



Her Best Friend's Dad

Author: Penny Wylder

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Lia

If I close my eyes and pretend as hard as I can, the list in front of me has gallery dates and art supplies listed instead of line after line of jobs my step-mom thinks I can handle. I can barely tolerate being back home with her here. Once I have a job and can save enough to get my own place, I will be out of here before the ink dries on a lease agreement.

The walls of my childhood bedroom are still silver and black striped with my mixed media artwork displayed as a personal gallery. It looks the same now as it did during high school. My prior almost step-mom tried to talk my dad into shipping everything to me and turning this into a yoga studio for herself, but he had refused. Something or other about even though I was an adult who owned her own gallery, I was still his little girl and needed to have a place in his home. She never made it down the aisle with him; he wouldn't marry someone who was so blatantly vicious about me. Jean, the current step-mom, was careful to be extra nice around him until they were married. Her behavior towards me since is another story, one more typical of stepmothers in fairy tales. I feel you, Cinderella.

When the economy went to shit, I could no longer afford my dream. I sold my car for two months of utilities and rent. Even with a loan from my father that floated my studio's expenses for a few more after that, it was just too hard. It is not like I had become some big-name artist, but I was holding my own. For being just out of art school, I had done well for myself. A patron of the arts near my college had an old storefront he was looking to rent, and in exchange for some art and a date that didn't

go well for either of us, I had a gallery. Doing well for myself is not good enough in today's world, however. With a tiny U-Haul of canvases, sculptures, and the assorted tools I couldn't bear to sell to pay another month's rent, I moved back home.

"Lia! It's breakfast time. Get your lazy ass out of bed and come down here. Be a productive part of the household." The intercom clicks off, but not before I hear Jean's usual complaint. "That girl of yours is such a waste of space, honey. Can't you do something?"

My dad won't do anything to change her attitude; even in her mid-forties, she still has the body of a college coed—most of it plastic—and is his glorified trophy wife. They never expected me to move back home, and I think he believes this is just an adjustment period issue. Her only issue is with me. She lets him go play golf with his buddies or run off to Vegas for a "weekend with the guys" and never asks a question. I so much as breathe too loudly in Jean's direction, and I've ruined her world. Jean is some sort of scientist, super smart, and if she could be anything but a raging bitch of an evil stepmother to me, I would like her. I try to for Dad's sake.

Mom's death still weighs on him. They were high school sweethearts, and I was their honeymoon baby. I am pretty sure the fact that I look so much like my mother is why Jean hates me so much. Okay, so maybe it was the four bottles of hairspray I gave her for the first Christmas she was with my dad along with a note that they might help with her 80s-era hairstyle.

I throw on a pair of jeans, buttoning them as I walk to my bedroom door. They are splattered with paint and scorched in a few places where they protected me from sparks while welding. Artists reserve the little black dresses for gallery openings, not for making art. At least spending my days in the studio has kept me in shape: hauling metal home from the scrapyard and holding parts over my head while welding was just as good of a workout as paying for a gym membership.

The intercom buzzes on again as I open the door. I press the button before Jean can yell, and I promise in my sweetest voice, “I’m on my way down.”

I grab my purse off the hook beside my door and head downstairs. Once upon a time, these stairs would have taken me past my dad and mom’s bedroom, but after Mom lost her battle with cancer, Dad could not stay in there any longer. It became the guest room, or rather Tasha’s room, once we were too big to sleep in the same bed.

Tasha is the highlight of being back home after years away. A best friend who is still my best friend despite so much time apart is a rare gift. She lives up to the designation of “BFF” in my contacts list. I do my best to make sure she knows how much I appreciate her and the use of her garage for a makeshift work studio. My sketchbook has a design I’m working on for of a tattoo that she wants to have done eventually, when she can summon up the courage to do it while still living under her dad’s roof.

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“Wow! You’re even dressed. I’m surprised.” Jean gives me a catty smile as she sets a pan of quiche onto a trivet on the table and sits down beside my dad. The fact that she can cook sets her marginally ahead of her predecessors.

My dad has the newspaper up, reading the stocks. “Ladies, I haven’t even finished my coffee. Let’s try and have a nice day.” Dad rustles the paper before folding the section and setting it onto the table. “What are your plans for the day, Lia?” His hair has gone grey at the temples and started to recede a bit in front, but he still looks like the dad I remember from before graduating art school and trying to make my mark on the world.

I serve myself a piece of the quiche, barely avoiding wrinkling my nose at the bits of mushroom and pepper. If Jean sees that I don’t like something she’s prepared, I’ll find those ingredients in everything for the rest of the week.

“I’m going to Tasha’s to work on a sculpture.” Doing my best to ignore Jean’s scowl and exaggerated sigh, I continue, “I submitted my résumé and application to all the places you asked me to. I also applied to a few others that were just looking for seasonal help. A job is a job right now.” Any job to get her off my back would be a gift, plus I could start paying off my loan to Dad.

“It’s only been a week, Lia, give it time.” Dad ate his quiche in a few bites and went back to the paper. “You know this is your home and always will be.”

It’s an effort to not smile around my own breakfast while Jean’s face falls. “I know, Daddy.” I don’t have to see him to know that he is smiling; calling him “Daddy” has never failed to earn me a grin.

“We have company tonight for supper. Will you be home by then?” Jean has the tone of voice that balances on the line between me being uninvited but expected.

“I don’t know. It depends on how far I get on my project. I want to keep my portfolio current in case I can get into the downtown gallery’s next show.” Really, I’m hoping to see Tasha’s dad and don’t want to deny myself the chance. He’s been busy at work since I got home, and I haven’t been able to see if he’s still the stuff erotic dreams are made of.

“I can make myself scarce and grab a sandwich so I don’t interrupt your dinner party,” I offer.

My dad makes sure I know that I have a standing invitation to their dinner gathering. After we finish eating, Dad asks me, “Do you want to take my car, or are you walking over?”

It is a gorgeous day for the season, and the walk is under a mile, so I don’t mind the fresh air. “I can walk, Dad. That way you aren’t down to just one car or stuck here waiting on me. Besides, we can’t have me being lazy, can we?” I say sweetly before quickly getting up and clearing my dishes.

Despite it being my third time over to work in their garage, Tasha continues to stare at me as if I might disappear at any moment. It would be freaky from anyone else, but from Tasha it is almost endearing. It also makes me sad. She and her dad were there for me after we lost my mom; I repaid the favor by escaping town at my first chance and did not look back until I had no other choice.

“I’m not going to vanish, Tasha,” I chide while taking off my jacket. I am warm from working with metal, but I don’t want to chance ruining the fabric with the dirt and oil on the cement floor. Working on the ground between sawhorses is not glamorous work, but it is the best I can do for the moment if I want to finish this sculpture. I

miss my more portable welding stick, but these will do the job. Selling my welding tools had gotten me through a quarter of tuition, rent, and my food. While still near the art school, I could use theirs. Living here doesn't provide that luxury, but I do have the ability to work. I can't afford to be choosy in what tools I use if I can still get the desired effect.

"I'm glad your dad has this creeper board for playing around with his truck. It's perfect for letting me slide around." Teenaged me had spent many a Sunday afternoon sitting on the workbench, watching her dad, Beck, change his oil and do minor repairs. I even masturbated under his truck, almost hoping he would walk into the garage and catch me with my fingers inside my shorts. I wasn't thinking of legality, only that I was a horny teen and he was hot. He was better looking than most of the men in the heartthrob teen magazines.

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Even if he is somehow half as gorgeous now as then, I think I'd still be more grateful for having space away from my step-mom. "Jean was on my case already. I can't wait until I have a job and can get out of there." I rush through what it has been like, having an evil step-mom straight out of a Disney story.

"We could make room here; it'll be like a sleepover. With it being just Dad and me, it's not like you'd be in the way. Plus, there are like six unused bedrooms. He's never home anyway, what with work and traveling for work." Tasha is playing with her phone as she talks, texting as if I can't see her fingers sliding across the screen. Swype is nowhere near as stealthy as she thinks it is.

"Who is he?" I ask. A boyfriend is the only person she would be texting like that. We have not had secrets between us in years, except for the one about me crushing on her dad when we were little. Even that was not so much of a secret but more of an omission. We were only sixteen years old when Tasha caught me staring at her dad while he played racquetball; I had promised over a bottle of stolen rum in our hideout that I would never sleep with her dad. Fast forward six years, I'm equally proud and dismayed to say I have not gone back on my promise.

"His name is Chris." I practically can hear her rolling her eyes at me. "And it's been four months," Tasha says before I can ask how long they have been dating. "He's not exactly someone my dad would approve of. I mean, he has a job and stuff, and he's really good to me, but he's just not our families' sort of person. You know what I mean?"

The cement is cold beneath my fingers as I pull myself out from under the workspace to look at Tasha. "Wrong side of the tracks?" I question.

She nods, giving me a small smile. “He’s a mechanic.” She brings over her phone and shows me a picture. He’s tall and good looking, long hair pulled back in a ponytail. There’s a carefree smirk that isn’t quite a smile which reminds me of the artists at my school who spent a bit too much time with hallucinogens as inspiration.

“Chris is cute,” I tell her. He isn’t my type, but I can definitely see the appeal. His blue eyes are piercing, and they shine with amusement at whatever Tasha was saying before taking his photograph. It’s clear to see that he loves her.

“Maybe we can go out sometime so you can meet him.” Oh, joy, being a third wheel sounds like so much fun... “You know, Lia, there are still some of the guys from high school around town who are worthy of your attention.” Unsure that any of the boys could measure up to the standards set by my long-term crush, I make a non-committal sound while she rambles. It was an adequate response, and Tasha resumes gushing about Chris. “I know that four months is still too early to talk about forever and all, but he was hinting at getting me a promise ring for my birthday. Just something small, but he wants to show my dad that we’re committed when they meet. He’ll have Sundays off starting next month, so I’m going to plan to have him over for a family dinner then. You should come too; you can be the moderator if Dad yells.”

I am about to open my mouth and tell her I need to meet this Chris-who-wants-to-buy-her-a-promise-ring like yesterday and make sure he’s the right guy for her when we hear the crunch of tires on gravel at the far end of their driveway. As a car door closes and the sound of footfalls brings the driver nearer, my heart stops beating. It kicks to a start a moment later as my mouth goes dry.

Beck Huntsworth has gone from being a hot dad I’d like to fuck to full-blown silver fox. His formal business attire completes the image. His hair was always light blond, but now it is thick and blonde like silvery moonlight. Memories flood me of the sculpture I once made of him for a college project on building a clay figure without a model to reference. From the cut of his jaw to his long, muscular legs, he oozes sex

appeal like a modern David. My fingers itch to run along the hint of stubble, and I clench my thighs together to avoid arching my back and offering myself up to him.

“You’re home early, Dad.” Tasha sounds dismayed at having to share me.

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“There are my favorite girls! Welcome home, Lia.” Beck nudges my leg with one of his feet in greeting, and I try not to stare up at him from the creeper board. “I need to get packed, and I have lots of meetings tomorrow. Did you get my note, Tasha?” When she does not look up from her phone, Beck clears his throat in anticipation of a response.

“Yeah, Dad. I transferred laundry, checked our pantry, and updated the grocery list for the delivery guys.” It must be nice to be as rich as they are. I mean, my family is beyond comfortable, but Tasha and her dad have the money to vacation anywhere they want, have a housekeeper, and get their groceries delivered for the rare times they aren’t just getting takeout. Their housekeeper doubled as a nanny growing up, so she has always been more like a daytime grandma than a maid, even to me when I came to visit.

“What’s it like being back?” Beck asks me.

Back? My brain blanks out everything except images of what it would be like to be on my back under him. I try to give his question more thought than an immediate, cliché response. He knows me, or knew me, better than that. When my mom was in hospice care, Beck was the one who gave me sanctuary from all the nurse visits and company coming to say their farewells. He was the one who looked the other way when Tasha and I raided his liquor cabinet, as long as we did it in moderation, didn’t get drunk, and weren’t driving.

“It’s hard after living on my own. I didn’t think I’d be back here for more than a visit. I miss having my own space and schedule.” Sitting up on the board, it slides into his leg, and I find myself leaning on Beck to find my balance. “Sorry.” I’m not really

sorry, not when grabbing onto him lets me know that he still smells every bit as good as I remember.

The hum of a vibrating phone has all three of us patting our pockets to find whose is responsible. Tasha looks at her screen and then locks eyes with me, desperation filling her silent plea. I know she expects me to take one for the team—she wants me to distract Beck. I have no problem doing this. I'm eager for time with him in any way I can get it. If only Tasha knew how much I would suffer by keeping her hottie of a dad's eyes focused on me. By suffer, I mean that ache inside while I try not to have my way with him on the garage's futon in the time it takes Tasha to take her call...

She bats her lashes at me, holding the phone against her chest as she bounces from foot to foot. Desperation and the passion of new love have changed her. It is heartwarming to see her so wrapped up in someone.

"You owe me," I mouth to Tasha. Really, I owe her. Looking up at Beck, I ask him about work. "Tasha said you are getting ready for a business trip." As soon as he turns his attention to me, Tasha slips in the door to the house, leaving us alone. I hope ten minutes will be enough; I don't know if I can trust myself with him longer than that.

I slide back under my project and install another of the mirrors, listening as he tells me about how he spent a week in India, delivering a shipment to a business partner there and volunteering some of his time in repairing an orphanage.

"You always were good with your hands." I can't stop the teasing huskiness to my words and am glad my heating cheeks are out of his view. I would love to see if he is as good with his hands in person as he has been in my dreams for the past decade.

"Beck, can you hand me another of the mirror plates from the box on your

workbench?” I don’t wait for him to bring it before I grab the screws I’ll need to hold it in place. I scoot further back so that I’m in position and hold out my hand. It’s an effort to not stroke his fingers with mine as he settles the glass into my palm. For a wealthy CEO, he has not lost the hands of a man who worked his way to the top.

“Would it be rude of me to ask what the hell this is going to be?” Beck’s voice is rich with his smile, and I must admit I would ask the same if I weren’t the designer.

My fingers close around the grip of the electric screwdriver, and I fight to get this mirror shard into place. “I started off calling it ‘Disco ball, deconstructed.’ Now, though, I am leaning more towards ‘Eye of the Beholder.’ With the mirrors and everything, it’s something about how you see yourself is different than others do, because reflection and...” I trail off, having lost my train of thought as Beck strips off his jacket. His biceps strain the fabric of his button-down.

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I clear my throat and continue, “I need to mount it on the plaque I already have hanging on the wall over there.” I use one foot to point at the painted canvas and wooden plaque I have hanging up with holes already drilled for the screws.

“This is the backside?”

I nod, then realizing he cannot see the motion, I confirm it verbally.

His chuckle is warm, and I imagine him making that sound again between my thighs before I can direct his mouth to my pussy. “Thank you for reassuring me that while I may be getting older, I’m not losing my vision or sense of design.” Beck squats down beside me, his hands resting on the nearest sawhorse to steady himself. “You’ve not changed much from the young girl who would disassemble broken appliances and turn them into water sprinklers.”

