt inside her. Dani cried out, her oversensitive body protesting even as a new wave of pleasure crashed over her. The ropes creaked as she instinctively tried to move, to press back against him, but found herself deliciously immobilized.

Zack set a punishing pace, his hips snapping against her with each thrust. One hand gripped her hip tightly while the other snaked around to rub tight circles on her clit.

"That's it, pet," he panted in her ear. "I can feel how close you are. Give it to me. Come for your Master."

Dani whimpered, torn between the devastating sensations and her overwhelming exhaustion. But Zack knew exactly how to play her, his cock hitting that perfect spot with each stroke.

"I-I can't," she gasped, even as she felt herself climbing higher.

"You can and you will," Zack commanded, increasing the pressure on her clit. "You're mine, Dani. Show me how good I make you feel."

His words, combined with the relentless stimulation, pushed her over the edge.

Dani's whole frame tensed, her inner walls clamping down on Zack's cock as an intense orgasm ripped through her.

Stars burst behind her eyelids as she cried out, her voice hoarse and raw.

He worked her through it relentlessly, drawing out her pleasure until she was limp in the ropes that bound her in this paradise.

Zack groaned, and with a few final, powerful thrusts, followed her over the edge, spilling himself deep inside her.

For several long moments, the only sound in the room was their ragged breathing. Zack pressed his forehead against Dani's shoulder, his arms wrapping around her suspended form.

"God, I've missed you," he murmured, pressing soft kisses along her spine.

Dani hummed contentedly, too blissed out to form coherent words. She felt Zack carefully begin to lower her, his strong arms supporting her as he released the suspension ropes.

Once her feet touched the ground, Dani's knees buckled. Zack caught her effortlessly, scooping her into his arms and carrying her to a nearby chaise lounge. He laid her down gently, his fingers working quickly to loosen the rope harness still adorning her body.

"You were amazing, pet," Zack murmured, pressing soft kisses to each patch of skin as it was revealed. "So perfect for me."

Dani felt boneless, completely at peace in a way she hadn't experienced in years. As the last of the ropes fell away, Zack gathered her into his arms, cradling her against his chest.

"How do you feel?" he asked softly, running his fingers through her tousled hair.

"Mmm... floaty," Dani mumbled, nuzzling into his warmth. "Safe."

Zack's arms tightened around her, and she felt him press a kiss to the top of her head.

"Good. Remember that feeling. That's exactly how I want you to feel with me.

Always."

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Things were truly better than Zack had ever expected they could be.

He'd been here for three weeks now, and while his reason for being at the resort was done after the first week and he'd finished with the mainframe, provided Saul with the information he needed to get his life back, as well as making the system updates that covered his tracks, things with Dani had gone from good to better.

It was early days, but Zack had no intention of leaving the island until everything between them was settled once and for all.

He had a cabana here. It was one of the perks of being an investor. Anything needing his attention could be managed remotely. And if it couldn't - tough! There was no way he was jeopardizing everything he'd worked so hard for with Dani. Not when they were finally making real progress.

Each day brought new discoveries - both in and out of the bedroom. Zack found himself constantly in awe of Dani's strength and resilience. The way she was slowly opening up to him again, allowing herself to be vulnerable, trusting him with her body and her heart. It was intoxicating.

Their scenes together had grown more intense, more intimate. Last night, Zack had bound Dani in a star harness, the white rope a striking contrast against her tanned skin. He'd taken his time, savoring every gasp and shiver as he'd methodically spanked her until she was trembling and begging.

Afterwards, as they lay tangled together, Dani had whispered "I'm starting to believe in us again." Those simple words had filled Zack with a fierce determination. He

would do whatever it took to prove himself worthy of her trust.

This morning, he'd woken early, padding out onto the cabana's private deck to watch the sunrise.

The gentle lapping of waves against the shore soothed him as he pondered their future.

He knew there were still hurdles ahead, but for the first time in years, Zack felt truly hopeful.

He turned as he heard soft footsteps behind him.

Dani emerged from the bedroom, wrapped in a silky robe, her hair tousled from sleep. She stayed with him most nights now. Padding over in her bare feet, she joined him at the railing, leaning into his side.

"Good morning," she murmured, stifling a yawn. "You're up early."

Zack slipped an arm around her waist, pulling her close. "Just thinking."

"Mmm. Dangerous pastime." There was a teasing lilt to her voice. "What were you thinking about?"

He chuckled, pressing a kiss to her temple. "About us. About the future."

Dani tensed slightly but didn't pull away. Progress, Zack thought.

"And what conclusions have you drawn, Mr. Strategist?" she asked lightly.

Zack turned to face her fully, cupping her face in his hands. "That I'm exactly where I

need to be. That we have all the time in the world to figure this out. And that I'm not going anywhere until we do."

Emotion flickered in Dani's eyes. She swallowed hard, her fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"Every word," Zack affirmed, his thumb caressing her cheek. "I know it's taken a while for you to see it, Dani. But I swear to you, I'm in this for the long haul."

She nodded slowly, a small smile tugging at her lips. "I believe you. And that scares me a little."

"I know, sweetheart. We'll take it one day at a time." He leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. "Now, how about some breakfast? I could whip up those blueberry pancakes you love."

Dani's eyes lit up. "Mmm, tempting. But I have a better idea." Her hands slid down his chest, fingers toying with the waistband of his shorts. "How about we work up an appetite first?"

Heat flared in Zack's eyes. "I like the way you think, Ms. Moreno."

With a playful growl, he scooped her up, relishing her surprised squeal as he carried her back inside. Dani's laughter turned to a gasp as Zack tossed her onto the bed, her robe falling open to reveal tantalizing glimpses of smooth, tanned skin.

"Now then," Zack purred, his voice dropping to that low, commanding tone that never failed to make Dani shiver. "I think someone's feeling a bit sassy this morning. Perhaps we need a reminder of who's in charge?"

Dani's breath hitched, her eyes darkening with desire. "Maybe I am," she challenged,

a coy smile playing on her lips. "What are you going to do about it?"

Zack raised an eyebrow. "Seems like someone's asking for a spanking," he growled with a mock frown. In truth, he wouldn't trade what they had here for the world. He was overjoyed Dani was becoming so comfortable with him.

Everything was heading in the right direction.

They emerged an hour later, disheveled and sated, and finally ate a late breakfast. "Urgh! I shouldn't have had that last pancake," Dani groaned. "I've got a lunch date with the girls later and I'm already stuffed."

Zack wagged his eyebrows. "I don't think cock counts, babe."

Dani giggled and swatted at him. "Lordy, you are incorrigible!"

He couldn't help the grin that spread across his face. He wanted this with her forever. This fun, this laughter, this easy banter. The physical side of their relationship - as amazing as it was - was almost secondary. And in truth, they'd never had a problem there.

But sex was just sex. Even when it was fantastic, it didn't have to mean anything. And often in the lifestyle circle they chose to embrace, it didn't.

Zack knew that the foundation they needed to lay was trust. Absolute faith in each other—the kind of deep, unshakeable trust that could weather any storm life might throw their way.

He believed without it, they would remain adrift, always second-guessing what the other truly felt or wanted.

But little by little, day by day, they were getting there, slowly but surely.

He saw the changes in Dani, how she was opening up to him, offering glimpses of the woman she used to be with him, and the woman she was becoming again.

He felt the shift within himself, too, the growing certainty that he could trust her not to walk away from him like the last time.

Zack knew reclaiming the closeness they once had would take time and patience.

But from where he stood, everything was on the right track.

Sure, he couldn't erase the past, but he could see a future. One worth all they'd been through.

Everything was pretty damn close to perfect.

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Most of the time, times like now, Dani felt like she was walking on air.

Others, she felt far too suspicious of her newfound happiness, and found herself waiting for the other shoe to drop.

She hated that insecurity, but knew it wasn't going to disappear overnight. All she could do was give it time, and she really was trying.

"What time is your lunch?" Zack asked, clearing their plates.

"One o'clock," Dani replied, stretching languidly. "I should probably start getting ready soon."

Zack nodded and threw her a captivating smile. God he was pretty! "Any special plans?"

"Just catching up. Sadie's been holding out on us, and it's time for her to spill the tea!" Dani paused, pursing her lips. "You know, it's funny. I used to dread these lunches. Now I'm actually looking forward to them."

"Oh?" Zack raised an eyebrow, curiosity lighting his expression.

Dani shrugged, a soft smile playing on her lips.

"Before, I felt like I was putting on an act. Pretending everything was fine when it wasn't. Side stepping the girls when they'd encourage me to go to Iniquity or hook up with a guest. I haven't confided in them about you and me yet.

I guess I needed time to know things really were going to work out.

But now..." She met his gaze, her eyes shining.

"Now I actually have something good to share, too."

Warmth bloomed in Zack's eyes. He crossed the room, pulling her into his arms. His lips brushed her forehead as he murmured, "I'm glad I can be that something good for you."