For a statement so full of nostalgia, the mixture of emotions rising in my chest prickles my eyes and surprise me. It is one thing to know that the man of your dreams is probably too old for you; it’s another to have him throw it in your face that you’re just a kid to him. I bite back the urge to cry or lash out in a temper. Those are not the ways to show him that I have grown up.

“That little girl,” I say instead, “grew up to take classes in mechanics, engineering, and art so that most of her art is also functional.” Slipping my fingers inside a hidden groove of the piece, I flip the switch of the hidden audio recorder. “Say something,” I prompt.

Beck is just low enough for me to see his eyes flash with mirth before he says

“something” and smirks. His squatting position falters, almost landing on his well-formed ass, when he hears his voice playing back to us.

“That’s why I am going with a name referencing beauty being in the eye of the beholder. I thought I could fill the recorder’s storage space with affirmations about appearance as well as just existing.” I give the piece a once over, and deeming this stage done, I slide out.

“Do you need a hand up?” he asks.

I shake my head, roll off onto my knees and start to get up. The movement has my hair hiding my face at first, and I catch a glimpse of what looks like Beck peering down my gaping shirt. He turns his head away from me, cheeks flushing, and I let it slide. If he is going to play like that, sneak glimpses while hinting that I’m too young, I will make it into a game and see who wins.

I grab the nail gun and bend over to plug it into the power strip, wiggling my ass just a little in the process. A fast intake of breath from behind me gives the first point of the game to me.

“Where is your next business trip taking you?” I make my way back to the workspace and line up the nail gun tip with the dots I marked earlier. “Somewhere interesting?”

“Nowhere is that interesting when you’ll be surrounded by coworkers and strangers for several weeks. I’m making a few stops, but the bulk of my time is going to be spent with two larger clients and helping them straighten out some deals. It’s all boring stuff.”

Assuring him that I could never find what he says boring, least of all about a job he has so much heart in, I go back to my art. I want to finish it before going back home. The gun misfires on the fifth nail, the air compressor making a feeble puff before it

goes dead.

“Fuck!” Instinct forces me to clap a hand over my mouth and apologize. “Sorry. I—”

He pulls my hand away, and I can almost taste his skin. “Fuck is most definitely an appropriate word choice. Is there any other way to do what you need without that? I can try to fix the compressor, but you’d be out a few hours of work most likely.”

The way he swore... I feel my panties getting damp at the sound of the word dropping from his lips. Warm, wet, and swollen from just his presence, it is an effort to not reach down and pull my jeans down a bit to avoid crushing my clit.

It takes me a minute, maybe two, to come up with a solution to the lack of a nail driver that doesn’t involve me using a hammer. “I managed to get all of one quadrant in before the compressor died. I can do something else for the other three. These are going to become flower petals. I’ll just use other things or be a bit more careful and use a hammer for the remaining ones. I have to hang this up on the base now, though. Do you mind if I use your ladder? I’m not quite tall enough to reach it and have the strength to manipulate it around from the ground.”

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“Go ahead, Lia. I’ll get started on the compressor. I don’t know the last time I cleaned this off. It’s covered in grease.” He says it like I would mind watching him get all dirty.

I turn to reach for the step ladder and... Wow. The button-down has joined his jacket, and Beck is so muscular I cannot imagine the hours he must spend to keep that sort of physique. There is a faint scattering of hair across his pecs, and his nipples are rosy against his suntanned skin. My mouth waters, and I am an achy mess with the desire to lick and kiss my way down his body. There is a trail of slightly darker hair beneath his navel, disappearing behind his belt, and without the jacket I can see that he hangs to the left and is definitely not small.

“I thought you artist types were used to seeing shirtless men.” Beck sits down on the creeper board I had been on and tugs at the power plug for the air compressor.

“We are, but most of the male models we get in have a ‘dad bod,’ not umm... well, fashion magazine male model bodies.” I try not to stammer out the words, but I know I’m blushing. I think he’s earned at least two points in our game for this exchange.

To hide my embarrassment, I climb up on the ladder and finish readying the board to connect to the base of the sculpture. I will need to tweak the painting to fit the changed design, but that’s how art goes.

It’s hard to not stare at him. Grease from the compressor mar his hands and streak his forearms. I want him to cover me in it and the sweat on his chest. As if hearing my thoughts, he looks over at me. “Careful up there, Lia.” His eyes burn when they look at me, and I climb down to get my sculpture.

“Maybe you could spot me?” I offer. I bite my lip and widen my eyes, trying to look innocent when I feel anything but.

He is hesitant in getting up, visibly fighting the game we’ve been playing since Tasha went inside. I can’t see him acting like this if he weren’t into me.

I climb up two of steps and brace my knees against the frame while I begin hooking the screws into their slots. He moves in behind me to make sure I can’t fall, but I wonder if I would have been safer without him. Beck’s breath is warm on my shoulder, making it hard to focus with him so close, and I lose my grip on the metal. Leaning forward to catch it, I wobble on the ladder, start to fall, and he’s there to steady me—his sweaty chest slick against my back, lips pressed into my hair, hands outstretched to catch the sculpture while his arms cage me in. The strength of his muscles is almost feral in intensity as he saves both me and my hours of progress on my piece of art.

We stay there, locked together long after I could climb down safely. I relish the feeling of him leaning into me, the hardness...

Like a hard ridge pushing insistently against me.

I look down over my shoulder, trying to peer between our bodies. Yeah, Beck is hard. His hard-on is straining the zipper of his slacks.

Beck is breathing on my neck, lips trailing up and down with each breath in an almost-kiss. “It’s safe now, Lia; you can move.” Despite the words, he does not release me. If anything, he is pushing into me harder. I can imagine the feel of him thrusting into me while holding me down on his huge four-poster bed. Years of dirty fantasies started with him taking me to that princess bed.

I push back into him, just a little, and those maddening lips of his part on my neck.

The heat sears me. I don't know what to do. I know what I want to do, but what I should do is something else.

Not wanting my sculpture to crash, I finish hooking the final latches into place and then turn around on the ladder, sitting down on the top seat of it so that Beck and I are eye to eye.

He licks his lips, and his eyes are on my mouth while I watch his. If he doesn't make the first real move, I fear I might have to. "Please," I hear myself whisper.

Our gazes meet, and the corners of his eyes crinkle as he smiles. It's so fast that I don't have time to even close my eyes before his lips are on mine. Firm but soft, Beck's mouth parts before his tongue begs permission. I know we shouldn't do this... I promised we wouldn't.

But the feeling. Oh, the feeling. His lips press harder into mine, and there's the heat of his lips, the slick strokes of his tongue as it dances along mine, the hands sliding down to the hem of my shirt only to climb back up to rest on my waist. I part my legs around him, inviting him to lean against me, and I can't resist the temptation to run my fingers up and down his back and cling to his shoulders. It's so much better than any of my dreams. Beck groans against my mouth, and I swear it's the hottest sound I've ever heard. He's thrusting into me with his slacks and my jeans between us. I wrap one leg around his hip, and I am half hanging from his shoulders to change position so I can get the other leg up too.

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We thrust together on the ladder, and I can feel the urge to come building as Beck thrusts again and again along my zipper. The pressure builds with each stroke of his tongue on mine, the hands pulling me into him, and the hard cock insistently grinding against my pussy. I know I'm going to come if we continue this.

I hear the creak of footsteps on the stairs just on the other side of the garage's door to the house. What we're doing crashes down on me. "Tasha!" I whisper, pushing Beck away from me. It feels like I'm ripping out my heart while doing so.

He stumbles back, palming his face and turning away to adjust his cock. He grabs for his jacket, holding it over his arm in front of his body, hiding his arousal just as Tasha walks back in.

She looks at her father, glances at me, and then back again. Suspicion narrows her eyes but she relaxes and smiles as she pockets her phone. "What did I miss?" she asks.

Beck's voice sounds strained when he fills her in on the near disaster, and I realize that I can't stay. Tasha might suspect that we were flirting, but if I stay even another minute, she's going to know that I wanted to fuck her dad in the garage.

"I have to go." I rush out of there, leaving all my tools in a disarray. Maybe I can wait until Beck is gone on his work trip before coming back. Or wait until I know he's at work...

I run the opposite direction from home, finding my way to the abandoned park that was once my refuge from all the world. The dilapidated swings and merry-go-round

haven't seen a maintenance crew in years: flaking paint reveals the rust beneath, and the swings don't look sturdy enough to hold a toddler let alone an adult.

The merry-go-round squeals out a complaint of gears needing servicing, but it still spins when I kick it into motion. Running with one foot, the other leg kneeling on the cool metal, I get the playground equipment spinning until it's fast enough to go for a while on its own. Laying down in the center, I watch the clouds and mentally replay my day at their garage.

My thoughts keep coming back to Beck. Not even thoughts about how well my sculpture turned out can hold my attention for long. Beck is so gorgeous it is ridiculous. Everything about him is perfection: the way he kissed me, his body, his laugh, just everything. Well, everything except being my best friend's dad. The best friend who was there to help hold my hand when I told my dad I wanted to go on birth control at age fifteen. The best friend who made sure I was going to be okay after my mom died. The best friend who drove across multiple state lines with me to get me settled into my tiny apartment near the art school campus.

I want Beck, and I can't have him. It's just too much. I can't let anything more happen with him.

Those are the nails in the coffin of my dreams. I now know how he kisses, and I know just what I will be missing. It's better than I had ever imagined. I would miss my best friend more, and I can't come between them. I'll just have to get over him somehow. I'll have to avoid him.

It's late when I finally walk home. Each step carries the reaffirmation that I will not let myself continue dreaming about Beck. I can't.

There are no cars in the driveway when I let myself in, but the lights are still on. I barely make it into the kitchen to find leftovers when Jean descends.

“Sorry I’m late, Jean. I know I should have texted. I am going to eat something and go to bed if that’s okay.” I don’t want a fight. Not now. I don’t think I could get through it without crying, and I’m damned well not going to let her see me cry.

“Actually, Lia, I came in because I have great news.” She bounces around wistfully, and for a moment I panic that she’s trying to tell me she’s pregnant. “My boss called before dinner and said he had reconsidered hiring on new people. He’s found room in the operations budget for someone to be his secretary.” She gives me a smile that might be the first genuine, friendly one I’ve received from her. “I think it is an amazing position to be working with the owner so personally. He’s such a great guy to work for.”

As “Senior Researcher of Blahbity Blah” or whatever it is she does, Jean has a considerably better job than secretary, but she seems oddly wistful about the position, as if she would welcome the demotion. Maybe the boss is hot, and Jean is crushing on him. Who cares, though? As long as she doesn’t act on it and hurt my dad, she can have a fantasy about whomever she wants.

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“How often would you and I have to see each other?” I ask her. I try not to make it sound rude, but I know that is a failed effort.

“You could commute with me, if you want. The bus stop two blocks away has a route that runs only a block or two from the main entrance if you’d rather do that. Otherwise, I’m rarely near the main office unless we have a system-wide meeting or there’s something that can’t be handled by email. My division head doesn’t send researchers over to see the main boss often.” Jean taps her fingernails on the counter, waiting for me to accept the job she has obtained for me.

I don’t want to give Jean what she wants, but this opportunity means I can give my dad back some money for the studio loan. Besides, it’s just a job. If I can pack up everything and come back home, I can also go to a nine to five job to earn money. Speaking of nine-to-five... “When and where, exactly, will I be working?”

Jean bounces, and not an inch of her plastic enhancements jiggle with the motion. “Tomorrow is your first day, and it’s normally an eight to five shift, but you might have to work later on occasion. I don’t think he’ll have you doing overtime often, being just a secretary. And it’s at Huntsworth Industries, silly girl. You’re working for the CEO, Beck Huntsworth. Isn’t he your friend’s dad?”

2

Beck

Pacing is one of my few bad habits, but I can’t help it. My mind is racing, and while I know my undivided attention should be given to the attorney I’m speaking with on

the phone, my thoughts keep returning to Lia. Two hours into my day, and I'm already fighting the urge to walk out of the office to work from home. I won't have to face Lia there or the nearly constant hard-on I have for her. I don't remember ever being this horny. Lia should arrive at the HR department any moment now, and she'll be up to my office shortly after they've given her a security clearance badge and finalized her paperwork.

It is not like I would accomplish anything at home, though. Here, at least, I can provide the illusion of efficiency. I began this company years ago in my attempt to help the world and create a comfortable life for Tasha. I succeeded, and I've moved on to do so much more than I originally planned. Huntsworth Industries has become one of the most respected corporations for blending technology with housing worldwide in addition to picking up the slack of feeding the planet's hungry. No child will eat mud if I have the means to help them.

"Intellectual property is usually harder to fight for, Beck, but we have the screen shots your IT security team provided of the employee copying files." My attorney wants me to utterly destroy the former employee, but I am having a hard time bringing myself to that level of ruthless CEO behavior. "I'm glad you pushed them to have those safety nets set up on all computers."

I don't care if my employees spend a little of their time playing games or chatting during the work day as long as it doesn't bring down their performance rating or quota. Downloading schematics of upcoming tech releases is another story... "Bob, I want to set an example of him so that we don't have anyone else try it, but I don't want him behind bars for a decade either. Any money from a settlement, however, I want diverted to a scholarship fund or some other charitable contribution. I don't want any fines he is charged to affect our actual income. I won't profit off someone being an asshole."

My attorney agrees and runs through a few more issues he wants hammered out

before I can end the call. I try to hold still, to stop my pacing, but whenever my frenetic movement is contained, the hunger for Lia begins to gnaw at my gut. It aches in a way I cannot remember feeling for anyone, not even for Carrie. We were married right out of high school, and she was my rock all through college and working my way up from crap jobs that taught me to be considerate to all my employees, not just the ones whose names are emblazoned on doors or desk plates.

When I walked in on my wife with another man, it had shattered me. It's been nine years, and I still find it difficult to trust a woman with my heart. I gave Carrie the world, and she took me for seven million dollars, my favorite car, our penthouse downtown, and access to my private jet whenever she wanted it for the first year following our divorce. At least she gave up all custody rights to Tasha. I'm not sure what I would have done if she had tried to take our daughter.

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Hell, I'm not sure what I will do now with Lia coming to work under me. Under me. I start filing papers that had built up on my desk. She should be kept busy, with actual work—not getting busy with me.

I have not felt lust like this ever, this distraction and need. From the moment I walked into the garage and saw her under the car I wanted to fuck her, claim her, make her mine. The nearly instant arousal that filled me by just being near her was enough to make feel like a randy teenager. While I had been almost desperate with the desire to fuck her right there in my garage, I would have settled for licking away the sweat glistening on her chest.

Lia gives new meaning to the word “stunning.” She was always cute, and I can admit to harboring a few naughty thoughts over the years, but I never allowed myself to go down those paths even mentally as more than a momentary lapse of propriety. She was a minor—a teen girl who would wear the skimpiest bikinis while sunbathing on my back porch as if to purposely tease me—and I was happily married. At least, I thought Carrie and I were happy together. Now, though, Lia has filled out into a curvy young woman who is so down-to-earth it nearly broke all my resolve when I caught her staring at me. Her mother had been a striking woman before cancer left her wasted and weak. Genetics has been kind to Lia.