Dani melted into his embrace, breathing in his familiar scent. For a moment, she let herself bask in the contentment that washed over her. But that nagging voice of doubt crept in, whispering that it was all too perfect. She pushed the thought away, determined to enjoy this moment.

"I should get going," she said reluctantly, pulling back slightly. "Don't want to be late."

Zack nodded, releasing her with a gentle squeeze. "Have fun. And Dani?" He caught her hand as she turned to leave. "Remember, you deserve this happiness. We both do."

His words buoyed her as she made her way to the resort's beachfront restaurant, Bahamian Rhapsody. The familiar faces of her friends greeted her, and for once, Dani felt genuinely excited to join them.

"There she is!" Sadie exclaimed, waving her over. "We were starting to think you'd gotten lost."

Dani grinned and slid into the vacant seat. "Sorry, I lost track of time."

"Now from Sadie or Mia, I'd immediately think they'd gotten lucky," Natalie teased. "But from you it probably means you were working on a Saturday morning."

Dani side-eyed her assistant. "Well, maybe it didn't, this time."

Silence engulfed the table as her friend all looked at her, stunned.

"What?" Dani asked, raising her hands in askance.

"Did you hit the club?" Natalie asked, her mouth hanging open.

Dani frowned. "Of course not." Why would they think that?

"Ohmygod!" Mia exclaimed. "Did you and Zack Kincaid..."

She trailed off and Dani felt her cheeks heat despite her tanned complexion. The others didn't miss it, either.

"You did!" Natalie squealed, loud enough to have heads turning.

"Hush!" Dani admonished, looking around, self-consciously.

Natalie bit her lip and subsided slightly, but she was still almost bouncing in her chair.

It was Sadie who reached over and squeezed her hand. "Oh Dani, I'm so happy for you. When I found out Zack was here to help Saul and that whole thing with the mainframe was just a cover, I was sure you'd never give him another chance. I'm so glad you got past all that."

There was a low buzz in Dani's ears and the background noise of the restaurant

seemed to fade into nothing as she tried to make sense of what Sadie was saying.

Her heart lurched and her stomach twisted into knots while her mind raced, trying to process this new information.

Zack hadn't come to update the mainframe, like he said. He'd been here to help Saul. Which meant... Zack hadn't been honest with her. All this time, he'd been lying to her, telling her what she wanted to hear. Making her think he was here to win her back.

Deceiving her.

Again.

She felt a sharpness in her gut, a jagged feeling that spread painfully through her veins at the revelation.

Pieces started to fall into place, fragments of conversations and little omissions.

Her own goddamned gut feeling. Did he think she would shrug and say, 'oh well?' That she was too desperate to care?

Dani swallowed hard, the lump in her throat almost choking her.

Panic crept in, whispering cold truths about how naïve she'd been to believe in him again.

Her breath caught, and she struggled to keep her composure in front of the others.

Maybe the nagging voice in her head wasn't just insecurity.

Maybe she'd been right to be suspicious of this happiness all along; right to wait for it to all come crashing down.

Her cheeks burned with a mix of humiliation and anger. She felt exposed, laid bare in front of her friends who were now staring at her with wide, expectant eyes, unaware of the storm surging inside her. Was it all some kind of sick joke? Was she the joke?

Plastering a smile across her face so big it made her cheeks hurt, Dani turned to Sadie.

"Don't think you're going to get out of telling us all about Saul Stevens after he stalked in here and stole you away at our last lunch," she managed to say, proud of the way her voice sounded almost normal.

"It's your turn first," she insisted, breathing a sigh of relief when the others agreed.

For the next fifteen minutes, Dani managed to sit and listen to the usually reserved and sensible Sadie wax lyrical about the new love of her life.

Thankfully the others asked enough questions no one seemed to notice how quiet Dani was.

As Sadie gushed about Saul, Dani's mind whirled, struggling to process the bombshell she'd dropped.

She nodded and smiled at the appropriate moments, but inside she was seething.

How could Zack have lied to her like this?

After everything they'd been through, after all his pretty words about trust and honesty? It just proved what she'd always thought.

Words were meaningless. It was actions that mattered.

The way a person behaved. And what did Zack's behavior say about him?

She'd been through this before with him. Did she really want to go down that road again?

Except... last time she'd run without hearing him out, and there had been reasons. Were there reasons now? And more importantly, did she want to make herself vulnerable enough to find out?

Loving someone means giving them the opportunity to explain when things look bad. Not running as soon as things get tough.

Damn, she hated that little voice inside her head sometimes. She was so freaking confused.

The waiter arrived to take their orders, providing a brief respite. Dani seized the opportunity to excuse herself to the restroom, needing a moment alone to collect herself.

Once inside, she gripped the edge of the sink, staring at her reflection in the mirror. Her carefully applied makeup couldn't hide the hurt and anger in her eyes. She took several deep breaths, trying to calm the storm of emotions threatening to overwhelm her.

"Get it together, Dani," she whispered to herself. "You can't fall apart here."

She splashed some cool water on her face, careful not to smudge her makeup.

As she dried off, a plan began to form in her mind.

She'd get through this lunch, keeping up appearances. Then she'd confront Zack and demand answers. No more lies, no more half-truths. Wasn't that what he'd said?

She deserved the full story, and she was going to get it.

With renewed determination, Dani straightened her shoulders and exited the restroom. As she made her way back to the table, she caught snippets of excited chatter from her friends. They fell silent as she approached, guilty looks flashing across their faces.

"What?" Dani asked, sliding back into her seat.

Mia bit her lip, exchanging glances with Natalie before blurting out, "We were just saying how amazing it is that you and Zack worked things out. I mean, after everything that happened..."

Dani's stomach clenched. "What do you mean, 'everything that happened'?" she asked, her voice tight. Dear God, don't tell her there was more. That really would be the last straw.

The others shifted uncomfortably. Sadie cleared her throat.

"Well, you know. You told us he had a wife and that's why you walked away all those years ago.

Even though you haven't explained yet, we just think it's great that you two were able to move past it. It takes a strong person to give someone a second chance after finding out something as huge as that."

"So... are you going to tell us about it?" Mia asked, her expression intent. "I assume this other woman's no longer in the picture if you're getting back together."

The other woman.

Mia's words seemed to ping-pong around her head like the projectile in a pinball machine, and each time they hit, it bruised a little. Because whatever way she looked at it, whatever the circumstances, she was the other woman.

Maybe the first blow, finding out Zack's true reasons for being on the island, had left her too vulnerable, but Dani felt the blood drain from her face as the realization hit her as if she'd never known it.

She was the other woman. The very thing she despised and had sworn she would never become.

Her chest tightened, making it hard to breathe.

"I... I need some air," she managed to choke out, pushing back her chair abruptly. She stumbled away from the table, ignoring the concerned calls of her friends.

Once outside, she gulped in deep breaths of the salty sea air, trying to quell the nausea rising in her throat. How had she let this happen? How had she allowed herself to be so blinded by her feelings for Zack that she'd forgotten everything she stood for?

She leaned against the railing, her knuckles turning white as she gripped it tightly.

The waves crashed against the shore, mirroring the turmoil in her mind.

She had been so quick to judge others in the past, so certain of her moral high ground.

And now here she was, no better than those she had looked down upon.

She had turned into her mother.

A gentle hand on her shoulder made her jump. She turned to see Sadie standing there, concern etched on her face.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Sadie asked softly, her expression tentative.

Dani knew the other woman had been accused in the past of trying to head shrink her friends' relationships because of her job as a psychologist and was a little cautious about offering help as a result.

But Dani knew Sadie was only trying to help.

And honestly? Perhaps a second opinion would help. God knew Dani was struggling to make sense of everything.

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Nodding numbly, Dani allowed Sadie to guide her away from the restaurant. They walked in silence along the beach until they reached a secluded spot shaded by palm trees.

"Okay, spill," Sadie said gently. "What's really going on with you and Zack?"

Where did she even start?

She took a shaky breath. "I thought... I thought we were starting over. I guess I had some romantic notion that he came here for me, and the excuse about updating the mainframe was just a cover. It never did make any sense that someone like Zack would come here to do that. He's a damn venture capitalist, not an IT lackey.

And now I find out he's been lying about why he's here all along. I was right. It was nothing to do with the mainframe... and it was nothing to do with me, either." She laughed bitterly. "God, I'm such an idiot."

Sadie's eyes widened. "Oh honey, no. He really didn't lie to you." She bit her lip. "No more than I did, anyway."

Dani looked at her friend in shock. "What does that mean?"

Dragging her fingers through her hair, Sadie huffed out a breath.

"There were things I couldn't tell you... that I still can't tell you.

" She shook her head and laughed humorlessly.

“God, that sounds shit. But it’s the truth.

Things about Saul that could put his life in danger.

Hell, he was in danger. That’s why Zack was here.

Neither of us were at liberty to talk about it.

The only person who knew what was going on was Luca. ”

“So, my best friend, my cousin, and my lover all knew the score, but not me.” Dani knew she sounded snippy, but she couldn’t help it. She felt betrayed. Again.

Sadie stopped walking and turned to face her.

“Dani, I know you’re feeling shut out, but none of this was about you...

and I mean that in the best possible way,” she added when she saw Dani’s expression crumble.

“Saul had a target on his back. I can’t say more than that, but the threat against him was massive, and it was real. ”

And now she felt like an asshole for bitching about it.

“All I’m saying is, don’t read stuff into it that isn’t there.”

Dani felt herself deflate. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I’m just so torn and confused. I promised Zack we’d give things another go, but in all truth, I still have so many reservations, and the situation with his wife doesn't help.”

She winced, knowing she'd have to explain herself a bit more on that score, but Sadie surprised her.

"As it happens, I know a bit about Zack's situation.

" She hurried on, maybe knowing Dani was hanging by a thread.

"It just so happened that Saul thought he had a lead on Zack's child bride.

I refuse to call her his wife, because she really isn't, and I think, deep down, regardless of your insecurities, you know that.

They were children, Dani. Minors whose parents had no business doing such a thing to them. "

"I understand that logically, Sadie. Honestly, I do. But it doesn't change the fact that Zack's married...

making me the 'other woman', regardless of the circumstances.

" She said it using her fingers as quotation marks.

"That's something that has real triggers for me, and I'm struggling to keep them under control. "

Sadie's expression softened with understanding. "Oh Dani, you're not the other woman. Not in any real sense. That sham of a marriage was forced on Zack when he was just a kid. He never chose it or wanted it. You're the one he's chosen as an adult."

Dani shook her head, unconvinced. "But legally..."

"Legally nothing," Sadie interrupted firmly. "Zack was underage when that 'marriage' happened and he's been trying to get it officially terminated for years. As soon as he manages to track Emylyah down, it'll be a couple of quick signatures and all of it will be in the past."

Dani felt a glimmer of hope but doubt still gnawed at her. "I just wish he'd been upfront about everything from the start, then maybe I wouldn't have been so blindsided, and reacted so badly."

"I know, sweetie, but you said yourself that your previous relationship only took the form of scening at a club. That's not exactly the kind of environment where you share deep life stories. And I have a feeling Zack kept it that way purposefully."

Dani thought back on the times she and Zack had spent together and couldn't deny Sadie's words. "It felt like so much more though," she admitted. "I wanted it to be more."

Sadie squeezed her hand. "I know that. And as soon as you put that out there, Zack came clean with you. He never led you on. I think you should give him a little bit of credit for that."

Sadie sighed and shook her head. "This may not be what you want to hear, Dani, but I'm going for a bit of tough love here..."

It was you who wouldn't give him the opportunity to explain back then.

And I'm pretty sure Zack probably has as many doubts as you do since for him, it probably seemed like you didn't care enough to hear him out."

Ouch. Yeah, tough love indeed.

“Hurt works both ways,” Sadie continued, not letting go of Dani’s hand.

“You don’t spend so much time together in such intimate circumstances - not even if it was only at a kink club - without building a certain amount of trust and faith in the other person.

You have to have that as both a dominant and a submissive, to be able to enjoy the kind of exclusive relationship you did.

To have it torn away so suddenly and painfully is going to leave scars on both of you, and the only way to get around that now is to be completely transparent with each other.

But also, you need to remember neither of you are entirely without fault. ”

Well, that sucked big donkey balls... but it was exactly what Dani needed to hear. Sadie was right. Zack had never led her on, and he had been honest as soon as she suggested taking things further.

It was Dani herself who ran, just like she always did when things got tough. She didn’t bother waiting around to listen then. But now, that was exactly what she needed to do.

And if she didn’t like the answers... Well, then she could run.

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Zack didn't know why he was nervous, but he had a bad feeling.

What if Dani's friends told her she was being stupid taking a chance on him? He had no doubt she'd talk to them about it. Hell, she'd said as much before she left. He just couldn't help wondering how much detail she'd gone into... Or what she might have told them in the past.

He paced the small room, running his fingers through his hair. The uncertainty gnawed at him. What if Dani decided he wasn't worth the risk after all? Things were still so new between them, and as good as things were, he could tell Dani continued to have reservations.

A sharp knock at the door made him jump. His heart raced as he crossed the room, hesitating before turning the handle.

Dani stood there, her eyes blazing with an intensity that made him take an involuntary step back.

"We need to talk," she said, her voice low and controlled. She pushed past him into the room, her body radiating tension.

Zack's mouth went dry. "What's wrong?"

She whirled to face him, hands on her hips. "You lied to me. Again."

His stomach dropped. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb, Zack. I know why you really came here. And it had nothing to do with updating the resort's computers."

Zack's mind raced, trying to figure out how she'd discovered the truth. He opened his mouth to explain, but Dani cut him off with a raised hand.

"Save the excuses. I want to hear the whole story. Now." Her eyes narrowed, daring him to try and deceive her again.

Zack's shoulders slumped. He knew this moment would come eventually, but he'd hoped to have more time to prepare. To figure out how to explain everything without sounding like a complete asshole.

"You're right," he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "I wasn't here to update the mainframe. Luca asked me to come because Saul was in danger and needed the kind of help only I could provide."

"So, none of this was ever about me at all, then. I was just an afterthought. An unexpected bonus..." Her voice sounded bleak, and Zack couldn't stand it.

Standing before her, he looked Dani right in the eye and told her his truth.

"Oh, it was always about you, baby. I didn't really know Saul.

Knew of him, sure, but we weren't friends.

And while I wasn't opposed to helping him out of a tight spot, I can't deny I leapt at the chance because it gave me an excuse to be here and see you.

The cover story about the software updates really wasn't my idea, and while I didn't much like it, I didn't have a lot of choice.

The ruse was a necessity, because Saul's life was in danger and his presence here was on a need-to-know basis.

It was never that I didn't want to tell you the truth, I literally couldn't.

And don't think I won't spank your delectable ass for calling yourself an afterthought. ”

Zack shook his head and gave a rueful grin. “And of course, you, my little spitfire, were so diligent about it all, I had to scramble to make it a reality.”

He paused and decided to tell her the rest. “And tell me if I'm wrong, but I felt like you'd never give me the time of day if I'd just turned up out of the blue... This gave me the chance to spend time with you where you couldn't just run away again.”

“I'm sure you could have found an excuse before now. It's been years!”

Okay, so she was obviously going to make him work for it. And that was fine. Zack was nothing if not persistent and maybe a tad relentless when he wanted something.

Okay, very relentless. Nothing worth having was ever easy, and Dani was definitely worth the effort.

He nodded. “You're right. I probably could. But for a long time, I had my own misgivings... and also a lot of anger.”

He could see the gears turning in her head at his words.

“I'm not going to deny it. I was pissed with you for not at least bothering to hear me out.

It made me think there was no future for us.

And that was compounded because of my situation.

I wasn't going to be free until eighteen years had passed, and I didn't think that was fair on you. "

Dani's eyes widened, a mix of surprise and confusion flashing across her face. "Eighteen years? What are you talking about?"

Zack sighed, running a hand through his hair. "The marriage... while it might not have been real, but there was an additional legal contract. An obligation to stay married for a certain period of time. I checked it out, and it was absolutely binding."

"Eighteen years," Dani said again, her voice soft. "Wow, that's..." She shook her head. "Why?"

"As far as I can piece together, it was for Emylyah's protection. She was in danger from the mafia, or something. Being married gave her a certain immunity but like I already told you, I don't really know. I was being honest about that."

"I'm sorry you were angry about me running," Dani said stiffly. "But when you dropped that bombshell on me, it felt like my entire life had imploded. I was disgusted with you and disgusted with myself for being with a married man. It's kind of a touchy subject for me."

Zack rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, I didn't really handle that the best way. In the heat of the moment, I wasn't really thinking about how to break it to you. I wish I'd managed it better."

"You and me both," Dani said humorlessly. "Although with my history it might not

have made any difference. Marriage and mistresses have difficult associations for me.”

He waited a moment, but she didn’t elaborate, and as much as Zack wanted to pry, he didn’t want to spook her any further.

Instead, he chose another truth to appease her with.

“My work here is done, Dani. It has been for the past two weeks. Whatever I came here for initially, I’ve stayed because of you. ”

“I’m not going to lie, Zack, it shook me, finding out you weren’t here for the reasons you said.

I understand confidentiality - hell, I live with it every single day given the nature of this island.

But even logic can’t simply erase my emotional doubts.

It doesn’t help me turn off all the uncertainty I’m feeling.

I want to give us a chance, really, I do.

But sometimes it feels like life keeps throwing up roadblocks and that makes me wonder if those are red flag warnings I should be listening to, so I keep second guessing myself. ”

She rubbed her arms and looked away from him, and Zack felt her slipping away. "I don't know if I can do this," she whispered, her voice trembling slightly.