Watching Lia work, tongue peeking out from between her lips as she immersed herself in her art, left me breathless. The strength of her limbs from years of lifting heavy components into place and working with power tools gave her toned muscles and an internal fortitude lacking in so many of her peers. I knew from her conversations with Tasha during Lia's years away that she was as beautiful inside as she was out. There was a gentleness to her that had her donating hours of face

painting to local hospitals' pediatric patients as well as gifting art for their walls so that the children had nice things to look at as they convalesced.

Being near Lia astonished me. Heat and desire struck each time she moved, and even now I find my body responding to the memory of her in my arms. I don't know how to react to her, and my brain is left out of commission in the wake of just her smile.

Tasha told me over dinner last week that Lia was coming back, so her appearance in my garage had not been a surprise. It had been no effort at all on my part to grant her permission to work in my garage workshop. It was not like I had time often enough to play there. There was space enough for five cars, and we only used two of them.

I had prepared myself for the pretty, bubbly, snarky, and often lost in her own head girl whom I had watched grow from childhood into her teen years. She was far from the awkward teen growing into her long legs while learning about the world. I still remember catching her making out with a boy on my own couch while Tasha was with her boyfriend in her room. Lia was the diversion so Tasha wouldn't get caught doing more than I wanted to see in my home. They had been grounded from each other for a few weeks over that one.

But Lia, at twenty-two, a few months older than my own daughter, makes everything that much harder. I'm glad she's home, despite the reason for it, but resisting her and whatever it is we have brewing between us is going to test my resolve.

I am no stranger to women wanting me, but other than a single interlude when I attempted to start dating and slake my thirst for human companionship, I have not welcomed anyone into my bed. It is hard to know who is after me for my money and connections versus being honestly interested in me. Hell, I would probably even welcome someone interested solely in my body if I knew it wasn't because they've seen me in various magazines and know who I am.

Despite being old enough to have an adult daughter and the greying hair that comes with having such a free spirited daughter, I take care of myself. I work out in the company gym at least three days a week with a trainer and have equipment at home as well. Keeping my body looking how it did during my early twenties requires determination, but it is an effort that leaves me feeling in control of my life. I eat right most of the time, and while I do have a fondness for lattes and other sugar and milk-laden coffee drinks, I make up for them on the treadmill and by lifting weights.

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When I stripped off my shirt and jacket to help Lia, I wasn't trying to show my physique. Teasing her had been a bonus effect. My mind was on auto-pilot from seeing the bombshell she had become, and my only thought was on not ruining a thousand dollars or so of fabric with grease. The drycleaner would have flayed me alive when our housekeeper took in the weekly basket of clothes.

I ended up covering the shirt in come after Lia left, only marginally better than ruining it in the garage. My cock refused to deflate, not even talking to Tasha had been able to calm my desires. Hiding my plight with the folded jacket, I'd gone into my study, locked the door, and then quickly jacked off, thinking of how Lia felt in my arms. Those full, high breasts of hers... The way I wanted to lick off the sweat I'd seen beading between them when she was bent over. How I longed to suck her nipples into my mouth.

When she wriggled her hips at me, I knew she had caught me looking. My cock had gotten hard with that move of hers, and it was only as I thought of her kneeling on my bed, shimmying before I could fuck her, that I found the release I needed.

Lia did not kiss like a young woman just out of college who was looking to tease. She kissed me like she meant it, like she felt everything I did. The chemistry, the cotton candy buzz of her tongue on mine, sang in my blood long after she pushed me off her and ran away without us talking about what happened.

I know I should apologize to her for letting it happen, but I don't think I can. I need her.

It isn't proper for me to want my daughter's best friend, a girl I've watched grow into

an astonishing beauty. There is just something magic about Lia, something that makes my whole body throb with the need to get closer. She could easily become addictive. I knew I should resist any temptation affecting me this strongly, but then I had to go and hire her.

What the fuck was I thinking? I am going to lose my mind, or at least my promise to myself to never sleep with an employee. Maybe that's why the second thing I did after Lia left was call Jean last night. If Lia is my employee, I can do my damndest to keep my rule. It would give me a buffer against the feelings that are already going well beyond lust and into a dangerous territory from just one encounter.

Lia makes me hungry. It is more than lust; it is the hunger to provide for her, not in a paternal way, but to see that all her dreams are made reality. I know that Jean is not very nice to her and never has been, and if it wouldn't make things worse, I would throw my weight around as Jean's boss to fix that. Jean is a great member of the R&D team, but not so much that I would be sad to see her go if it meant making Lia happy. It's an employer's market right now with more applicants than jobs. She would be easily replaced.

It is a dangerous move, I know, to bring Lia in as my secretary. I haven't needed one, preferring to share my CFO's office assistant when the need does arise. It would be less work for me and give me time to think about future ideas directly instead of only in scheduled planning sessions or when I'm on a plane to a site. I have the money in my budget for an assistant, and it would save me time by having someone dedicated to keeping me organized.

When Lia first moved back to town, Jean had asked me to bring her step-daughter onto the staff. I had declined, not wanting Jean to think I was doing it for her sake. I didn't want to do her any favors and have her try to offer me any in return. She flirts a bit too much for trying to keep things professional and she's married. Sleeping with a married woman is against my code of ethics; even if I found Jean attractive, which I

don't, I could never consider her as a partner. One of Tasha's older coworkers had asked me out on a date once, and I had accepted out of curiosity until I found out she was married. Social media makes it easy to find out those sort of secrets if you're willing to look.

My shoes squeak against the marble tile as I make my way to the en suite bathroom, distracting me from thoughts of all I want to provide for Lia. I stand in front of the sink, looking at myself, and I try to shake off the urge to climb into the small shower stall and let cold water soak into me until my desire ebbs. I'm a mess, and the boss can't afford to be that way. Part of me, probably the part of me currently swollen in my pants, wants to find out where things could go with Lia so we can then move on with that urge taken care of.

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I know she is the forbidden fruit, and that maybe this is my mid-life crisis starting to hit me, but I want her. “I need her,” I tell my reflection. “I have to have—”

“Mr. Huntsworth, your new office assistant has finished with human resources.” My chief of security sounds amused as his voice plays from the speaker on my desk.

She’s on her way up. The thought repeats itself in time with the aching in my cock.

“You wanted me to call you when she was being shown her way to the executive office floor.” The line goes silent. My fingernail catches on the red disc of a call button beside the vanity in my bathroom. I press it, wait for Brian to answer, and then thank him for the notice. There’s no time for me to get my libido in check, so the best I can do is sit down at my desk to hide the reaction Lia evokes from me.

I wait at my desk—one minute becomes two, and then it’s soon five minutes before I hear muffled voices outside of the security clearance down the hall. I try to focus on the paperwork in front of me. The chirp of a badge being swiped lights up a blue LED on the panel beside my phone, giving me a warning that someone will be entering. Only a handful of people have clearance to get in here, and most of those require the security guard in the hall or someone inside to buzz them in. I like having my privacy to work without interruption.

Not that I couldn’t tell Lia was near without the warning. My cock is like a divining rod, pointing straight toward her. It feels as if all the blood in my body is rushing down to make my pants smaller. My fingers wrap around the bulge and tug, pulling my dick upright so that it isn’t trapped in a painful position. Glad there aren’t cameras in my office to catch the motion, I make a mental note to have my tailor add more

room to the crotch in my slacks after I return from this business trip. I won't have time for those alterations to be done before I go. I'll have to always wear jackets buttoned or my shirt untucked if I'm going to be around Lia. I don't see this effect she has on me going away anytime soon.

"One. Two. Three." I breathe out between each number in an attempt to calm my racing pulse. Reaching forward, my fingers hover over the switch that will call out to the desk in the lobby beyond my office door. Lia will be working just thirty feet from me all day, five days a week. I flip it, feeling the vibration in the air as it makes her phone light up with the silent summons. Beneath it is the intercom button, and I murmur her name as I press it down, inviting her to come into my office.

She bids farewell to whichever intern was sent from Human Resources to guide her up to our space, and I'm glad that the CFO's office is on the opposite wing of our floor. We have full privacy for the conversation that might come. I need to know how she feels about our kiss. I need to know if she wants more as badly as I do.

Lia enters, timid and nervous with hands playing with the hem of her blouse. A skirt dusts the top of her knees, and it just skims the hips I was clinging to yesterday as if they were my lifeline. Her breasts are hidden by the demure shirt, buttoned all the way up to her neck with a string of simple pearls over it, but I can imagine the generous curves I had the slightest glimpse of before. If anything, her outfit is plain and should be boring, but it incites something in me. It makes me every hungrier. I want so much to undo her hair from its careful confines and fist my hand in it as I lick my way down her throat.

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other. "Hi." Her voice trembles before she steels herself and repeats it more surely. "Do I call you Mr. Huntsworth?" Lia has her head tilted down, and she looks up at me through the sweeping edge of her bangs. Her lips part, and the tip of her tongue glosses over them.

She's nervous, and I selfishly hope it's because of me. "Beck is fine unless I happen to be in a meeting. 'Sir' works too," I tease.

Lia blushes before rolling her eyes. She even does that artfully. "Thank you for the job, Beck."

The way she says my name makes my cock throb. "I should be thanking you for accepting it, Lia." I stand and offer her my hand. Her fingers are cool as they slip into my palm, and the shake we share is anything but innocent despite the chaste touch. I want her grip to be lower and firmer, and with the quick dropping of her eyes, I sense that her thoughts are moving in the same direction.

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“I am grateful,” she reiterates. “Jean thinks I’ve just been a waste of space since I had to come back home. My dad is just happy to see me.”

“He isn’t the only one,” I find myself interjecting. Our hands drop as if the words were too much and break the spell connecting us. I try not to reach for her again, to pull her to me and kiss her right here in my office. It’s hard, harder than the throbbing flesh wanting to bury itself inside her, to resist making the offer. Instead, I sit back down and ask if everything at her desk is satisfactory.

She comments on how she needs to get settled in with the computer and go through the manual she was given for getting logged in. I’m loathe to let her go, wanting her in here with me, and for a moment I consider having her desk brought in here to share my space. I don’t want to be the creepy, stalker boss, however.

“If you need anything, Lia, just ask.” Even I can hear the double meaning in my husky words.

Lia swallows, her neck bobbing. She looks at my mouth, her eyes locking on mine again as if daring me to come to her again. Not going to her is torture. Every muscle in my body screams her name as I cling to my chair in hopes of not succumbing to the urge to kiss her again.

She gives me a shy smile, one that shakes a bit as she swallows once more before speaking. “I’m fine, Beck. I’ll let you know if I have any questions. If you’re done with me, can I go to my desk?”

I’m not done with her at all, not by a long shot. “Go ahead. Calls aren’t going to your

phone yet unless they have the direct extension. We'll have everything rerouted to your desk tomorrow. I didn't want you having to learn our phone system today on top of everything else. Mostly though, you'll be making copies, running errands on site, and keeping me on schedule."

She steps out, closing the glass door, and I can see her back as she sits down. I rest my elbows on my desk, palm my forehead and hair, and I groan so loudly my chest aches. What the hell is wrong with me?

The entire time Lia was in here, I was like a teenaged boy going through puberty. If this is how I'm going to be around her, maybe this was not a great idea after all. I don't know if I can hide my reaction to her. Yeah, the tailor is going to have a lot of work in order so I can avoid splitting open the seams on my pants anytime Lia touches me.

I push my hair back out of my face, and my daughter's beautiful smile is the first thing I see. The picture of her taken on a cruise around Greece last spring has been on my desk since the moment we got home from the vacation. My daughter. My not-so-little girl who will always be my baby... Lia is her age. They've been best friends for more than half their lives.

Groaning again for good measure, I force all thoughts of Lia out of my head and focus on my to-do list. If we're going to make this work, I have to be able to actually function. If I wanted to pay her to distract me... Well, that's not exactly legal in our state.

It's nearing lunch when Lia interrupts me at last, but her question is not what I wanted to hear. "You have a visitor, Beck. I'm not sure which button will buzz her past the security door. Which one is it?"

Her voice is cold, and I know of few people who could earn that sort of reception

from her. Lia was devastated when Carrie left me. She had claimed at the time that she hated to see Tasha lose her mom. Now, though, I think it was far more personal. It must be Jean. I don't want to deal with Jean today, but the wrath Lia would endure isn't worth my preferences right now.

“Our door will open manually from this side. You can either directly open the door or there is a yellow square that lights up on your phone when someone doesn't have access. If you press that, it will open the door for them.” She's already at the door and pushing the button before I can ask her who it is. Security would have called me if Jean's visit were announced as a visit for me. She must have told them she was here to see Lia.

I straighten the papers on my desk, hiding the top sheet of confidential numbers. Jean is leaning on Lia's desk, and Lia has put herself between her step-mother and my slightly ajar door. “If you'll wait here, I'll check with Mr. Huntsworth to see if he's available.”

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“Oh, he’s available for me, Lia.” Jean pushes past her and lets herself in, reminding me why I’m glad she can’t get past security without permission each time.

“Jean—” Lia sounds exasperated as she stomps after Jean into my office. “I’m sorry, Mr. Huntsworth.” The professional tone is a one-eighty from when she first came in a few hours ago. Her ability to project the right persona as the secretary to the CEO of my corporation means a lot to me. I need someone who can provide the correct image.

“It’s okay, Lia. If you want to go for lunch, it would be great to head down to the cafeteria now or go out if you prefer. My food will be sent up from the cafeteria in about an hour. If you could be back by then, it would be great. I have some things to go over with you for while I’ll be away.” I can get back to work (or to fantasizing about Lia) depending on how quickly I am able to rid myself of my impromptu visitor.

Lia gives me a bright grin, one rich with more than a little mischief. “I know about your lunch. The chef called up to see if I wanted a grilled chicken salad when he sent up yours, or if I wanted something else. I’m going to go see what they are serving everyone else. It would probably be good for me to meet the factory employees while I’m at it. Second floor, right?” she asks me. “If your tray is ready, I’ll see if I can just bring it up with me to save the kitchen staff the effort. See you in a bit.”

I wave as she disappears, and then I turn my attention to the woman in front of me. “How can I help you, Jean?” She’s dressed in a short suit dress, one considerably shorter than what I would consider professional. Her shirt has a low neckline, and she leans over my desk, daring me to look at what her husband likely paid to have

enhanced. I don't take the bait.

Jean is beautiful, but she is far too greedy for prestige and money aside from her being married. She toys with her necklace, a red fingernail dropping below my peripheral vision.

"I am busy, Jean. Is there something wrong?"

"No, Beck." I hate the way she purrs out my name. "I just wanted to check in and see how Lia is working out for you." She comes around and leans against the corner of my desk, one toned leg stretched out only inches away from me. Her act could be seen as innocent flirtation by anyone else. I know the truth.

"She's great; thanks for recommending her." I keep my eyes on hers or on my computer as I type in an order sheet for inventory to get moved from one warehouse to the factory for additional work. "Did you manage to fix that error with how the generator converts the solar powered energy?" Jean is excellent at her job most of the time, but when she makes a mistake, it's a big one. Even before she married Lia's dad, Jean had pursued me to the point of it being laughable.