Zack's heart clenched at her words. He took a step closer, his hand reaching out to

touch her arm but stopping short, hovering in the space between them.

"Dani, please," he said softly. "I know I've given you reasons to doubt me, but I'm here now. Fully present and ready to fight for us."

She turned back to him, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "How can I trust that? How do I know this isn't just another lie?"

Zack swallowed hard, his throat tight with emotion.

"Because I love you. I've loved you for years, even when I thought there was no future for us. Even when I was angry. Even when I thought I'd never see you again. And I've never lied to you, even though there have times when I couldn't be as open as I wanted to be. I've always been truthful whenever you've asked the hard questions, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to prove myself to you. "

Dani's breath caught, her eyes widening at his confession. She searched his face, and he knew she was looking for signs of deception. That was fine. She wouldn't find any. He meant every word he said.

"I... I don't know what to say," she whispered.

Zack stepped closer, closing the distance between them. This time, he did reach out, gently cupping her face in his hands. "You don't need to say anything. Just give us a proper chance, that's all I'm asking for. Things have been good up until now, haven't they?"

She let out a shaky breath, clearly conflicted.

"You said you would," he reminded her, trying to put everything he felt into his eyes as he looked into her doubtful ones.

“I can’t change the past. But at least let’s give the future a shot.”

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G oddamn, she wished she wasn't so freaking distrustful. Why did she constantly do this to herself? Second guess herself to the degree where she jeopardized everything they were building? Damn her family. They'd ruined her!

Zack was right. Things between them had been good. The sex was phenomenal. And as he'd promised, he was present, which couldn't be easy for a man with his responsibilities, and he did indeed seem determined to prove himself.

But Dani was still struggling, and she hated herself for it.

She couldn't shake the nagging feeling that there was more to the story with Emylyah. Zack's evasiveness when Dani asked about her only fueled her paranoia.

Except he wasn't really being evasive, that was unfair.

He just didn't know. He was as frustrated as she was to have a faceless woman standing between them.

Maybe more so, since she was his baggage.

Unfortunately, none of those things eased her peace of mind; the emotional baggage from her past was too ingrained.

A couple of days later, Dani was still no closer to reconciling her misgivings. She paced her cabana, frustrated with herself, wondering how long it would take before she stopped feeling like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It was midweek, but Dani had taken some time off so they could be together. Just the two of them. Time to heal the wounds of both the distant and recent past.

The balcony doors stood open, allowing in the sultry island breeze, but even paradise couldn't soothe her racing thoughts.

She wanted to trust Zack. God, how she wanted to let go and give herself permission to fall into this second chance with abandon.

But years of disappointment and battling against her family's expectations had built walls around her heart that weren't so easily dismantled. She'd become set in her ways and stubborn about giving even the slightest concession but even recognizing that about herself didn't help much.

A soft knock at the door startled her from her spiraling thoughts.

Her pulse quickened. Regardless of everything, there was no denying the way her body responded to Zack.

When he was close it seemed like everything was right in her world.

Even her mind quieted. It was only when she was alone that doubts plagued her.

And right now, it was time to put them aside, because they had the rest of the week to spend together. It was exactly what they needed.

She steeled herself and squared her shoulders as she reached for the door handle, determined not to let her negativity ruin things for them.

"Hey." She pasted on a smile as she opened the door and stepped back to allow Zack entry.

“Hey yourself,” Zack replied, pulling her into his arms for a searing kiss. His lips were firm yet tender against hers, and Dani felt herself melting into his embrace. For a blissful moment, all her worries faded away.

When they finally broke apart, Zack's eyes searched her face. "Everything okay? You seemed a little tense when you opened the door."

Dani hesitated, not wanting to ruin the mood. "I'm fine," she said, forcing a smile. "Just excited for our time together."

Zack's brow furrowed slightly, clearly not entirely convinced. "You know you can talk to me about anything, right? I want us to be open with each other."

His sincerity made Dani's chest tighten with guilt. Here he was, trying so hard, and she was still holding back. “Honestly, I’m fine. What’s the plan for today?” She’d left it to him to arrange their day, happy to be surprised.

Zack grinned, looking more boyish than she’d ever seen him. “Well, I thought we’d go jet skiing to start, then wind down with a private trip on the glass bottomed boat to watch the sea life.”

Dani blinked in surprise. In all the time she’d worked on the island, she’d actually never participated in any of the many exciting activities the resort had to offer. “That sounds wonderful,” she told him, meaning it.

“Get yourself ready then, kitten. Shay’s waiting for us.” He gave her a swat on the backside as incentive, and Dani giggled, her previous tension forgotten.

An hour later, they were dressed in wetsuits and life jackets, and after a technical and safety brief, they were out on the water. Dani had chosen to ride with Zack, rather than take out separate machines. She wanted to be close to him.

The wind whipped through Dani's hair as they skimmed across the turquoise waters, spray misting her face. She clung tightly to Zack's waist, her body molded against his back. The powerful thrum of the engine beneath them sent vibrations through her core, igniting a different kind of excitement.

Zack steered them skillfully through the waves, occasionally glancing back to make sure she was okay. His megawatt smile was infectious, and Dani found herself grinning back, her worries forgotten. This was exactly what she needed - to get out of her head and just enjoy the moment.

They zipped around the island, marveling at the pristine beaches and lush vegetation from a wholly different perspective.

At one point, Zack slowed down and pointed out a pod of dolphins frolicking nearby.

Dani gasped in delight as the sleek creatures leapt and dove, putting on a show just for them.

An hour later, after she'd taken a turn at the controls herself, Zack circled back to the resort's private cove.

They dismounted the jet ski and her legs were wobbly, but Zack pulled her close and helped steady her, not seeming to have the same problem himself.

"Come on," he murmured, "I have another surprise waiting."

Leading her further up the small golden beach, Dani saw a blanket had been set out, with a wicker picnic basket next to it. "How did you do this?" she laughed, delighted at the thought he'd put into their day.

Zack winked at her. "I have my ways. And friends in all the right places."

They settled onto the blanket, and Zack began unpacking an array of gourmet treats - fresh fruit, artisanal cheeses, crusty bread, and a half-sized bottle of chilled champagne which she guessed was the limit for being in charge of a jet-ski.

As he poured them each a glass, Dani marveled at how sweet and thoughtful he was being with this whole date thing.

It was a side of him she'd rarely seen during their interactions at Club Risqué. Not like this, anyway. Of course, he'd been an excellent dominant during their scenes, and attentive during aftercare.

He'd been interested when they'd talked business, but all of that had been in a rather professional kind of way.

This... this was completely different, and it melted her heart in ways she never expected.

"To new beginnings," Zack said, raising his glass.

Dani clinked hers against his. "And second chances."

As they nibbled and sipped, conversation flowed easily between them. The sun warmed her, the light breeze enough to stop them overheating, and Dani found herself relaxing more and more.

Zack was trying so hard. Everything would be okay.

Wouldn't it?

"So, are you ready to head back and take the boat out?" He bent his head and trailed butterfly kissed over her lips and jaw.

Dani nodded, although really, she would have liked to partake in a decidedly different pastime, but wetsuits weren't the easiest to struggle in and out of.

Later, she thought.

At the marina, a sleek glass-bottomed boat awaited them. Zack helped Dani aboard, his strong hands steadying her as she stepped onto the gently rocking deck. "Where's the captain?" she asked as Zack settled her into a cushioned seat at the bow.

"At your service, Ma'am," Zack said with a theatrical flourish that made her giggle.

"You can pilot a boat?" Stupid question, really, since he was already steering them out into the crystal-clear waters. There was so much she didn't know about him. But then, that was the point of spending time together like this.

As the boat glided over the vibrant coral reefs, a kaleidoscope of marine life unfolded beneath their feet.

Dani gasped in wonder at the sight of neon-bright parrotfish, graceful sea turtles, and undulating rays.

Zack set the boat to idle and joined her, draping his arm around her shoulder and pulling her close as she admired nature's aquatic spectacle.

"It's beautiful," Dani murmured, leaning into Zack's embrace. The warmth of his body and the gentle rocking of the boat lulled her into a state of blissful contentment.

"It is," Zack replied, his voice husky, but when she glanced over, it was her he was looking at, and Dani felt her cheeks heat.

He tilted her chin up, capturing her lips in a slow, sensuous kiss that made her toes

curl.

When they finally broke apart, Dani's face was flushed, and her heart was racing. She gazed at Zack, seeing the desire smoldering in his eyes. "Maybe we should head back to the cabana," she suggested, her voice breathy with anticipation.

Zack grinned wickedly. "I thought you'd never ask."

The ride back to shore seemed to take an eternity, though in reality it was only a few minutes.

Zack's phone rang several times, but he ignored it, giving her his full attention, and as soon as they docked, he practically lifted Dani off her feet in his eagerness to get her back to their private retreat.

Once inside Zack's cabana, they fumbled with zippers and clasps, peeling off their clothes between heated kisses.

His phone rang some more, and this time Zack grumbled and silenced it.

His lips found hers once more, and Dani let herself get lost in the kiss. Zack's hands roamed her body, leaving trails of fire in their wake. He backed her towards the bed, easing her down onto the plush mattress.

"God, you're beautiful," he breathed, his eyes raking over her aching body and making her shiver like a physical touch.

Dani felt a flush of heat at his words and the intensity of his gaze. She reached for him, needing to really feel his skin against hers. Zack obliged, covering her body with his own. The weight of him, the scent of his skin, the taste of his lips - it all combined to overwhelm her senses.

Zack moved her arms up over her head. “Honor bondage,” he growled, nibbling at her ear, his warm breath spreading goosebumps racing across her sensitized skin.

“Grab the bars and keep hold of them until I say you can let go.” Dani dutifully wrapped her fingers around the dowels on the headboard while Zack took his time, worshipping every inch of her body with his hands and mouth until Dani was writhing beneath him.

“I need you,” she whimpered, trying to angle herself just right against his rock-hard cock.

That’s when the hammering on the door started.

“What the hell?” Zack groaned, burying his face in Dani’s neck at the interruption.

“I don’t think they’re going away,” Dani remarked, blowing her hair out of her face in frustration as the hammering continued.

“Stay right there, I’ll get rid of them,” he promised, rising from the bed and grabbing a pair of shorts.

And she did. For long minutes she remained right where she was, naked, legs spread, her hands wrapped around the bars in the honor bondage he’d placed her in.

Even when her body cooled, she stayed there, tipping her head to one side as she tried to make out the low sound of voices in the living room.

Time stretched but Zack didn’t return. How long did she stay here like this?

There was an old-fashioned analogue alarm clock on the bedside table and Dani watched as the seconds ticked interminably by. After ten minutes had passed, she’d

had enough. She moved her hands and wiggled her stiff fingers. She felt ridiculous... and embarrassed.

An unwanted memory of her mother waiting for her father to turn up crept, unbidden, through her mind.

As a child Dani had always believed her father worked late and should finish earlier.

Now she knew it for what it was; her mother forcing herself into a state of constant readiness in case he pulled himself away from his family for long enough to visit. Her stomach twisted at the thought.

Unaccountably let down, Dani untangled herself from the sheets and sat up, her muscles protesting after being held in one position for so long.

Somehow it wasn't the same when the adrenaline of desire wasn't holding you hostage.

Something was clearly wrong for Zack to be gone this long, but surely he could have spared a moment to explain instead of leaving her hanging.

She wanted to shower. To wash the disappointment and niggling unease away, but somehow doing so in Zack's cabana with visitors in the living area seemed like too much of a vulnerability. So instead, she freshened up as best she could and retrieved her clothes.

She was dressed and sitting on the bed, wondering if she should make her presence known to whoever needed Zack so badly, try to leave quietly - difficult since the front door was through the lounge - or just sit and wait indefinitely, when Zack finally came back.

“I’m so sorry,” he apologized as soon as he set foot in the bedroom.

It did nothing to soothe the irritation that had been growing over the past thirty minutes.

She knew it wasn’t altogether Zack’s fault, but she felt like she was coming second in his life once again.

She felt like she was becoming her mother, something she’d sworn she’d never do.

Zack dragged his fingers through his already disheveled hair, clearly agitated. “It’s just that... Emylyah’s here. On the island. And I need to see her.”

And there it was. The reason he’d pushed her away all those years ago. The reason he was pushing her aside now. Ice flooded her veins. In a matter of moments, she'd been relegated to being the other woman in the presence of his wife.

Just like her mother.

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Dani was quiet as he rushed around getting dressed, ready to meet with Emylyah. Too quiet. Then again, perhaps that was to be expected under the circumstances.

But she had to know he was doing this for them, didn't she? The whole reason he'd been desperate to find Emylyah and free himself from their ridiculous marriage was so he could forge a future with Dani.

Of course she knew. He'd told her as much, more than once.

While the timing left a lot to be desired, Zack was excited to meet up with Emylyah and get this over with. To finally negotiate his freedom.

When Marcus had arrived to tell him the news, Zack had been completely poleaxed. Of all the things he'd expected in his search for his missing child bride, her turning up, right here, out of the blue wasn't it, and now his head was all over the place, making it hard for him to concentrate.

But Dani... "I reserved a table for the two of us at Bahamian Rhapsody for dinner tonight at seven. Why don't I meet you there?"

Dani searched his face, and he briefly wondered what was going on behind the dratted mask of indifference she liked to slip on.

Surely, she must be excited for this too?

So often she brought up his farce of a marriage as a stumbling block.

She had to be as impatient as him to have the whole ridiculous situation dispensed with. Didn't she?

He'd have liked to discuss it all with her, but there was no time.

Emylyah was only here for a short amount of time.

There was nowhere on the island for her to stay, since the resort was full, and unregistered visitors were usually strictly forbidden.

But Marcus had finessed it with Luca, on the understanding she wouldn't stay more than a few hours.

Everything he needed to accomplish had to be done now.

Before she disappeared again.

And Zack got the impression that was a distinct possibility.

From all accounts, the woman was easily spooked, so Zack was keen to do everything that might be necessary and remove Emylyah from his life.

The possible mafia connection was yet another reason to do so.

With his billions, he couldn't afford to be linked with criminal organizations and have the nature of his wealth questioned.

It would destroy his businesses and his credibility, bringing with it the kind of shade that would be impossible to step out from.

Dani nodded and opened her mouth as if to say something. But in the end, she just

shook her head, gave him a quick, somewhat distant peck on the cheek, and walked past him to the door, leaving without looking back.

Fuck! Apprehension nipped at him, but Zack didn't have the option of reassuring Dani right now.

Besides, he'd done so over and over. If she didn't believe him by now, then whatever he said in this rushed moment probably wasn't going to sway her.

He just needed to get through this, meet up with Dani later, and be able to dispel her fears once and for all because Emylyah was finally in his past. He was so close he could taste it.

It was... surreal. Meeting someone for what was, ostensibly, the first time, and knowing they were - technically - your wife. Zack wondered if Emylyah felt the same.

Or was it even worse for her, because she'd married without realizing she was committing bigamy if what he'd been told was true.

He and Marcus had arrived at a private room off the resort's open-air bar, which only really came into its own after dark, where Gabi was visiting with her sister. The two of them said a tearful farewell peppered with promises to keep in touch properly, after Marcus made the introductions.

Now they were alone, and it was... awkward.

Zack would have invited her to his cabana, but it seemed all kinds of wrong to bring another woman home. Especially with Dani being as skittish as she was, so this was a compromise.

“I...”

“Do you...”

After an uncomfortable silence, they both spoke at the same time.

Emylyah laughed nervously, but it was enough to lighten things a little.

“Sorry,” Zack apologized, sucking in a bracing breath. “I know this must be as difficult for you as it is for me.”

“I... yeah.” Emylyah nodded, her pale blonde hair shimmering in the sun’s rays shining through the window.

Looking at her, Zack could see the remnants of the twelve-year-old girl he’d glanced at across the judge’s chambers that day.

Her face was leaner, more sculpted now she’d lost that youthful puppy fat every child seemed to have.

She was beautiful, there was no denying that.

Tall and willowy, but somewhat reserved.

The complete opposite of Dani.

And she did absolutely nothing for him. His tastes definitely ran to tanned, curvy spitfires.

"Well, I suppose we should get down to business," Zack said, taking the bull by the horns.

Just think of it as a business meeting. A transaction, he told himself.

"I'm sure you're eager to get this resolved as quickly as possible."

Emylyah nodded, smoothing her conservative, black dress which looked completely unsuitable for their island surroundings.

It made Zack think she'd come here unexpectedly, or in a hurry.

"Yes, I... I appreciate you meeting with me since I turned up without any warning.

I know this isn't an ideal situation for either of us. "

Zack studied her face. Despite her composed demeanor, he could see the tension in her shoulders, the way her fingers fidgeted with the edge of the tablecloth.

The level of her nerves seemed out of proportion with the circumstances, making him wonder about her husband.

Or rather, the man she called her husband, since she was actually married to Zack.

Did the man know? Had the revelation caused trouble for her?

Head on - that was the only way to tackle this.

"Gabi told me she thought you had married without being aware of our parents'... arrangement." He grimaced at the choice of words, but how the hell else did he put it?

Emylyah's eyes widened slightly, a flicker of surprise crossing her face before she schooled her features.

"Yes, that's... that's correct. I had no idea until Gabi sent a message to the email address only she and I use.

" She swallowed hard and her gaze dropped to the table, her fingers twisting together.

Zack followed his instincts and placed his own hand over hers.

"Is everything okay, Emylyah?" he asked softly.