Jean nods, her chin rising and falling like one of those bobble heads lined up along a car's dashboard. "Weeks ago, Beck. Really, I don't have any problems. It's my lunch break, so I thought I would come up here, see if Lia's doing okay, and if there's anything I can do for you." One fingertip dances across my desk and touches the side of my hand.

It's too much, and I'm done with the conversation. I can only be polite for a short time in the face of such blatant disregard for my boundaries. A swift keystroke triggers my own security protocol, and my phone rings five seconds later, appearing to be from the main reception desk downstairs instead of being a fake proxy call through the computer.

“Sorry, Jean. I have to take this.” I pick up the receiver and hold it to my ear as a recorded voice begins questioning me about our upcoming releases. “This is Beck. How may I help you?” This truly was one of my more brilliant additions to my phone system. I’ll have to come up with something like this for Lia’s computer, too.

I listen for a few more seconds. “Hold on just a moment. I’ll be right back.” I place the fake call on hold. “I really am sorry, Jean. This call is about my upcoming trip. I leave in the morning for several weeks. I’ll drop by Research and Development later today when I give Lia a full tour of the site. I want to introduce her to all the department heads before I leave in case she needs anything for me while I’m gone. We can catch up when Lia and I are down there. Okay?”

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Sour-faced and sulking, Jean shows herself out. She knows she can't complain about me having her step-daughter there when talking to me, not without admitting to ulterior motives.

I hang up the phone once she's past the security door. Thankful for her departure, I make a few quick calls to wrap up loose ends before I start packing up my desk for my trip. Being gone for several weeks at a time is a normal part of my job. I can work from virtually anywhere as long as I have a Wi-Fi connection or remember to pack my portable satellite access. Video conferencing keeps me close to Tasha no matter the distance. Not seeing Lia, however, is going to be painful. It has barely been twenty-four hours since she came crashing back into my world, but I'm not sure I can envision my life without her.

I've got to get this boner in check.

3

Lia

It's nearing the end of my first day at Huntsworth Industries, and I find myself happy with how it went. Behind a desk is not exactly how I saw myself, even as a temporary financial solution, but all the staff I've met are friendly. Having Beck visible from the edge of my monitor is quite a job perk, too. He's even gorgeous when deep in thought with his work.

"What's it like working for my dad?" The words pop up in my chat messenger, and I minimize the window quickly. I know I'm allowed to chat online a bit, and even use

the desk phone for personal use if needed, but wasting work time does not sit well with me. It feels like stealing from Beck when he's paying me to be productive.

My tour of the facilities has already blurred in my memories except for the sensation of Beck's hand on my waist or at my elbow to guide me. Always the gentleman, he opened doors for me and answered all my questions with patient enthusiasm instead of making me feel stupid when I did not understand a division's responsibilities. Some of the signs seemed more likely to be from a sci-fi film than belonging in a company, but they mostly made sense by the time we finished. By the time Beck is back from his trip, I hope I know my way around without guidance.

Near the end of my tour, as he showed me the gym as well as his favorite escape route from our wing of the building, I could feel myself falling for him. He doesn't take for granted the position he has here, nor does he hold the responsibilities lightly. The pride in Beck's eyes as he showed me the location of the time capsule we had buried here when I was just a kid...

I open my computer's web browser and Tasha's message, replying to her about my afternoon. "Do you think your dad will give us back the things we hid in the box before it was sealed?" I type. My favorite charm bracelet went in there along with Tasha's teddy bear. We hadn't thought that out too well. There are still seven years to wait before the time capsule will be dug out and opened.

"Doubtful." I watch as the cursor blinks, letting me know Tasha is typing more. "Going to text you. Don't want my dad to see this..."

My phone pings quietly from the top drawer of my desk, and I grab it to read Tasha's message. A picture of Tasha with Chris fills the screen. Like I had told Tasha in the garage, he is cute, and the way he is looking at her gives me hope for them. She is the light of his world; it shows in his eyes and the easy way he grins at her.

With Beck leaving for a work trip, Tasha is having Chris over for the weekend and wants my help in setting up the house for a romantic rendezvous. She is so excited about their time together that it is hard to feel jealous over their relationship, and I'm genuinely happy for her. I text back that I would love to help, but only if I get to meet him before they lock the door and forget about the world.

The hot tub under the gazebo would be beautiful with lights strung for a bit of ambiance, and I know I can figure out something to decorate the path from the patio to there as well. "Budget and colors?" I type before tossing my phone back into the drawer. I don't want to chance Beck coming out and seeing the plans. Even though Tasha is an adult, she is still his daughter. I know my dad would not want to hear about me planning to spend a weekend in bed with a guy.

Of course, the only guy I'm interested in is Beck. A weekend away with him, or even a weekend in but offline and completely unplugged from everything except each other, would be heavenly. Waking up in his arms, making love in the afternoon, and spending early dawn hours swimming laps together in his heated pool... I know he is a morning person, or at least he always was. I've had boyfriends—lovers—but none have affected me like this. Working for Beck has the benefit of forcing me to focus on my job so that I can impress him. I can't imagine what I could accomplish at home today or even in his garage.

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The phone in his office rings, and I jump from how loud it is. Tomorrow, when I start taking most of his calls and forwarding messages as needed, I will have a new concept of cacophony. Without Beck here, though, I think the call volume should be manageable. Mostly, I'll be redirecting calls where they need to go or typing up messages that Beck will grab online when he can deal with them. The most urgent ones will be forwarded to his cell.

I jot down a note to make sure I get his personal number just in case. I pull off the sticky note from its pad and affix it to my monitor. "Ask Beck for his number" sounds much more personal than I mean it to. Thoughts of calling him, maybe even having phone sex to prevent him from being lonely, infect my brain.

"It's already in your electronic directory," Beck whispers from beside me, making me jump. "But if you give me your phone, I'll program it in for you." I hadn't heard him come out of his office, and I try not to look at the muscled forearms flexing where he's gripping my desk.

"B-Beck, hi. I didn't hear you." I fish around in the desk drawer for my phone, and I close out of my messages before handing over the device.

"You looked pretty focused on the screen." He leans over me, and the scent of his cologne is as inviting as the body heat emitting from him. "The history of solar power, huh?" Beck gives me a wink. "Fascinating stuff if I didn't know you already are pretty up to date on engineering, Lia." He inputs his number and then crouches down, holding my phone out in front of us. "Smile for the camera."

Beck's cheek is inches from mine, and we are looking at each other—not my

phone—when the camera app clicks. “That’ll have to do, I guess,” he teases. He hands back my phone but not before his own vibrates. “There. Now I have your number and a contact photo for you.”

He stands up straight, stretching his arms overhead and cracking his neck and back in turn. “What have you thought about your first day so far?”

“So far?” I question. I’m supposed to be on my way to Jean’s office for a ride home. If I’m not there when she leaves, I’ll have to wait for the bus.

He steps back and shrugs, burying his hands in his pants pockets. “So far as in I really need you to stay late, if you’re available. The call that just came in was one of our distributors. I thought I had everything wrapped up for the trip, but apparently I don’t.” Beck runs down a list of copies he needs, emails sent, travel plans adjusted. It’s overwhelming, and I’m only given the tasks he is delegating to me. “Do you have a hot date or something that you need to escape for? I know this is short notice for overtime, and on your first day at that...” He trails off and gives me a hopeful smile.

More time with Beck and getting paid for it? Sign me the fuck up right now.

“No hot dates tonight.” When he visibly relaxes, I wonder if he was trying to find out more about me, not just give me an out for the work. “I was planning on having an exciting dinner of grilled cheese or whatever Jean and my dad are making. It would have been epic.”

Beck reaches for my phone and taps out an extension before I can try to remember who it goes to. “This is Beck. Hey, Jess, what are the dinner options in the cafeteria tonight?” He taps a finger on my desk a few times before asking me if sushi is okay. When I agree, Beck orders two plates of assorted sushi, some fried rice, and whatever dessert the evening chef on duty wants to send up. “Charge it to my office tab, Jess. Thanks!”

We work side by side in his office, me running across the hall to our printer and copier to grab what he needs, and then proofreading documents before he sends them off to be notarized. There's so much that goes into his job, and Beck's ability to do it all with such ease amazes me.

"Lia?" Beck is in the bathroom washing ink off his hands when he calls to me. "Do you remember the office at the opposite end of the hall I showed you? The one with the roses on the glass pattern?" It belonged to their accountant, or something like that. I would have to go through the security checkpoint to go out. "There is a yellow file folder on the bookcase against the window. It has all my printouts of today's financial documents. It needs to get dropped off in the mail slot there before we eat. Can you do that for me?"

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I bite back the response that I want to say. “I’ll do anything for you.” Instead, I say that I know where it is, and after finding the yellow folder he described, I head for the door. “I’ll be right back.”

A young man, perhaps a year or two older than me, exits the elevator by the security desk and heads toward me. “You must be Lia; I’m Jess.” He shakes my hand in greeting. “It’s nice to see we have someone not old enough to be my mom working here at last!” The guard uses a handheld scanner to capture the barcode on the guy’s badge and buzzes Jess in, and the door to my office area opens on automatic hinges. I wish they could have done that for Jean instead of making me look like an idiot earlier.

I peer at the guard’s name badge. In the dim light of the overhead it’s hard to make out until my eyes adjust. “Michael, can I ask what’s probably a silly question? I see that Jess swiped his badge, and you were able to let him in from here. Why couldn’t that happen for Jean from Research when she came up earlier today?”

The guard coughs, disguising a bark of a laugh. “Umm... You mean Scientist Barbie? She does not have proper clearance for the offices on this floor. Jess has clearance for almost every room in the complex. I cannot disclose additional information, but if you ask Mr. Huntsworth, he may tell you.”

Knowing that would likely be a futile effort, I smile and thank Michael for his help. It can’t be fun to sit at the desk for a twelve-hour shift with nothing to do but press buttons and watch security monitors. It will be even less interesting with Beck gone starting tomorrow. The office will be lonely; that much I know already.

I scurry along the hallway, my footfalls loud in the empty corridor. It's nearing seven, and even the assistants have gone home. It's just Beck, the guard, and me. As busy as Beck is, I know dinner will be eaten either rushed, standing shoulder to shoulder while we work, or alone in the dark at my desk. I'm unsure which one I want.

No. Being with him, even if we're eating sushi like it's popcorn between tasks, would be better than not having this time with him.

I return to our office, but there's no food and no Beck. The entire office suite is empty. "Beck?" I call his name and go from my desk in the lobby to his office. Louder this time, I call his name. A door, one I thought was a coat closet, has a light shining from beneath it. "Maybe it's a meeting room," I say to myself as I open the door. The food service cart is at the bottom of a set of stairs leading up, and at the top of the stairs is a door, propped open, revealing the night sky.

Beck comes to the top of the stairs, a blanket over his arm, and calls down, "Yay! You're back! The food's here, Lia. I thought we could use a break from the office. Come on up." He disappears from my view, but I soon see him as I crest the landing after the final stair.

The space is huge; the roof of our building is connected to the others by slim walkways that make up the ceilings to the skywalks between the three towers. Our roof is mostly open with a garden diagonal from where I stand at the stairwell. To my right, Beck has a personal restaurant, or a close facsimile.

Four patio heaters are beginning to warm the night air, shimmering with heat. Adding to the comfort, Beck drapes a blanket over the top of a wicker couch and pulls back a bit of mosquito netting to invite me beneath the spacious gazebo style tent. "Welcome to Chez Huntsworth. Tonight's main course is a sushi sampler. May I interest the lady in the finest vintage of hot tea or chilled spring water? Sorry I don't have sake or wine. I don't drink on the job. Please sit, Lia."

I take the spot he points to and reach for a bottle of water. “This is amazing; thank you.” The moonlight and glow from the electric braziers illuminate his hair, giving Beck an otherworldly appearance. With Beck in his suit and me in a skirt and blouse, I can almost imagine this as a date. Hell, this is already nicer than most dates I’ve gone on.

“You’re smiling. What are you thinking about?” The couch cushion dips as Beck sits down beside me, his knee grazing mine.

“Honestly? I was thinking that having dinner with my boss is nicer than all of the dates I’ve ever been on.” It’s hard to think with him so close, and blurting out my real thoughts is easier than trying to come up with a believable lie. I consider asking if this is his version of a date, but I don’t want to make it awkward.

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Beck picks up his plate of sushi, turns so that he's sitting sideways to face me, and begins eating. His teeth bite through the first piece, and he arches an eyebrow at me in silent question. I can't tell him I'd rather watch him eat, so I pick up my own plate and start with something I don't recognize. It's good, but I think almost anything would be with Beck for company.

"I know we talked about what it's like being back, and I could tell by your voice that you were hiding how much you miss your studio." He skips the small-talk, going straight for the heart of it all. "What was your favorite part about art school?"

I add sugar to my tea and blow on the steam rising from the cup in misty curls. "Not interacting with anyone before at least ten." Most nights had me up until midnight working on various projects. "If you were unlucky enough to land an earlier morning class, even the teachers were hugging coffee pots.

"Actually, I think it was wearing overalls and a faded, thrift store flannel shirt for like four days in a row without anyone noticing until I took a trip to the laundromat, washed it, and cleaned off the paint." Even to my own ears, my voice sounds richer as I discuss my life as an artist.

"That reminds me of my first days of building Huntsworth. I ate, slept, and breathed my work, and I loved it." Beck's wistful tone echoes mine.

"Beck, it was so damned refreshing being around other artists all day. I mean, there were the usual squabbles over best lighting and who stole somebody's brush or welding gear..." My eyes catch on Beck's throat as he laughs, his Adam's apple bobbing as he throws his whole head back with the emotion. "But," I continue, "we

got each other. The peer groups we formed by discipline truly became family.”

Warmth covers my hand, and it takes a minute before I realize Beck’s fingers are intertwined with my own. I squeeze them back, memorizing the strength in his grasp.

His voice breaks as he speaks. “And now you’re far away from the first people who really understood you.”

“I had you and Tasha first,” I blurt without thought. Glancing up, I want to see his reaction. There isn’t one on his face, but I can’t find it in me to be disappointed. His eyes are on our joined hands, and neither of us move to let go.

Minutes pass before he speaks again. “What’s harder: being away from your chosen family or not having the freedom to do your art whenever you want?” The night breeze toys with his hair, sending wayward waves into his eyes. He hasn’t had it cut in a while. I brush them back with my free hand, relishing the sensation of those silken strands slipping between my fingers.

I don’t want to talk about my art. It hurts too much. “I miss my studio. I miss the way the afternoon sun would reflect off a carefully placed mirror and fill the space with warmth.” Closing my eyes, I sink into the memories. “It smelled of chai spices from the tea I kept at the counter for guests. I miss rolling off my pull-out couch in the back room and getting to work without worrying about overstaying my welcome or disturbing anyone. There was this exhibit I did...” My hands release Beck’s and flutter around as I speak, so excited even now as I describe the photographs I took and how I recreated them as paintings and sculptures.