To his dismay, a sob was wrenched from her throat. "I'm sorry," she quickly apologized, struggling to pull herself together. "I'm such a mess."

"Hey, hey, hey..." Zack scooted his chair around until he was next to her and put a supportive arm around her shoulder. "Tell me what's wrong. Perhaps I can help. We're in this together after all."

Emylyah sniffled. "I don't really monitor the email address Gabi and I use. By necessity, our correspondence has always been brief and infrequent." She paused and wiped her eyes, her makeup smearing as she did so. Somehow just that little imperfection made her seem more approachable.

"But it seems my husband - the man I thought was my husband... does."

Fuck!

"Emylyah, did he... are you..." Zack scrunched his eyes together, not liking where his thoughts were taking him. But mafia . "Are you safe?" he finally gritted out.

His words startled her out of her pity party.

"Oh! Oh, yes. Niko would never hurt me, but..." Her voice broke and more tears

pooled in her big blue eyes.

“He was so angry,” she said, her voice no louder than a whisper.

“He said some horrible things. Told me I wasn’t really his wife and accused me of deceiving him.

And then there’s ...” She trailed off and ducked her head.

She didn’t say any more, but the way she rubbed her hand over her slightly rounded stomach made Zack suspect... Shit!

He blew out a breath. “Okay. There’s a lawyer right here on the island who can help us get this mess sorted out and notarized.

My own legal team has already put together all the necessary documentation, and I contacted them to send it all to Mia on my way to see you.

Then, when all that’s done, I’m going to transfer some money to you. ”

Emylyah frowned. “But why?” she asked in confusion, lifting her watery eyes to his.

“I’m a very wealthy man, Emylyah. And you’ve been my wife for eighteen years.”

“But...”

He shook his head. “No buts. Even though you were unaware, there’s a postnuptial agreement in place.

I made sure of it after I found out about you, myself.

And if things turn out badly between you and your hus...

ah, Niko, because of all this, I want the peace of mind of knowing you're taken care of.

After all, he never would have found out if I hadn't asked Gabi to get in touch with you on my behalf, so some of the fault is mine. ”

“I...” Emylyah stopped and ran light fingers over her abdomen again. When she looked back at him there was the ghost of a smile on her face and Zack breathed a sigh of relief, knowing she would accept.

“Thank you.”

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She'd been sidelined yet again. Stood up. Pushed aside. Passed over in favor of someone else.

Story of her life. Every time she considered something other than putting her career first, this was what happened.

This is what had happened to her mother. Memories of Concetta bombarded her mind. Waiting. Disappointed. Giddy that her father had finally made time for her. Dani refused to be like her mother. No way was she debasing herself that way.

Dani checked her phone... six minutes past the time Zack was supposed to meet her and there was still no sign of him.

Again.

No message either.

Well, she wasn't going to wait around a second time for him to make a fool out of her.

Climbing to her feet, Dani headed towards the door and told the hostess the table wouldn't be needed, then set off at a fast pace towards her cabana.

That's when she saw them.

Zack, and a woman Dani didn't recognize, one she assumed must be the mysterious Emylyah.

This was Zack's wife?

She was beautiful... and everything Dani wasn't.

She was also clinging to Zack in an obviously intimate embrace.

The two of them were wrapped around each other.

Dani didn't wait to see any more. She didn't want to watch her dreams go up in smoke and turn to ashes right in front of her eyes. Better to cut and run than to watch them burn.

Tears stung Dani's eyes as she hurried back to her cabana, her heart pounding.

How could she have been so stupid? Of course Zack would choose his wife over her.

Wasn't that what men always did? Wasn't that what her father had done; treating her like she was invisible except on the rare occasions he could bother to make time for her?

Or rather her mother. And just like Concetta, Dani was, and always had been, the other woman.

Once inside, she slammed the door and leaned against it, letting out a shaky breath. She should have known better than to give Zack a second chance, no matter how convincing his story was. No matter that he professed to love her.

She wiped angrily at her eyes. No more crying over him, she was better off by herself. Hadn't she always known that? When did she lose sight of the harsh realities of life?

She'd just poured herself a large glass of wine when there was a sharp knock at the door. She froze, knowing it would be Zack. How did he get here so fast?

"Dani? Are you in there?" Zack's voice called out, a hint of frustration in his tone. Somehow that just fueled her anger. What right did he have to sound annoyed?

Dani's jaw clenched, and as much as she wanted to play possum, it was time to tell Zack he should leave Elysium. She marched to the door and yanked it open.

"What do you want, Zack?" she snapped, her voice cold and brittle.

Zack's brow furrowed in confusion. "What's going on? I was looking for you at the restaurant."

"Oh, were you? You must have missed me while you were wrapped around another woman," Dani retorted, her words dripping with sarcasm.

Zack's eyes widened - probably with guilt, she thought uncharitably - then morphed into a frown. "Dani, that's not..."

"Save it." She cut him off. "I don't want to hear your excuses. This was a mistake. You should go back to your wife and leave the island. We're done here."

Zack dragged his fingers through his hair, leaving it standing on end. "Dani, you don't mean that," he cajoled, taking a step over the threshold. "Let's talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about, Zack. And besides, talk is cheap. Actions speak far louder."

Anger flashed across Zack's face, taking Dani by surprise at its vehemence.

"You're unbelievable, you know that? I thought you understood about Emylyah. I explained over and over. I told you how I feel about you, and I tried to show you by putting my life on hold and staying here with you. By tackling the barriers standing between us and removing them. Everything I've done, I did for us, so we could have a future together."

Dani scoffed, her jealousy and rage clashing together to make her bitter and bitchy. "Sure, it looked like that was the case when you were all over her."

Zack's eyes flashed dangerously as he stepped fully into the cabana, slamming the door behind him.

"You want to talk about actions speaking louder than words?"

Fine. Let's talk about how you didn't even bother to wait a measly ten minutes for me.

How you jumped to conclusions without giving me a chance to explain.

Again! How you're ready to throw away everything we've built here because you're busy getting pissy about things you can't even be bothered to ask about. "

He advanced on her, his tall frame crowding her space. Dani stumbled back, her anger warring with a sudden spark of arousal at his commanding presence.

"You always do this, don't you?" Zack growled. "You jump to conclusions, then cut and run at the first sign of trouble. Push people away before they can hurt you."

"You're the one who stood me up to be with your wife!"

"I just divorced my wife!" he bellowed, surprising her with his ferocity.

“I was saying goodbye to Emylyah. I was trying to comfort and reassure her after I pretty much fucked up her life by tracking her down to terminate our association. I caused all kinds of problems with her relationship because she didn’t know about our marriage.

Our child marriage, Dani. One neither she nor I understood or agreed to.

And I did all that for you! So we could be together without it in our way.

And this is what I get in return? You willing to throw it all away because you can’t see past your own insecurities for five goddamn minutes? "

Dani flinched at the raw anger in his voice, but her own temper flared in response. "Oh, so I'm supposed to just trust you blindly? After everything that's happened between us?"

"Yes!" Zack roared, closing the distance between them until they were nose to nose.

"That's exactly what you're supposed to do, because what happened in our past was nothing more than a misunderstanding - as you’d have known way back then if you’d bothered to stick around and listen instead of turning tail.

Because I love you, you stubborn, infuriating woman.

I've done everything I can to try to prove it to you, but you refuse to see it. "

His words hit Dani like a physical blow, stealing her breath. She stared up at him, her heart pounding. The intensity in his eyes was scorching, a mix of fury and passion that might have scared her if it had been anyone but Zack.

His next words did scare her, despite her decision to push him away.

"I can't do this anymore, Dani. It's tearing me apart inside.

" Zack said, his voice dropping to a low, dangerous growl, laced with defeat.

"I can't keep chasing you, trying to convince you of my feelings.

Either you trust me, or you don't. Either you want this - want us - or you don't. And honestly, it seems like you don't."

He gripped her upper arms, not painfully but firmly enough to hold her in place.

"Maybe you're right, and we can't ever make this work, because God knows I can't do it on my own."

Dani's breath caught in her throat, her mind reeling. The finality in Zack's tone sent ice through her veins. This was it - the moment of truth. She thought she'd been prepared to push him away, to run and protect herself from the pain that always seemed to follow love. But now he'd given her an ultimatum, things didn't seem quite so clear cut.

A horrible thought ran through her mind. Had she been testing him? Deliberately pushing him away to see how he'd react? To see if he'd run?

Had she finally gone a step too far?

She didn't like the idea she was that person.

A woman who would deliberately hurt someone she cared about just to test their loyalty.

And she did care about him. She loved him, even though, in that moment, she

realized she'd never said the words.

Never returned them all the times Zack had professed them to her.

The realization hit her like a punch to the gut - that's exactly what she'd been doing. Not only was she testing him, but for a little while, she'd also become the kind of woman she'd always hated.

Bitter and resentful, hating on others instead of celebrating them.

How had that happened? When had she turned into someone who cast blame on people who didn't deserve it? Someone who secretly wanted to stamp another woman down instead of lending them a hand up? Someone mean, and spiteful, and vindictive. That wasn't who she thought she was, who she meant to be, but it was exactly how she'd acted.

She'd been so obsessed with what Zack's reunion with his wife might mean, so blinded by her parents fucked up relationship, so scared, she'd been ready to lash out. Ready to hurt someone else just because she was hurting. And it wasn't even the first time she'd done it.

Dani squeezed her eyes shut as she remembered just how many times she'd lashed out at Zack when he'd tried to reach out to her. How she'd acted when they ran into each other that first time at her office and she'd thought he was mocking her.

When he showed up at her cabana and she'd thought he was there to use her, so she'd used him first. Her heart clenched as she realized she hadn't just been testing him.

She'd been waiting for him to fail. Expecting it because she was so convinced he would.

Expecting him to be like her father, because that's how she'd grown up seeing a man behave.

No wonder Zack was ready to give up. Who could blame him?

As understanding began to dawn, Dani's anger gave way to mind-numbing fear.

She didn't want to lose him. In fact, that was the last thing she wanted.

Her mouth fell open as she scrambled to find words, but before she could speak, Zack's grip on her arms loosened, his fingertips trailing away slowly, as though reluctant to let her go.

His eyes darkened with an unsettling mix of emotions, the intensity from moments before waning to something more subdued but no less devastating.

He took a deliberate step back, and Dani felt the chill of his withdrawal like a sudden gust of cold wind. The set of his jaw and the hard line of his mouth signaled a resolve she hadn't seen before, a shift that made her breath catch in her throat.

"I think I have my answer," he said quietly, his voice stripped of the fury that had electrified the air between them, leaving behind a sadness and resignation that chilled Dani to her core.

Then, before she could find the right words, he turned and walked away.

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Zack closed the door softly behind him and Dani stared in shock as he left.

What had she done?

Her heart raced as the reality of her impulsive actions sank in, threatening to leave her bitter and alone.

Her legs felt weak, and she was slow to respond as her mind reeled.

Then panic set in as the sound of an ATV engine roaring to life snapped her out of it.

Dani bolted out of the house, her shoes slipping on the loose, dusty gravel as she raced to stop him before he left.

Before it was too late.

"Zack, wait," she blurted, but he couldn't hear her over the drone of the engine.

Impulsively, she threw herself in front of the ATV as it started to move, falling on her backside in her rush. She saw Zack's shocked face as he slammed on the brakes and screeched to a halt just inches from where she lay.

"Are you insane?" Zack yelled, jumping off the ATV and dashing to her side to help her up. "I could have hit you!"

Dani's heart pounded as she looked up at him, his face a mix of anger and dismay. She scrambled to her feet, ignoring the sting of gravel on her palms and her butt.

"Please don't go, Zack," she blurted out, her voice shaky. "I made a mistake."

His eyes narrowed, skepticism clear in his guarded expression. "Which part was the mistake, Dani? Throwing us away or nearly getting run over by an ATV?"

"Both. All of it. I... I..." What the hell could she say? She'd behaved like a complete and utter bitch. Which meant... there was only one thing to say. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"So am I, Dani." Zack replied mournfully, looking away from her and staring at the surf off in the distance.

Shit, was it already too late? Had he decided she was too much trouble?

Time to lay it on the line.

"All my life, I felt like I was never good enough. I never seemed to be able to please anyone. My family, they all thought I was worth nothing beyond being a wife and mother. That I didn't need to bother my pretty little head with anything that might require me to use my brain, to be a productive member of society. "

Dani held up her hand when he opened his mouth to interrupt.

She needed to get this out. "That's not to say stay-at-home mothers aren't productive members of society.

I just didn't want to be defined by other people; only given worth because of my husband or my children. I wanted more than that for myself."

She blinked back the tears which fought to escape.

“For a while, my family indulged me.” She laughed bitterly.

“Although even that was because my mother was convinced I was going to fritter my trust fund away if I was left to my own devices, and that money was to be my dowry. Something to sweeten the pot, like no man would want me otherwise.”

She sucked in a breath, preparing to admit her biggest shame.

The thing that had molded her into the woman she was today.

“My father - when he was actually around - used to look right through me, no matter what I did. He treated me like I didn't matter, and I guess I didn't, since I eventually found out he was married with his own ‘proper’ family. I was just his mistress' bastard child. He didn't even acknowledge me as his own or give me his name. I was just a dirty little secret, like my mother, who has spent her entire life being the other woman.”

Her voice trembled, and she couldn't bring herself to look at Zack. Couldn't bear to see the judgement in his eyes.

“I threw myself into my career, thinking that was the way I could prove my place in society. Somewhere I could be judged on my own merit instead of my family's warped, old-fashioned principles. But even though I worked my butt off to prove myself, I still got passed over when it was time for the serious promotions. That's how I ended up here. Luca was the only person who believed in me, and that was a bitter pill to swallow.”

“I've never thought you were anything less than amazing, Dani,” Zack murmured, reaching out to tuck a strand of her disheveled hair behind her ear.

“I've never had anyone fight for me the way you did, but then, with my history, and

finding out you had a wife... it made me feel like I wasn't good enough again. Not even good enough to be the wife and mother my family thought I should be."

"Ah, Dani," Zack murmured, taking her in his arms. "It was never about Emylyah."

"I understand that now. But I had so much baggage I've never properly unpacked that I didn't trust myself, and that meant I didn't trust in you, either.

I'm more sorry for that than you'll ever know," she told him, her voice barely a whisper.

"I never realized my upbringing had made me quite as cynical and distrustful as it has, not until you pulled me up on it. And now..." She swallowed around the lump in her throat.

"Now I'm scared I don't know how to be what you need. That I'll revert to what I'm used to and end up being a bitch again. "

"Then let me teach you," he murmured, his eyes searching hers. "Let me show you what it means to be cherished, to be put first."

Dani felt herself teetering on the precipice of a decision that could change everything. "What if I mess it up again?" she asked, vulnerability seeping into her voice. "I'm a typical Italian hothead, so there's a pretty good chance that'll happen."

Zack laughed. "Oh, I'm certain of it," he said with a smile in his eyes.

"But we'll work through it. Together." He offered the reassurance she desperately needed.

"But you have to be willing to try, Dani.

You have to be willing to stay and fight for us, even when things get tough.

Because I can guarantee they will. Nobody's life is ever plain sailing, and relationships take work."

The fear of failure, of not being enough, still lurked in the corners of Dani's mind. But looking into Zack's eyes, seeing the unwavering faith he had in her, in them, she knew she was more when she was with him. And maybe, in some small way, she made him more too.

"I love you," she admitted, the words leaving her lips for the very first time.

"Despite everything; despite the way I behaved. I think I've always loved you, even when I didn't want to admit it because I thought it was a weakness.

Even my own bullheaded stubbornness couldn't stop me from loving you. "

The expression on Zack's face as he accepted her declaration was like the sun creeping out from behind a cloud and brightening up the day.

"I love you too, Dani. More than I ever thought possible. And just so you know, I was never leaving. I was just going to give us both time to cool down before I came back to claim you again." He cupped her face gently, his thumb caressing her cheek.

"Because I know together, with effort and commitment, we can make this work. "

"I want that. I want to try; to be better. For you, for us."

"Then let's start now," Zack said, his voice taking on a firmer note. "I think a certain somebody has definitely earned herself a spanking... or two."

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Zack's hand landed with a satisfying smack on Dani's upturned bottom, eliciting a delicious gasp from his wife.

"Happy anniversary, kitten," he purred, admiring the rosy hue blooming across her sun-kissed skin. He'd taken to calling her that after they'd finally sorted everything out.

The term 'pet' had always been generic; kitten suited her better since she was soft, adorable, but often showed her claws and could hiss and spit like the true Italian hellcat she was. Zack wouldn't have her any other way.

Dani wiggled enticingly, her body bound in an intricate karada, a shibari rope dress that framed her breasts, accentuated her curves, and sported a diabolical tease of a knot right over her clit, designed to have her writhing.

"Mmm, happy anniversary, Master. I can't believe it's been a year already. It's gone so fast."

"Time always flies when you're having fun, my love."

And it had been fun. Oh, it had been trying at times, too.

Breaking Dani's preconceived notions about relationships, persuading her she could have a career as well as being his wife, hadn't been easy, but every challenge had only brought them closer together, strengthening their bond and deepening their trust. Zack traced the intricate patterns of rope across Dani's back, marveling at how perfectly they framed her shapely form, suspended from the specially braced steel

frame he'd had installed.

As perfectly as the two of them fit together - in body, mind, and soul.

It had taken time for them to get here, but they'd made it and never been happier.

The balmy Caribbean breeze drifted through the open windows of the beach villa they'd built on the family island of Syèl la, complete with its own 'adult' playroom.