“That sounds amazing. I wish Tasha and I had been able to come out. I remember when you sent us the postcard about the show. I think she has one in her scrapbook, and the one you addressed to me is in my desk at home.” Beck serves himself some of the fried rice and manages to make eating it look like an advertisement for the

world's most perfect food. I'm happy that I haven't spilled sushi rice down my front.

"I still have a few of the paintings that didn't sell. I might try to get them into a boutique downtown to make some money. Maybe then Jean won't keep reminding me what a failure I am." The label sticks with me and will continue to until I can somehow make it as an artist again. If I can. "Even if I fail at doing anything with my art, I do love making it. I love creating."

His hands reach for me, clasp my shoulders, and squeeze until it is almost uncomfortable. "You are not a failure, Lia. You gave it your all, but the economy let you down."

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“Promise me you won’t give up your art dreams,” he demands.

His eyes are fierce in the moonlight, and I’m staring up at him, wondering what all is going through his head. His lips are parted, reminding me of how they felt on mine. It would be too easy for me to pull him down on top of me on this couch and resume yesterday’s kiss. My whole body shivers with the thought.

“You must be cold. Here, take this.” Beck shrugs out of his jacket and wraps it around me. I can’t believe the smell. It’s him, but intensified from hours of wear. The silken fabric whispers along my neck and arms, encasing me in his scent and body heat.

Years ago, I had danced around in his hallway during a sleepover while wearing a discarded jacket. It had not been so warm though. “I used to dream about this, Beck.” I whisper the words into the heavy air between us. “In my dreams, it was always you who would take me out on a date like this one and kiss me good night. More,” I add when he stares at my lips.

“More?” His question is muffled by my mouth as we come together in a kiss. It’s more than I ever imagined. His tongue darts along my lower lip, tracing a line before I open for him.

There’s laughter in our kiss, pent up passions that need to escape like the flames on the braziers around our rooftop oasis. Hands slide around my waist, pulling me to him, and I lean back at the same time, bringing Beck down onto me.

His weight is a solid blanket as he covers me. I arch up into him, into his kiss, and I

know I'm not the only one breathing hard when we momentarily part. Beck mouths my neck, heat and sharp pain dissolving at the wet press of his tongue on the love bite. "God, Lia!" He sucks at a spot near my shoulder, his hands in my hair.

I don't know where I want to touch him most. There's so much of him, all muscled and tense as he rocks on top of me. I scratch my nails down his back, and he hisses, thrusting down so that I can feel his arousal pushing into me. He's wild, groaning into my ear as I dig my nails into his shoulders.

"Need to—" Beck punctuates his words with open-mouthed, dragging kisses beneath my chin. He pushes himself up, the motion bringing his cock and my pussy even closer, and when he covers my body with his again, his hands slide beneath my shirt. "I need to get my hands and mouth on those gorgeous tits of yours."

I can barely whisper out my approval before he's cupping my breasts, fingers already tugging at the lace cups of my bra. It's my turn to moan as he squeezes a nipple, the hardened peak aching for more.

I beg, offering myself up to him. Releasing my grip on his back, I reach for my buttons, wanting to get my shirt off. Skin to skin won't be close enough.

He stops me, one hand grabbing at my wrists. "Let me." It's as much a plea as a request, and I acquiesce. Beck rips my blouse down the front, buttons popping off around us. "I'll buy you a new one." I can't be mad, not when I see the pure hunger on his face. He looks ready to devour me.

His fingers pull down the lace again, freeing my nipples so that both are displayed for him. It's exhilarating to be out here like this—even more so for it to be Beck stripping me.

"You are so gorgeous. I need to taste you, Lia." His mouth closes over one tip, and I

swear I can feel it between my legs. The rapid flick of his tongue is almost too much, and I can't stop myself from burying my fingers in his thick hair in an attempt to move his head to the other side.

He doesn't budge. Each suckle is deliberate, and when I find the strength to lift my head to look at him, he smiles around my nipple before letting it pop free. Wet from his saliva, the night air cools it, making goosebumps pebble the flesh even tighter.

"So beautiful," he murmurs. He licks a lazy line down my breast, nuzzles at the space between them, before taking my other nipple into his mouth. Covering the other with his hand, he doesn't let it go soft from lack of attention. Tweaking and tugging, I can't hold still beneath his ministrations. Even the squeezing of his palms seems deliberate in the attempt to make me crazy with want. He's succeeding.

When his fingers inch down to begin pulling at my skirt, I know where this is going to end up. I can feel how wet I am each time I lift my hips up in offering, in the dampness of my panties when he thrusts against me with only a little fabric separating us.

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I shouldn't want this. I promised not to do this. I promised not to fuck Beck.

It's not fucking though. Not what we're doing. This is so much more.

Reaching for him, I pull Beck's mouth back up to mine, and somewhere in my kiss is my apology to Tasha. I need Beck too badly to stop this.

His fingers move up my thigh, rubbing small circles on each inch as he exposes it. "I've wanted you, too, Lia." Beck admits his desire for me as his fingers reach my panties, and we're both holding our breath from the words and the line we're about to cross.

We stare at each other, and I nod in encouragement. Hotter than my own flesh, his fingertip parts my folds, entering me with a finger before either of us can change our minds. The pressure, the delicious stretch as a second one joins... I clench down around his fingers, grinning as he moans.

"You're so wet." Beck seems surprised. He withdraws his hand, holding it up between our faces. I watch him as his tongue licks his fingers clean. "So sweet."

That short moment with his fingers inside me is enough to have me bereft at the loss. "So empty. Fill me. Please," I beg.

My words spur him to action, and his pants and our underwear are on the floor beside us before I have a chance to miss his body weight on top of me. He's even larger than I imagined, and I reach for his cock.

He shakes his head, jaw tense. “Not now. It’s been so long since anyone else has touched me, and when I come, it will be inside you, not on your thighs and in your hand.” Beck grasps my leg that is between him and the back of the couch, lifting it so that it is bent up. Despite the dim glow of the heaters’ flames, I know Beck can see all of me clearly. The knowledge sets off butterflies in my stomach; I feel more exposed than I have with any other partner. I’ve never been this turned on.

Beck’s cock nudges me, and I lift my other leg up around his hip, raising my pelvis to his with the motion. We join together effortlessly. He pants against my neck, clinging to my hips with bruising fingers. I’m going to bear his marks for at least a few days.

I feel stretched, full, and it’s so much better than my daydreams. Then, he moves. The withdraw is torture, but the glide as he reseats himself in me is better than anything I’ve ever felt. The slam of his hips on mine, the force of his thrusts, all the muscles moving beneath my hands... He’s Adonis.

Sweat glistens on his shoulders, making my grip slip. I pull on him, hands going lower to feel the flexing muscles of his back as he thrusts into me.

We kiss, noses bumping and teeth catching on lips, and we’re both smiling when I open my eyes. Looking at him is torture. He’s so handsome.

Beck snaps his hips, and the motion hits something... I jerk in his arms, gasping at the electric pleasure.

“Oh? You liked that?” He does it again, holding himself up over me, thrusting so fast I can hardly move. Pressure is building, and I know somewhere in the back of my head that no one has ever done this for me. It’s always taken a mouth on my clit or at least fingers to get me off.

Beck’s mouth moves to my ear, and he tugs my earlobe before whispering. “I’m

going to make you come, Lia. I can feel your pussy throbbing around me.” I can feel it too. He’s hitting all the right spots on each thrust, and I can’t focus on where it feels the best. He’s somehow getting pressure on my clit even as his cock reaches my g-spot and something else that I’ve never felt before.

“So beautiful, Lia.” He kisses my forehead, and there’s a tenderness in the act that is at odds with the near manic thrusts.

Panting and moaning, I lose myself to the pleasure of it all. Moving together, faltering as sweat makes hands slip, and finding our rhythm again. “Beck!” I cry out his name as the spiraling pressure tightens in my stomach.

Tingles spread out, and I can’t get close enough to him as the knot goes deeper. It’s too much and not enough. I want... Another thrust, another conquering stretch as my body welcomes Beck in as deep as we can join, and I’m certain I’m screaming before I even register the orgasm.

Shaking, powerful, the pleasure crests, and I’m so tight around him that I can feel Beck’s cock swelling even more. When he grunts something that could be my name, I swear I could come again from the sound. Then I feel it: the pulsing heat of him coming inside me.

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I'm still trembling in aftershocks of my climax as he withdraws, and we both sigh at the sudden rush of cool air. He's lying on top of me, and both of us are struggling to breathe in the aftermath of such pleasure.

He turns his cheek, tickling my face with his hair, and rests his head on my chest. "Wow." I feel the breath more than hear the word, but I echo it. "This is probably the wrong time to remember we didn't use a condom."

"On the pill," I answer. I'm glad for it now, for the warmth of his come inside me. Proof that we made love.

"That's...Good," he says at last. His voice is sleepy, satiated. "I'll be thinking about this the whole time I'm away."

The weeks apart will give me a chance to talk to Tasha. Plus, it will allow me to find out what I feel for Beck when I'm not half-crazed with lust. I consider all the conversations we can have, what this could be like between us. "Maybe I can send you some photos so you don't forget me." I'm teasing, but the way he reacts makes me consider actually doing it.

Beck laughs and kisses me once more. "You're going to sext your boss?"

I ogle him, letting my gaze drag up and down Beck's body as much as it can in our position. "If your boss looked like mine, you'd sext him."

"I think I'll stick to my secretary."

Lia

It has been five weeks since we fucked on the rooftop couch. Five weeks since Beck dropped me off at my house while I wore his button-down to hide the fact he ruined my blouse. Five long weeks of using his shirt as a pillow and trying not to miss him. Try is the operative word.

I knew his being gone for more than a month was going to feel like forever. What I had not anticipated was that the company doesn't need me. Huntsworth Industries is not used to Beck having a secretary, so my tasks were minimal in his absence. I spent my first week alone, spinning around in my office chair as I waited for the phone to ring. Boredom had me venturing out on my breaks to meet other staff members and try to make friends.

When the second week arrived, I brought in a sketch pad and my design tools. The third, I spent on the phone making my own plans for having an art show. So, yes, I did rely on the fact that I'm the personal assistant to the CEO of Huntsworth Industries in order to secure a meeting with the gallery owner, but it was my art that actually clinched the deal. It is still an amazing sensation to have someone want to not only look at my art but be interested in hosting a show for me. These last two weeks, I've been daydreaming about my show and working on advertising it.

In my copious amount of free time at the office, I've been helping out the other executive level assistant. She is a widower in her early fifties, and is very sweet, but sort of clueless, when it comes to anything but the basics of technology. While it wasn't like the horror stories I've heard from my former classmates teaching their parents how to use a computer, Donna was unlikely to learn easier ways to do her work without me prodding her along. She has a daughter a few years older than me who went through that technophobic phase with her a while ago, saving me the

trouble. I showed Donna how to make doubled-sided copies without reloading the paper each time, that she could use a list-serve for her frequently emailed groups, as well as how to set up her online calendar to sync with the one used by the company in our email program.

Grateful for the help, Donna has been misguidedly trying to set me up with her son. He's a year younger than me, just graduated from college, and is working as a substitute teacher here in town. If not for Beck, I might have accepted just for a bit of fun. The pictures she keeps showing me have gone from being sort of cute to annoying after a few weeks, though. My lack of a concrete reason beyond not having time to date is not enough for Donna, and she's been pushing the issue. She really is like having a well-meaning but nosy mom at work. I traded in my lunch times with Donna for working out in the gym to avoid that messiness. Besides, I want to keep in shape with all the amazing food the cafeteria provides for employees.

I noticed on my first paycheck that money for my meals wasn't being deducted. Thinking it an obvious mistake, I called down to the kitchen and was told that while employees do have to pay for snacks and any extras, the basic meals are considered a part of the full-time benefits package. The tamale pie was going to go straight to my hips if I continued having it every Tuesday. I've resisted the cafeteria dessert bar with more toppings than a candy aisle, but it calls my name each time I walk by. My sweet tooth gets stronger each day and my resolve that much weaker.

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The fish fry on the menu for today is not my favorite, but the grilled salmon I know is Beck's. Chef had already checked twice if Beck was in yet and if he should send up food. Beck's itinerary had him returning yesterday and in the office today, but storms delayed his plane.

"Are you back yet?" I message Beck. We've been texting through most of his trip, and even shared a few late night calls. The last I heard from him was this morning—a short, apologetic sentence as they waited for clearance. I rescheduled his meetings for him, pushing them back to this afternoon, but now even that looks unlikely. Depending on when his plane arrives today, I doubt he'll have a chance to show up at the gallery either.

My phone rings, and I answer it, already smiling after seeing the number on the screen. "Hi, Beck."

"We're in the air now, so my connection is iffy, but I wanted you to know I'm safe and sound. Sorry I didn't text you earlier; I was in desperate need of some shut eye if I'm going to have a chance to make it to the gallery tonight." He punctuates his sentences in yawns, and I feel guilty about asking so much of him.

It is unrealistic of me to want him at my art show, but it was his urging that convinced me to try again. Having Beck believe in me, in my passions, makes me feel hopeful again. With him gone, I've channeled the desire I have for him, the emptiness with him gone, into my art. I hate to say that he inspires me; an artist should never have someone else as her muse, but my love for him has been an inspiration.

I want to impress Beck with my art, to show him that I can live up to the potential he sees in me. To do so has been expensive. All my money has gone into paying bills and saving up for this show. Paint, clay, metal working tools, and a new air compressor were not cheap, but the money I make at Huntsworth has opened doors to me I had not imagined in a long time.

Making money even has Jean being nicer. I've helped with groceries, picked up some of the chores around the house that Jean usually takes care of, and I even paid a bit extra as rent, despite my dad's protests. I get that her behavior is probably because she's into Beck and hopes I'll spill some details about him. That's the biggest reason I couldn't find the nerve to send him any nudes or even teasing photos, for quite a while. I can't chance Jean finding out about us.

Some days, we only had mundane "How was your day?" type exchanges. It really depended on how tired we were. When my dad and Jean were out late for a party, Beck wrapped up his work for the night and called me. We spent hours on a video call that evening, only ending the call after we both had come at least twice. It wasn't just about getting off, though. It felt like what a couple would do to stay together during an extended absence. I do wish I had photos of Beck on my phone for the lonely nights, but it's too risky to get caught.

"Are you wet for me, Lia? Just thinking about getting to see you has me hard." Beck's yawns have changed to a raspy whisper. "Can I show you how much I've missed you?"

I laugh into the phone. "Yes, I am, and maybe. My father and Tasha will be at the gallery. I don't know how great it would look if I disappear from my show, Beck."

"Maybe I could show you now. Go in my office, Lia, and lock the door."

I start to question him, not knowing what he's up to, but the sound of his zipper going

down is enough to silence me. “Oh, fuck, Lia,” he moans, making me run from my desk to his. “My hand does not feel anywhere nearly as good as your pussy. Are you in my office yet?”

“Yes.” His leather chair cradles me as I spread my legs.

“Touch yourself for me. I want to smell you in my office when I get in later. Where are you?” His whisper makes me even hotter, and I’m trying to picture how he’s hiding that gorgeous cock of his from view.