Outside, gentle waves lapped at the pristine shore of their private slice of paradise and the air carried the scent of tropical flowers and the salty tang of the sea.

"Best decision I ever made was moving here and making this place our home," he murmured, bending his head and taking the rosy peak of one straining nipple into his mouth.

Dani gasped, but her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Really?" she asked, her eyes wide with a fake innocence Zack knew he should be mindful of. "I think that was actually your second-best decision. I'd say marrying me was the first."

"Cheeky girl," Zack growled playfully, moving around to deliver another sharp swat to her bottom.

"I think someone needs a reminder of her place."

Dani's eyes gleamed with excitement. "Oh? And how do you plan to remind me, Master?"

Zack's grin turned predatory as he reached for the nearby flogger. "I have a few ideas, kitten. Let's start with counting. I want to hear that sweet voice of yours. You know how much I love to hear you beg."

He trailed the soft leather tails along her spine, watching goosebumps rise in their wake. Dani shivered in anticipation, her breath quickening.

"Ready?" Zack asked, voice low and commanding.

"Yes, Master," Dani breathed.

The flogger whistled through the air, landing with a satisfying thud across her upper thighs. Dani yelped, then remembered her instructions. "One! Thank you, Master."

As Zack continued, alternating between sharp strikes and soothing caresses, he watched as Dani lost herself in the sensations. The sting of leather, the brush of fingertips, the tightening of ropes as she writhed - it all blended into a heady cocktail of desire, which he fed off of.

Her cries grew more desperate with each stroke, the numbers tumbling from her lips in breathy gasps. "Fifteen... oh god... sixteen... please, Master!"

Zack paused, admiring the rosy glow spreading across her skin. "Please what, kitten? Use your words."

Dani whimpered, tugging at her bonds. "Please... I need you. I need to feel you inside me."

"Patience," Zack murmured, trailing his fingers along the insides of her thighs. He could feel the heat radiating from her core, smell her arousal. "We're not done yet."

He set the flogger aside and retrieved a small vibrator from the nearby table. Dani's eyes widened as she saw it, a mix of anticipation and trepidation in her gaze.

"Let's see how long you can last," Zack said with a wicked grin, pressing the device against the knot of rope over her clit.

Dani's back arched as far as her bonds would allow, a strangled moan escaping her lips. "Oh fuck!"

"Language," Zack chided playfully, delivering a sharp smack to her inner thigh. "What do we say?"

"S-sorry, Master," Dani gasped, her hips jerking against the relentless vibrations. "Thank you for my pleasure."

Zack hummed approvingly, increasing the intensity. He watched in fascination as Dani's body trembled, muscles tensing against the ropes. Sweat glistened on her skin, catching the warm glow of the setting sun through the windows.

"That's it, kitten. Hold on for me," he murmured, his free hand caressing her flushed cheek. "Show me how good it feels."

Dani's breath came in ragged pants, her eyes squeezing shut as she teetered on the edge. "Please... oh god, please..."

"Please what?" Zack pressed, his voice low and commanding.

"Please may I come, Master?" Dani cried out, desperation clear in her tone.

Zack considered for a moment, savoring her pleading gaze. "Not yet," he decided, switching off the vibrator. Dani whimpered at the loss of sensation, her body trembling with unfulfilled need.

"Shh," Zack soothed, running his hands along her sides. "You're doing so well for me, kitten. Just a little longer."

He moved behind her, pressing his hard length against her through the barrier of his clothes so she whimpered and pushed back against him.

“Soon, I promise,” he cajoled, nipping at her earlobe. “You know the wait will make it so much more explosive.”

His hands came around to cup her breasts, thumbs brushing over her nipples. "I want you desperate for me. I want you thinking of nothing but how much you need me inside you."

"I already am," Dani gasped. "Please, Master. I need you so badly."

Zack chuckled, the sound sending shivers down her spine. "I know you do, love. And you'll have me. But first..."

He reached for something out of her line of sight but suspected the familiar click of the bottle lid gave him away, by the way she wriggled.

He applied the cool lube to her most forbidden hole, and she tensed slightly, then forced herself to relax.

"That's it," Zack murmured approvingly, working one finger inside her tight opening. "Relax for me, kitten. You know how good this can feel."

Dani whimpered, her body trembling as Zack slowly stretched her. He took his time, savoring every gasp and moan as he prepared her. When he finally deemed her ready, he positioned himself behind her, the blunt head of his cock pressing against her slick entrance.

"Are you ready for me, love?" he asked, his voice husky with desire.

"Yes, Master," Dani breathed. "Always..."

With a low groan, Zack pushed forward, sinking into her tight heat inch by agonizing inch. Dani cried out, her fingers clenching around the ropes that bound her as she

adjusted to the intense stretch.

"So perfect," Zack murmured, running his hands along her sides. "You take me so well, kitten. The sight of my cock sinking into you this way is like nothing else imaginable."

He began to move, setting a slow, deep rhythm that had Dani gasping with every thrust. The ropes creaked as she strained against them, desperate for more friction.

"Please," she begged. "Harder, Master. Pleeeeeease! I need it harder. I need more!"

Zack's grip tightened on her hips as he increased his pace, driving into her with more force. The sound of skin slapping against skin filled the room, mingling with their shared moans of pleasure.

Zack reached around, his fingers finding her clit beneath the rope knot and rubbing tight circles. The dual stimulation had Dani trembling, teetering on the edge of bliss.

"Come for me," Zack commanded, his voice rough with exertion. "Let me feel you milk me, kitten."

With a keening cry, Dani shattered, her body clenching around him as her orgasm ripped through her. Zack groaned, the feeling of her pulsing around him pushing him towards his own release. A few more powerful thrusts and he was there, spilling himself deep inside her with a guttural moan.

For several long moments, the only sound was their heavy breathing as they came down from their shared high. Zack carefully withdrew, pressing a tender kiss to Dani's shoulder blade.

"You were magnificent, my love, as always," he murmured, reaching up to undo the knots securing her wrists. As the ropes fell away, he gathered her into his arms,

cradling her against his chest.

Dani nuzzled into his warmth, her body still trembling slightly from the intensity of her release. "Mmm," she purred, tilting her face up for a kiss.

Zack obliged, capturing her lips in a slow, deep kiss that spoke volumes of his love and devotion.

"I have something I want to ask you, Zack," she murmured as he quickly cut away the rest of the ropes that bound her.

He tilted his head to one side. The fact that she'd used his name instead of his title meant something.

"Ask me anything, my darling Dani." He placed a kiss on her collarbone and snuggled her closer.

"How do you feel about being a daddy?"

Zack blinked, his heart racing. If she'd said that anywhere else but in their playroom, he'd have considered it entirely differently. But here... "Ah... you mean a daddy Dom? Because that's not really my kink, kitten."

Her eyes twinkled mischievously. His little tease knew exactly what she was doing.

"How about a baby daddy?" she asked, coyly.

"You want to be an infant little and have me change your diaper?" he asked cautiously, hardly daring to hope, even though his pulse was careening in a way that had nothing to do with his recent climax.

"Well, there will definitely be diapers involved," Dani replied, huskily.

“What are you saying?” Zack asked, his tone serious as he stared into her eyes. Could it be?

Dani's smile widened, her eyes sparkling with joy. "I'm saying... we're pregnant, Zack. We're going to have a baby."

For a moment, Zack stood frozen, his mind reeling with the implications of her words. Then, a grin spread across his face, so wide it almost hurt. He let out a whoop of excitement and swept Dani up into his arms, spinning her around.

"A baby! Oh my god, Dani, we're going to be parents!" He set her down gently, suddenly aware of her delicate condition. "Oh hell! Should we have done this? I need to be more careful with you! Will it harm the baby?" Sheer panic coursed through him.

“Hey!” Dani’s voice was sharp. “None of that. I’m pregnant, not an invalid. I won’t have you treating me like spun glass, mister.”

Zack bit his lip. Okay, he’d spiraled a bit there. Cradling her face tenderly, he gazed into her eyes, overcome with emotion. "A baby!" he breathed reverently. "When did you find out? How far along are you?"

Dani beamed, her own eyes glistening with happy tears. "I took the test yesterday, but I wanted to surprise you on our anniversary. I think I'm about six weeks along, but we'll need to see the doctor to be sure."

Zack's hand drifted down to rest reverently on her still-flat stomach. "Our baby is in there," he murmured in awe. "A little piece of both of us." He knelt down, pressing a gentle kiss to her abdomen. "Hello, little one. I'm your daddy, and I already love you so much."

Dani ran her fingers through Zack's hair, her heart swelling with love for this man

who had become her everything; who had taken every mistaken belief she'd ever had and turned it on its head. "We're going to be amazing parents," she said softly.

Zack stood, pulling her into a tender embrace. "You're going to be an incredible mother," he murmured against her hair. "And I promise to be the best father I can be."

"I know you will. Happy Anniversary, my darling."