“Your chair.”

His answering groan is everything to me. “Fuck that’s hot. If I were there, Lia, I’d kneel under my desk and lick your pussy. Would you like that?”

I nod, my mouth going dry. “Yeah,” I manage to whimper. The phone is tucked between my ear and shoulder as I reach both hands down. “I’m so wet for you, Beck.”

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“Pretend your fingers are mine. I want you to put your phone on my desk, put me on speakerphone, and lean back in my chair. Fuck yourself, Lia. Put your feet up on the desk, too. I want to hear how wet you are as you fuck yourself. Those are my fingers doing it though. Can you feel me?” He doesn’t wait for a response. “That’s it. Pump them a little faster. There you go.”

I’m so wet that I have three fingers thrusting into me with nothing but pleasure spreading through me. And when he tells me to start pinching my clit, I don’t know how long I can make this last. “Beck!”

“No coming yet, Lia. Roll your clit around for me, tweaking it like you would if it were a nipple. That’s what I want to do to you. Mmmm...” His voice trails off, softer than the hissing slide of his hand and a squirting sound of lotion. “I can hear you fucking yourself for me, getting ready for me to fuck you. Lia. I can just picture you there in my chair, spread open and ready for my tongue, my hand, my cock. I want to give you all of them.”

I can’t stop myself from arching upward, barely holding back from coming. “Please!”

He laughs, a dark, lusty sound. “If only you were here with me, Lia...” His hand speeds up; I try to match his pace. “I want to give this all to you.”

I’m poised on the edge, tight and loose all at the same time. My fingers haven’t stopped, and I don’t know if I could now even if someone walked in on me.

“All for you, Lia. All—for—you,” he grunts out. “Come for me, Lia.”

I barely hold back from crying out his name.

He has no such restraint. “Oh, Lia! Oh, fuck!” Beck comes loudly, a gravely groan punctuated with wet slides of his fingers over his cock.

My body convulses one more time as I shudder through a mini second orgasm.

A chime sounds from somewhere on his end of the call, and Beck fumbles with his phone. “I have to go, Lia. The pilot put on the ‘no electronics’ light, and I should clean up, I think. I’ll see you soon.” The line fills with static before the call ends.

It couldn’t be soon enough. Having sex with Beck was the most magical experience of my life. I doubt anything can top that. We were perfect together, better than I had ever dreamed it could be, and I have dreamed about him a lot over the years. The only problem with it—other than him being Tasha’s father—is that it was my first day on the job, and I was already fucking the boss! How can he take me seriously after that? Beck admitted to not having sex in a long time; despite his declaration that he had wanted me, our sex and the phone sex could have just been relief. I really don’t want to think that way, but it’s hard to do otherwise. I’m worried he thinks we made a mistake, despite the continuing sweetness and flirting during his trip.

I couldn’t bear it if he rejected me now, so I think it will be easier to just avoid the issue altogether. If I go on as if it didn’t happen, we can continue working side by side and enjoy the memory of how good we were together. This company is too important to Beck for him to jeopardize his reputation with the board by sleeping with an employee. After the show tonight, I’ll try to talk to him about it.

On shaking legs, I make my way to Beck’s bathroom to wash my hands. There’s no hiding the wet marks on his chair, and I’m torn between wiping them off or leaving them for Beck. I’ll leave them; it’s not like I can hide the musky sweet smell in here anyway.

My desk phone starts ringing as I go back to my office, and I actually smile when I see it's my step-mom's extension. I'm still on an endorphin high from Beck's impromptu phone sex, and with my loan almost paid off to Dad, Jean's been on my case a lot less. We even had a nice brunch together last Sunday while my dad was out golfing with friends. "Huntsworth Industries, executive office. This is Lia speaking. How can I help you?" I answer. It doesn't hurt to keep in practice, even when I know who is on the other end of the line.

"Lia, it's Jean. Your dad is taking me out for lunch at that Italian place you like. Do you want to join us? Our treat."

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Despite how well Jean and I have been getting along the past month, I am cautious to tip the balance. Besides, I don't know if I can hide my post-orgasm glow from them. "No thanks. Finance dropped off papers for Beck this morning, and I want to get them in order for him. He should be back today or tomorrow. Thank you though; I appreciate the invitation." The thought of anything with red sauce turned my stomach anyway.

"Would you like us to bring you something back?" Jean's voice is way too sweet, and I know part of it is she wants an excuse to be up here, but their white pizza does sound good to me.

I try to match her tone, if not for her sake, for my father's. "If it's not too much trouble, Jean, their alfredo deep dish pizza would be amazing. Otherwise, I can just grab something downstairs or have it sent up."

She promises to bring back their personal size deep dish pizza and run it up on her way back to her office. "Maybe even an Italian soda? You like their grapefruit one, right?"

I agree and thank her before hanging up the phone. It's so weird being nice to her, not referring to her as the Step-Monster. I move over to the guest seating area and call Tasha to tell her about the lunch plans. Putting my feet up on the glass coffee table, I lean back to look out the windows and soak up a bit of the sunshine. It's been too many days since I last saw it.

"Hey, Lia. What's up?" Tasha is busy driving but assures me she's on her handsfree headset. She laughs as I tell her about Jean, and we joke about the research

department secretly working on personality switching. “I should mention that to my dad.” Tasha swears, and I hear a car’s horn blare repeatedly. “Mother fucker! That ass wipe tried to cut me off, and I almost missed my exit.” She swears like a trucker when driving, and my dad blamed Tasha for most of my bad language slip-ups during high school.

“Dad’s plane is landing soon. He said he was going to call and let you know.” Tasha and Beck have a ritual of her picking him up at the airport, spending time together to catch up on their weeks apart. It surprised me at first to find out that he didn’t pay to leave a car there or have one of the company drivers pick him up. He has always been an amazing father. “Oh, he did call,” I answer. It was quite the call...

I’d be lying if I said knowing he’s near doesn’t make my heart race. No matter my intention of trying to play it cool, I still want Beck. Thoughts of seeing him, of what our reunion will be like, fill me with butterflies. It’s a different sort of nausea than what I’ve felt with his absence. I haven’t been sick enough to throw up, but I just feel funky. Emotions are a bitch. It could be the change in eating habits catching up to me. The cafeteria at work makes sure I eat lunch, and often supper too if I don’t get out the door in time to ride home with Jean. Jess is obnoxious about standing in the doorway until he sees that I’ve opened my meal and taken a bite. It’s as if Beck made sure they’re taking care of me in his absence. Not that anyone would admit to that...

The stress of the show is doing awful things to me too. I’m relieved that it will be over tonight. The gallery has been great at promoting my show—even having me talk to the local radio station about what it’s like as a local artist who has come home to make art here. I did throw up then thanks to my nerves. I promised my dad I would go to the doctor next week if I wasn’t sleeping better and feeling back to my old self. He threatened to complain to Beck that I was working too hard, thinking that two dads could keep me in line.

“You are still planning on coming tonight, right?” I ask Tasha. Despite staying over

to keep her company often the past month, I know she requires constant reminders to get her there. “Chris is welcome, too.” I’ve met him a few times, and he is a nice guy. Tasha was right in thinking Chris isn’t exactly the type her father would want her dating, but I have faith that Beck would give him a chance. He wants his daughter to be happy, and anyone can see that Chris treats her well.

“Absolutely. I’ll be there when the doors open so I can make sure you don’t hide in the back corner until it’s all over. There’s my dad! I gotta help him load his luggage into the trunk. I’ll see you tonight. Love you lots!” The line goes dead before I can reply.

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I swipe over to my messages and send Beck a quick welcome home text before going back to my desk and trying to focus on my work. There is not much of it, but I want everything perfect for his return. All I can think about is how I felt in his arms, not about the copies I know I should be organizing and meeting minutes I should file in the proper folders for Beck. My personal checklist for the week mocks me from its corner on my desk. I marked everything off before ten, and now as the clock nears one, it begs for my attention to reassure myself I've done all I can for the show.

I wasn't this worried about my first public show at my own gallery, not even about my senior exhibit. Those were done with a sense of purpose and the excitement of "Look what I can do!" This one is proof that I haven't wasted years of my life: proof to myself, to my Dad and Jean, and to Beck. He believes in me, and I want to prove to him that his faith in me is warranted.

There is a soft chime as the elevator opens down the hall, and I realize just how quiet it is during lunch when no one else is on the floor. I listen for footsteps, and I hear heels clicking against the flooring, nearing my door. I buzz the entrance for Jean as she sweeps into the lobby with a cartoon villainess smile and sashay of her hips. She only needs a fur coat and cigarette holder to complete the look.

"Here's your pizza, Lia." She sets down the box on my desk with a slight wrinkle of her nose. The garlic smells amazing to me. "They were out of to-go cups for your soda; sorry. Your dad sends his love and a promise that he'll be back from work in time to make an appearance tonight." In her words is the unspoken declaration that she won't be there. I don't mind; in fact, I'm happy she won't have a chance to cast a shadow on my night. It's one more chance at perfection.

“Thanks, Jean. I appreciate it.” I invite her to sit down, but she is already headed for the door. “And, Jean, thank you for getting me this job.” It was Beck who hired me, who asked for me, but it doesn’t hurt to stay on my step-mom’s less bad side. I’m still not convinced she has a good side.

“Anytime, Lia. And maybe we can have lunch together sometime this week. I can bring my food up here if you need me to...”

My cheeks ache as I fake a smile, and I know I probably look ready to puke instead of actually agreeing, but I try. “I’ll let you know what my schedule is once Mr. Huntsworth is back in the office. Things will probably be pretty busy as he catches up.”

Speaking of the devil, Beck’s text tone sounds from my drawer, and it’s an effort not to reach for it immediately. I wait until I see Jean disappear into the elevator before grabbing my phone. “You can welcome me properly tonight.” His texted words are followed by a wink, and my stomach tightens with lust and worry. It’s not altogether an unpleasant sensation, but I don’t know if I can make it through my art show while trying not to make Beck and me part of the presentation. I don’t reply to his text; there aren’t simple words for all that I feel. He’s going to make indifference hard to maintain.

My skirt hem tickles the back of my knee with each step, and only the coffee I’m holding keeps me from reaching down to scratch for the seventh time since I came into the room. The gallery owner is playing hostess like she has waited her entire life for this show. Honestly, I didn’t know there were this many people in town who would come on a Thursday night. The place is packed.

I know at least three pieces have sold: two paintings and a metal shadow sculpture that is meant for being part of a light show. The promise to help the purchaser set it up was part of the purchase price. Even after the gallery’s cut on the sales, I should

clear enough to pay back the rest of Dad's loan. Within two months, I might even be out on my own again. In six, maybe I'll have enough to rent studio space. I know better than to over extend my resources this time. If I don't have at least three months' worth of studio rent in the bank, I can't consider the venture. Given how it turned out last time...

Besides, could I really leave Huntsworth Industries? Even just one day with Beck followed by five weeks of taking messages and keeping things organized left me not only with a pleasant bank account, but with a sense that I'm part of a place that makes a difference in the world. Beck has created a company that truly does good. As long as I can make art in my spare time, I can continue being his secretary.

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My feet are sore from my high heels by the time I finish my third round of mingling with guests and answering questions. Tasha is in the corner, face pinched in concern as she plays with her phone. Any time I've gotten near, she finds someone to go talk to. She says she has a lot to do for an upcoming tournament, and after all our years of friendship, I try to give her the benefit of the doubt. I don't think too much about it since I have so much to distract me.

Tomorrow will be all about Tasha. Despite her protests that everything is fine, I can tell she needs to talk. I just need to get her to open up to me.

"This all looks great, Lia." My dad squeezes my shoulder as he looks at a mixed media piece that goes from floor to ceiling. It was one I brought back with me from my studio and put back together here at the gallery. "I knew you were a good artist, but I guess I hadn't looked all that closely at anything you didn't have at home. I'm so proud of you, honey." I lean into his awkward hug. "Your mom would be proud, too."

My eyes prickle with tears, and I admonish him for making me cry. "Dad! You're going to ruin my makeup!" I shove my coffee into his hands and go over to where Tasha is guarding my purse. Despite having her eyes glued to her screen, she already has a tissue held outstretched.

"Thanks," I mutter. I wipe at the smudges of eyeliner. "How bad?"

Her lips curve upwards into a half-smile. "You look gorgeous. And, Lia, if that pink painting in the other room doesn't sell, I want it in my room." I lose her to her phone again. This time she takes a call. She whispers and turns away, and if not for the

sparkle in her eyes, I'd have assumed it was something bad. Tasha is shit at keeping secrets. That's the only reason I know that her behavior isn't leading up to some surprise party celebration of my show.

I return to where my father is chatting with one of his friends, and I see a huge bouquet of flowers come bobbing down the hallway. There are white roses and indigo lilies that are set off with the darkest greenery I've ever seen a florist use in an arrangement. It looks like something out of a dream garden. The flowers are lowered, and Beck grins at me from above them.

"Congratulations, Lia. You did it." He hands me the crystal vase and its flowers, leaning down to kiss me on the cheek. It's all very chaste, and I'm not sure if he's doing this because my father is there or because he is trying to put some distance between us. His face is blank but pleasant, the same one he gives any coworker. Beck smells so good, like his soap and cologne, but also just the scent that is him. My mouth waters as I breathe in that scent, and my mind replays the feeling of him on top of me, inside of me, and I whimper.

He smiles, and I know he heard me. His public persona fractures; hunger burns to life in his eyes, and I can feel the need stretching between us. Beck walks behind me, his fingers trailing over the top of my ass, and I don't need to look at him to know he's smirking as I lean back into his touch. His mask comes back up as he twists, all in the same smooth movement, greeting my father and his companions. It's easy to forget that they have been friends, almost by necessity thanks to Tasha and me, for over fifteen years.

I know I'm smiling like an idiot in love... love? I mull over the word as I take the flowers to an empty spot where hors d'oeuvres have already been finished and replenished a few times. Tasha is staring at me when I look up, and heat floods my cheeks at having been caught. She knows me too well to write off my giddiness as being happy about the flowers. I don't want her to know about Beck and me. She

wouldn't understand. I promised her... My heart aches at the duplicity of the act, is torn by knowing I shouldn't do it again. Not if I want a chance at keeping my best friend.

The colors of the floral arrangement remind me of something, and I snatch off a velveteen petal from a lily to carry its indigo beauty with me to gallery's front parlor. There, surrounding the shattered glass and mirrors forming a giant compound eye, are the same shades of night sky as the flowers. I tuck the petal into a gap between a gear and nail. If this piece doesn't sell, I will try to preserve the flowers and attach them somehow. For me, it will always be the piece that witnessed my first kiss with Beck.

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“That’s interesting.” A guy about my age is looking in the mirrors, reading the card posted beside the piece. If not for Beck, I could see myself being interested in this guy. He’s tall, well-built, and has the sort of jawline and sleepy eyes that always caught my attention during college. I explain to him about the recordings and show him how it works. “Are you the artist?” he asks.

“Yes, she is.” Beck is suddenly beside me, a shadow beyond my shoulder. “Lia is very talented.” He is gone just as quickly, but I can smell him long after the admirer has moved on to get a drink and chat with a gallery employee around my age. He was scared off by Beck, it seems. My feelings for him and my dedication to Tasha distract me, and it’s harder to focus on being truly present at the show.

Going back to the sculpture, I peer into the mirrors and straighten my blouse and skirt. I toy with one long curl that has escaped my updo, and I mentally paint a smile onto my face before making my muscles move to match the mental image. Fake it until you make it...

I don’t see Beck again at the show; I’m kept busy with making rounds to talk to prospective buyers and am led by my father to a journalist who is doing a review of my work for the newspaper. It’s been months since I felt a glimmer of hope in my art, and now I feel like a fucking rock star. Buoyant and joyful, I bounce from group to group until the last person leaves and the gallery owner has started to turn off lights. I’m disappointed that Beck didn’t find me to say goodbye before he left, but I know he was exhausted from traveling. At least I get to see him at work tomorrow.

“Lia, what are your thoughts on the show?” the owner asks.

“I think it went great. I know at least a few pieces sold.”

The woman laughs and shows me a stack of receipts. “I have seventeen sales slips here, Lia. You killed it tonight. Do you think you can have enough new pieces for next season’s lineup? We have a few weekend openings for a show. If you want to come in on Monday, we can compare schedules and settle up on what we owe you for the pieces.”

Agreeing, I dance past my portraits and sculptures on my way out the door. Tasha is waiting on me outside and is the first to hear the great news. “They want me back in four months for another show! I sold all but like four pieces!”

Excited for me, Tasha decides we need to celebrate. At least that’s her excuse for not going home yet. Chris is at a party, and after making sure it’s okay for us to crash, we head north. As nice as it is to just lean back into her heated seats and let Tasha drive, I miss having my own car. I miss not needing to borrow one or worry about transportation. Most of all, I miss the sensation of the night air blowing through my hair.

“You are going to look like a troll doll or like you’re doing the walk of shame if you keep that up, Lia. I forgot you are part dog with your need to stick your head out the window on the freeway,” Tasha teases. I can hear in her voice that she’s rolling her eyes at me. I don’t mind. It’s such a gorgeous night, and my heart is light with how well things are turning out.

My fingers smooth my hair back into the clip, and I sing along to the radio with Tasha. It’s easy to forget my worries when I’m with her.

We’re both laughing and more like the us we were before I went to art school. Walking into the stranger’s house glued at the hip, I feel nothing but joy even as I’m abandoned when she goes to find Chris. There are photographs on the wall and tons

of symbols, and it takes a while for me to realize we are at a frat house. I avoided them during my years in college, and I'm not thrilled to be at this one now, but to see Tasha so happy, I can deal with almost anything. I perch on the arm of the couch beside them as she sits in Chris's lap, and we're chatting about the show, about life... It's a near perfect ending to the day.

The music changes from something techno to something better for dancing, and Tasha is up and grabbing my hands before I even recognize the song. "Let's dance, Lia!" Her moods are more up and down than mine!

I barely have a chance to close my water bottle before we find our way on to the dance floor. My skirt isn't really meant for this, and when I spin, I know I'm showing more thigh than I intend. It's so easy to lose myself in the beat when Tasha is laughing in front of me.

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Chris joins us, arms around Tasha, as the music becomes something a bit more intimate. The three of us dance, and they're almost grinding. I back up a bit, feeling like a third wheel for the first time since arriving. Looking around for a dance partner or a way to escape, I catch the eye of the guy I met earlier at the gallery. He lifts his chin and winks, draining a beer in one chug before coming over.

"I'm Gary. You're the art girl." He slides around me, hips and shoulders swaying with the music. It's a move meant more for a club than a house party, but I'm not looking for someone who can do more than entertain me while I'm here.

"Lia," I half-yell into his ear so I can be heard.

We dance, and despite how the other couples on the floor are dancing, I try to keep a bit of distance between us. He grabs onto my hips a few times, and each time I spin away. I'm not interested in what he's offering. I don't want to be rude and make a scene, but I try to make my intentions clear. I move away again, bumping into the wall as he comes nearer.

"Come on, baby." Gary reaches for the edge of my skirt and rubs the inside of my thigh. I panic, heart racing, as I try to find an escape. "We should celebrate you doing that art thing. There's a free bedroom upstairs." I don't want to go anywhere with Gary, but he is drunk enough that he thinks I'm merely playing hard to get. "I can show you the kind of art I make, Lia. I bet I can do all sorts of things with my tongue you've never experienced." He reeks of beer, and I freeze as his hand moves up higher.

"The lady has made it clear you aren't wanted." We both turn at the voice, and I see

Beck's fist come at Gary's face before he does. It connects with a snap, making Gary collapse in a heap. I'm in too much shock to process what is happening, as I'm lead outside. It's Beck, though, and I trust him to keep me safe.

Tasha follows us outside, upset at her father's disruption of the party. "That guy was pawing at Lia even after she told him 'no,'" he says. "If you'd kept your phone on as promised, Tasha Marie, I wouldn't have had to track you down to find the two of you. Be home by one; I'll get Lia home. We can talk then." Beck is calm despite the rage in his eyes, and his hand is a vice around my wrist. "You might want to get that dipshit some ice."

I scurry to keep up with Beck's long stride, and he not only opens the truck door for me, he lifts me up into the truck and reaches in to buckle the seatbelt for me. "Did he hurt you?" Beck's hands coast over my skin without really touching. It's maddening.

Shaking my head, I tell him I'm okay. I am okay. I'm quivering, but it's mostly from the adrenaline rush of watching Beck punch someone. He climbs in on his side and pulls away from the curb, barely looking at the road as he reassures himself that I'm fine.

My voice is soft, almost reverent, when I can speak. "You protected me."

Beck's hand is warm as he wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me a bit closer in the cab of his pickup. "I always will." The promise in his words has me near tears.

"Lia, I haven't stopped thinking about you, about us. Memories of our night on the roof drove me crazy the entire time I was away. Work called while I was at the gallery, and it had to be dealt with. I was on the phone in my car when you and Tasha left. I had to talk to you, and so I followed you to the party. I wasn't going to interfere with you and that guy, not if it looked like you wanted him. When he started forcing

you, however..." Beck trails off, hands tensing on the wheel. "I couldn't stop myself, Lia." His fingers move to the back of my neck, kneading while he drives. I don't know how he can focus on doing both so well. "I promised to show you how much I missed you. That kiss on your cheek was nowhere near enough. And when I saw you with that boy... I wanted to show him that you're mine."

Stumbling over the words, I explain how I was only dancing. "And what if Tasha asks why you were there, why you hit that guy?" Will she know about us? Will there be repercussions at work? I like my job too much to cause trouble for him, for us, there. And there is my father to worry about... Beck lets me ramble for the entire drive, and he pulls off into the parking lot of the park I'd escaped to the day of our garage kiss.

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“Lia.” He whispers my name, stopping my tirade. “You are better at putting your feelings into art instead of words; you always have been.” The hand he had kept on the steering wheel reaches for my chin, turning me to face him. “My feelings are better shown in actions. Let me show you how I feel.” He pulls me to him, seatbelts straining as our lips meet.

It’s just like before: need blossoms in each stroke of his mouth on mine, and I can’t get close enough. I inhale as he exhales, and vice versa, and I’m dizzy when we finally part to catch our breath. Cold after sharing like that, my lungs burn with the effect. Forehead to forehead, we pant before tilting our heads to claim one another in a second kiss.

My hands move to his hair, and his slide down to my waist before blindly pawing at the seatbelt until the catch releases. I’m in his arms, and if not for the center console between the seats, I’d probably be in his lap. If I end up there, we’ll end up with the seat down flat and doing way more than making out in the truck. Beck’s hands slide up and under my shirt, and I am so close to trying to find a way to sneak him home and into my room. My room that is past my father’s, where he’s likely waiting up for me...

I break away from the kiss. We can’t get caught. Police sometimes patrol this park, and my dad likes to jog down this street. He would recognize Beck’s truck... All the questions I’ll have, the fighting. I know exactly what my dad will say. How Beck is too old for me, how I’m too young to be doing this.

“Do you want me as badly as I want you, Lia?” Beck can barely get out the words between gasping breaths, and he’s covering his crotch with his hands, hiding his

erection or adjusting it. It's hard to tell in the darkness.

I can't reply. I'm so torn on what the right thing to do is. I want him. No; I need him, but it's so difficult to know if what we're doing is right. It feels right.

"It's clear that you want me. I can tell in your kiss, by the way you look at me, the trust you have in me." Beck's breath fans out over my forehead in a warm puff before he kisses the skin between my brows, my nose, and then my lips. He pulls back enough to look at the house with its porch light on. "You are an adult—a gorgeous, grown woman, who drives me so crazy with want and lust that I could fuck you right here on the hood of my truck- and what the hell can anyone do to stop us?"

His hands grasp mine and pull them to his lap where I can feel his hard-on. "This is what just being near you does to me. It's the Lia effect. If I so much as think about you, and I'm so hard it feels like my balls could burst. Every night I was away I would take a shower and stroke myself as I thought about us. I saved a screenshot of you as you finger fucked yourself while talking to me, and I jacked off a few times looking at your face as you came. I want to make love to you in my bed and wake up with your hair in my face and an arm thrown across my chest. I want to see where this can go. Do you want that? Your dad can't stop us. You are an adult, Lia."

I'm turned on, and uneasy about all of this. Getting caught by my dad is terror-inducing, even as an adult. I am still living beneath his roof... It's not so much about dad, however, and more about Tasha. I start to try and explain it to Beck, about my promise to Tasha, and he silences me with a kiss.

"I want you. You want me. If you tell me that you don't want me for your own sake, not for anyone else's, I'll believe you and let this go."

His cock is tenting his pants, and I find myself stroking it through the fabric despite knowing I shouldn't tease. "I want you. Want this." I motion between us as I speak.

Beck nods and cups the back of my head before kissing me softly. “Then nothing is going to get between us.”

“There’s clothing between us,” I tease.

“Let me fix that.” Beck is out of the truck and around to my door in the time it takes me to shimmy out of my panties and kick them off onto the floorboard. “Come here.” He grabs me around the waist and carries me to the front of his truck, and leans me against the hood. “I’d never fucked outside before you. You’re getting all sorts of firsts out of me, Lia.”

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The merry-go-round creaks in the night breeze, a ghostly melody in counterpoint to the ragged breaths we share. “I was at this park after our kiss in the garage. This is where I ran to.”

He nods and leans in for a kiss. “I know,” Beck whispers along my cheek. The scrape of his teeth on my earlobe makes everything tighten in me, and he laughs as my legs wrap around his hips, pulling him closer. “This was always your place when you wanted to think. I found you asleep on that bench when you were told about your mom’s cancer being terminal. I picked you up, not like this,” he whispers, “and carried you home.”

“I was lighter then.”

“But you did not have these fabulous tits or this delicious pussy then.” Beck’s hands squeeze my breasts, making them pop up out of my dress’s low neckline. He growls, “You’re perfect,” against my stomach as he pushes me flat, and I’m not given a chance to ask what he’s doing before his mouth is on me.

Mouth and fingers move in tandem, seeking my pleasure. Hard and fast, he takes me to the edge twice before I beg him to let me come. His mouth covers my clit, tongue and lips teasing me as two fingers inside me become three. It’s too much, and the pressure builds until I’m biting my own hand to keep from crying out.

Seeking fingers work up my body to my breast, pinching until I can’t hold back the moans. My nipples are so hard they ache in the night air, and his hand is warm despite the delicious torment of each twist. He’s a musician in this, playing my body like an instrument.

When I come, it's almost a relief when the pleasure ebbs. I'm still shaking when he moves up and into me. If his fingers felt good inside me, they're nothing compared to his cock.

"Fuck, how I missed this, being inside you." He thrusts, pulling me down the truck's hood until he's so deep inside me that I feel the stretch everywhere.

Beck makes good on his promise to make sure I know how much he missed me. His pants are still on, and my skirt is just hiked up out of his way, but it adds to the moment. We can't get enough of each other. The night birds bear witness to our frenzied passion, listening as I try to stifle my groans.

"I missed you, too," I say between his thrusts.

The pleasure is dizzying, and when he finally trembles on top of me, coming with a sigh, I almost wish I had the energy to climax again. I hate that we have to rush, but I am getting cold on the truck despite the warmth still radiating through the hood. "Can we get back in the truck? I'm freezing."

We stumble back to our seats, and I manage to get my underwear back on. "I'm touched that you're worried about my upholstery, Lia." He's still trying to fix his belt as he restarts the engine, and the fumbling is so cute that I laugh until a yawn interrupts me. "Let's get you home, Lia. You've had a big night."

I protest that he had a longer day and he stops me with a soft kiss. "Totally worth it."

The drive to my home is filled with soft touches and shy smiles. We're still not sure how to interact in ways that doesn't involve fucking. I don't know if we should even do that, but Beck is impossible to resist—even if I wanted to, which I don't. He makes me feel like a princess, a desirable princess. The thought of going into the house and leaving his side makes my heart ache.

“I should go in.” I don’t mean the words, and kissing him in front of my house is dangerous and exciting. It would only take my dad or Jean one glance outside, and we’d be discovered. Glancing at the window, I try to remember if that light was on when we first pulled up...

We kiss again, and keep at it until my lips feel swollen and it’s hard to think about anything but the desire to go home with Beck and sleep in his bed.

“If you kiss me like that again, you’ll never get inside,” he groans. “For now, though, you should probably get your amazing ass to bed. We both have to be to work tomorrow for the Friday morning meeting, and if I don’t let you go now, we’re going to end up late to work because we stay up fucking all night. I really am jet-lagged, too,” he admits.

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I open my door and stumble out. “Text me when you get home?” It sounds needy, but I want to make sure he gets home safely.

Beck smiles and blows me a kiss. “Anything you want. See you in the morning, Lia.”

I make it across the yard and into the house, glad that my dad and Jean are in the den in the back of the house instead of the living room up front. Both are wrapped up in a television show and eating popcorn, not noticing me. My stomach churns at the smell, and my mouth salivates as I try to squeak out the words that I’m home. I run through the house to the bathroom, and I fall to my knees as the appetizers I’d nibbled on at the gallery all come rushing up.

Sweat beads up on my face as I heave, and I flush the toilet before crawling to the sink. I’m glad I keep the bathrooms clean as part of my chores. I don’t even bother standing up as I reach for a paper cup of water and grab a hand towel from the stack beneath the sink. The dizziness I felt earlier has gotten worse with my vomiting. Panic sets in as my stomach protests even the smallest sip of water. Everything tastes like the awful smell of microwave popcorn.

The signs add up, and I try not to think of what they could mean. It was seven weeks since my last period. Pills are not one hundred percent effective, I know. Panicking, I quickly wash my face and then slip into the kitchen. I leave Dad and Jean a note that I am running out for just a few minutes, grab Dad’s keys, and take his car.

The pharmacy is two miles away, and I’m in a fog as I stumble up and down the aisles until I find what I’m looking for. I head for the bathroom as soon as the cashier hands me my receipt. I can’t wait to get home. I need to know now. Dizzy and

emotionally exhausted, I can hardly focus on the test, fumbling with the cap as I open it.

I follow the instructions and continue to sit there on the toilet as the test strip color blooms into view. First one line in the control box to let me know it's working, almost cranberry in the overhead light. Then, even as I'm praying to be wrong, a second line darkens.

I'm pregnant.

If my stomach weren't empty already, I would probably throw up again.

My hands shake as the panic sets in. How can I go to work and see Beck again, knowing I'm pregnant? I told him I was on the pill. He trusted me. He'll think I did this on purpose. He'll hate me.

I barely make it to my desk on time, and I can see by the lights on that Beck is already at work. Sleep eluded me except for a few fitful hours, and I don't know how to act around him today. Do I tell him? Do I keep it secret for now and figure out what to do? I just don't know. There are so many things to worry about. I couldn't take care of a gallery on my own; how will I take care of myself and a baby?

Jess, one of the kitchen staff, wheels a cart out of Beck's office. "Good morning, lovely Lia. I hear your show was amazing." He doesn't wait for a response before going to the other side of the lobby where a few chairs and a couch are mostly there for effect. In my five weeks here, we have yet to have anyone but me sit on them. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Boss man has some meetings up here this morning and wants me to have a full coffee bar setup out here.

"There are already pastries and stuff on the table in back. I'm sure he won't mind if you help yourself to a couple."

Hearing that I've arrived, Beck calls me from his office. "Morning, Lia. Can you come join me in here?" He sounds way too chipper for the morning, like he's a few pots of coffee into his day already. I hate to ruin that for him.

I drop my bag in my chair, take a deep breath, and walk into his office. Beck is in a black jacket and turquoise button-down, and he has his head turned to the side, looking over at the door to the roof. No... Looking at my art. My image is reflected to me in the mirrors of the piece I made in his garage.

He's smiling as if he won the lottery. "The gallery delivered it this morning. I had to have it, Lia. I needed this piece of you and me."

The words pierce my fragile shell, and the tears come rushing out of my eyes. I crumple to the floor in pained tears. He's going to hate me. Why did he have to say that about wanting a piece of him and me? I have that inside me...

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Beck kneels in front of me and gathers me into his arms. “What did I say? Did I do something? What’s wrong?” He’s so worried about me, and I start crying even harder.

“Everything—is—wrong—” I sob out the words. “You’ll hate me, Beck. I’ve ruined everything!”

“I hate myself for it. Everything is over. I’m so sorry!” I bury my face in his jacket, crying.

He pushes me back gently, and I can’t bring myself to meet his eyes. His hands with their long fingers cup my cheeks. “Lia, I want you to tell me what happened.” He’s calm, scarily so. “I can’t make things better if you don’t talk to me.” His thumbs move across my cheeks, gently massaging the curve of my cheek bone on each side.

My lashes are matted with tears as I try to look at him. I want one last look in his eyes before I tell him how fucked up I’ve made things. “I’m so sorry, Beck. I’m pregnant. I’m having your baby.”

He freezes, going stiff. I’m sure he’s about to yell, maybe even fire me. He’ll panic the way he did when Tasha broke her arm riding bikes when we were little. He’ll—

Beck’s arms sweep me into a hug, and his nose rubs the side of my face as he nuzzles me into position to accept his kiss. Dazed, I let him kiss me deeply, hanging onto him as I try to calm my tears.

“You’ve ruined nothing.” His lips are gentle this time, kissing away my tears. “Our

lives aren't over; we're just beginning." Beck moves a hand down to my stomach and rests it there. "To be a little crass, I thought your breasts looked bigger last night," he teases.

We both hear the door lock unlatch and separate quickly. I wipe at the lingering tears as someone knocks on the doorframe to the office. Jean busts in, almost catching us in our embrace. "What's going on?" she says suspiciously, looking between us. Her mouth is puckered as if she just bit into a lemon.

I stand up and go over by my sculpture, using it as an excuse to try and catch my breath. I examine how it was hung as Beck coldly asks Jean what she needs. He's angry that she trailed after Jess into the office instead of following protocol and waiting to be buzzed in. "You know better!" he snaps.

"I just needed these signed. The company party is next weekend, and we need this taken care of before then." Apparently, the division head of Research and Development is being honored for his contributions. "I really didn't think it would be a big deal. I couldn't see Lia at her desk from the door, and I didn't want to make you have to get up. Sorry, Beck."

Jean is wary as she watches me; I can see her in the mirror's reflection. I hate the way she's leaning over his desk as her eyes are searching for any reaction on my part. I deny her the satisfaction.

I busy myself with the sculpture until she leaves and we hear Jess's cart go out the door too. Sighing, I sit down on the edge of the desk. I cover my face with my hands and groan out my frustration. "That was just a taste of what we're going to go through, Beck. How can we go through this?" All my worries come spilling out. "How can I tell my parents that I'm pregnant? How can I tell Tasha that I'm having your baby?"

His arms go around me, and he pulls me down into his lap. “Shh.” Beck kisses the side of my head and lightly swings us side to side in the chair. “We’ll figure it out, love. Don’t stress too hard.” His hand slides down my back, drawing me even closer to him, and then moves to my stomach, rubbing my belly. “You’ve got a baby in you now—my baby. We can’t have you making yourself sick with worry. Let’s take things one day at a time, Lia.”

I let him soothe me, though I think it’s as much for his own sake as mine. There’s excitement in his voice, gentle and warm, as he talks about the baby. I can practically hear all the plans going into motion inside his brain.

“Why don’t you take the rest of today off, Lia? I’m just going to be here in meetings. You did such a fantastic job while I was away, and everything is in order. You know the garage code still, right?” When I nod, Beck grasps my hand and brings it to his lips in a gentle kiss across my knuckles. “Good. Go take a shower, rest in my bed or a guest bed. Watch television or soak in the tub... Do whatever you want that will make you feel a bit calmer. Tasha was out already when I left this morning; breakfast plans or something. She should be home by lunch, though. If you want to wait to tell her until I’m home, I’ll do it.”

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Beck reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out a single car key. “This is to one of the fleet cars. It’s in parking spot twenty-three, the one right by the door into the garage off our stairwell. Just bring it back Monday, okay?”

I let myself into the garage once I arrive at Beck and Tasha’s house, and I’m surprised to see Tasha’s car parked in her spot. She wasn’t supposed to be home yet. Bile rises in my throat, sour and acrid as I swallow it back down. If I don’t do this now, I won’t be able to. I’ll chicken out. I’m going to tell her that not only did I sleep with her dad, that I’m pregnant.

I kick off my shoes in the mud room, hang up the keys on the little hook beside the door, and set off to find Tasha. This has been like a second home to me since childhood; I wander through it as I look for her. She’s not on the main level or up in her bedroom. I’m about to go outside when I hear the faint thump of music from the basement. Taking the back stairs, I go down to the recreation room with its pool table and other games. I find her curled up on the oversized black leather couch.

“Lia?”

I plan to tell her, all the potential combinations of possibly right or wrong words spinning through my mind. “Hey, Tasha.”

She’s surrounded by tissues; the end table is littered with them. Tasha is crying now as hard as I was earlier, and my heart sinks. Beck must have told her. She has to know. I go to her, not knowing what else to do, and my eyes burn with my own tears. I hate that I’ve betrayed her trust and caused her this pain.

“Do you remember a little over a month ago, Lia?” she asks.

I nod, kneeling in front of the couch. The words are on the tip of my tongue. I can admit to breaking my promise, even if it breaks her heart. It’ll take time, but I will fight to keep her friendship through this. “I remember.” The words gag me to speak.

“Chris and I hooked up that weekend. Like we planned. But the condom broke,” she squeaks out. “I thought it would be okay. He pulled out right away. I’m pregnant!” Tasha is shaking with the force of her sobs, and launches herself into my arms. Distraught, I pet her hair and comfort her as best as I can. I can’t tell her what’s going on with me and Beck, not with her like this.

I murmur that we’ll figure things out, whispering all the things her father had said to me, just an hour before, to calm me down. She’s so scared about Beck being pissed when he finds out. I have no doubt that he will at least be disappointed, but I hope he won’t take it out on her.

It’s unintentionally funny how things have worked out for Tasha and me. Life is fucking sick.

5

Beck

I’m going to be a father. “I’m going to be a father, again.” I repeat the words to my truck’s rearview mirror, still disbelieving them. It’s not that I think Lia is lying, or even that she did this purposely, I just can’t believe we’re having a baby. My baby is growing inside her. If that isn’t a sign that we should be together, I don’t know what is.

Despite traffic being minimal, I can’t get home fast enough. I have to talk to Lia

more, figure out when we can get her into a doctor for a checkup... Is she on vitamins? I need to get her some prenatal vitamins, just in case. I'm going to make sure she and the baby are taken care of as well as they can be. They deserve no less from me.

I swerve into the right lane and quickly take the exit, glad no police are around to ticket me for reckless driving. The fine would be worth it right now, though. She's going to have my baby! Images flood my mind of her getting round with the baby as it grows, and how I'll be able to feel the little one moving inside her in a few months. It's such a magical time, and even though it's been more than twenty years since I last went through this, I remember.

I remember the first time Tasha kicked hard enough for me to feel through Carrie's stomach. The first time I held my baby...

Will we have a girl? A boy? Twins? So many questions flood my mind, and I'm practically vibrating with my excitement as I pull into the pharmacy and park my truck. I always wanted more than one child, and while this is not how I expected that to occur, I'm on cloud nine. The engine is still purring to a stop when I jump out and slam the door. I couldn't hide the skip in my step if I tried, so I let the buoyancy I feel carry me to the store and down to the reproductive health aisle.

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There are a thousand and one types of tests, lubricants, and condoms, but no vitamins. You'd think they would keep everything in a useful area. I check over the shelves again and grab a bottle of warming lube while I'm there. It could be fun to put to use.

"Can I help you, sir?" A teenaged boy looks up from his squatted position on the floor while stocking shelves. He points me in the direction of the prenatal vitamins when asked, and barely gives me a second glance as I thank him. He's likely used to far odder requests.

The designated shelf has multiple brands of vitamins, and I grab three. The sour gummy vitamins are labeled with a giant red star marking them as something new to the store. If nothing else, I can return what Lia doesn't want. Vitamins obtained, I go to the baby aisle and start searching. It's early; she can't even be a full two months along, but I have to buy something. Our baby needs a present. Lia needs to know just how happy I am.

Maybe I should be worried about how Tasha will react to the news. Fuck, I should probably be worried about how Paul and Jean are going to take it... I have time to think about that later. Right now, I'm obsessed with making sure Lia is okay and understands that I'm excited to begin this new chapter in our lives.

A small tiger attached to a rattle sits lonely on a shelf, pale green and orange in its gender-neutral colors. Surrounded by an ocean of pink and blue, it begs to join my household. It will be perfect. Choosing a toy was easy; the card will be far harder. Picking out cards has never been my forte. The glitter-coated ones are instantly dismissed as options. I don't want that crap all over the office, and I'm going to surprise Lia with these gifts at work.

Settling on one with a silhouette of a pregnant woman, I start thinking of all the words I could write in it. Do I use the word love yet? Would she think I was just saying it because she's knocked up?

In truth, I was feeling more than just lust and affection for her before we tumbled onto the couch and slept together. I could not have bedded her with just carnal desires driving me forward. She's worth so much more than that to me.

Yes, I can use the word love—at least in my head. I will wait a while before saying it aloud to Lia. She is the type who would be spooked, and she's already so overwhelmed.

I pay for my purchases, tapping my foot against the grimy tile while the cashier bags them and prints the receipt. "Thank you!" I grab it from her outstretched fingers before she can begin her spiel about how I should be healthy or whatever the hell she's paid to say, and sprint for my car.

The evergreens marking my driveway were planted when Tasha was born. What would we plant for this baby? Lia has to know that I will want her and the baby here. She can't be under the stress of worrying about rent or how her father will react to this news. I want to protect her, keep her safe, care for our baby before and after it's finished growing inside of her. I can't lose her. I'm hers, and she is mine. I'll fight for her if that's what it takes. I hope it will be easy, though. We've both earned it.

A car parked in the driveway emerges in my view as I round the bend, and my fingers fumble in the darkness for the garage opener on my visor. The car is the one I loaned Lia. I did not expect her here; she must have lost track of time. My pulse quickens, breath coming faster too as I think of getting to see her again. It probably makes me a caveman to be hard over having gotten Lia pregnant, but I feel like the king of the world.

My dick throbs with each heartbeat, and I ache by the time I reach the house. “Tasha? Lia?” I call out for both women while passing into the kitchen and dining room, and I drop my purchases off in my study before searching in earnest. Running up the circular stairwell to the bedrooms, I pause at the top, listening for any voices. It’s too early for them to be asleep.

Tasha’s door is open, meaning she hasn’t been in it since the housekeeper went through this afternoon to wash windows and vacuum. Maybe they’re outside?

Just in case, I slip into my bedroom and check the private, attached bath. I had invited Lia to make herself feel at home. The carpet is unmarred except by my own footprints, and I make a second path of tracks as I go back down the hall. Peeking over the balcony, I notice that the lights are still off out back; no one would be swimming in the dark.

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As a last resort, I trudge down to the basement. I hate the game room and at-home theatre Tasha had begged for during high school. Given how little we use them, it's been a waste of resources. We could have rented out the cinema a few times instead of having all this AV equipment installed.

Music is thumping through the speakers, barely audible from outside the room, and I step in, trying to focus in the dimly lit space. The women—my girls—are curled up around each other in a nest of cushions and pillows on the floor. My heart warms at the sight. It's been years since they've done this, and I'm hopeful that their friendship will endure the news.

I sneak in, tiptoeing in a way I haven't done since Tasha was a toddler. Fuck! I'll have to relearn how to move silently on the floors. Sneaking out of the nursery after putting our baby down... If either were awake to see my smile, I know they would tease me mercilessly, and I'd have a hard time avoiding spilling the news to Tasha. Grabbing a large blanket from the closet, I gently cover the women, tucking the plush fabric around them.

“Good night,” I whisper with naught but the slightest breath. “I love you.” Returning upstairs, I make myself a sandwich from leftovers in the fridge and go into my study. My mind is spinning with all the things I want to do before the baby arrives, but all I can manage to do is stare at the ceiling and grin. I'm going to be a father!

I give up on trying to calm my mind at eleven. There's no way I can sleep with the news that I'm going to be a father bouncing through my head anytime I close my eyes. When I think about that, I think about how Lia ended up that way, and then my dick gets hard as a fucking rock... again.

My hard-on has been leaking, begging for me to go wake Lia, despite my attempts to ignore it. I palm it, closing my eyes at the sensation. So hot and hard, my fingers can barely wrap around it at this point. I want Lia.

I can't wake her up, not because I've got a boner and want to have her help me fix the issue...

Masturbation doesn't even feel as good anymore, not without her involvement. The night we used my videoconferencing app, and I watched her fuck herself with her favorite toy might go down as the best thing I've ever seen. And when I called her at work and dirty talked her until she came... I want to do that again, but with me able to watch her.

"Not helping," I whine to myself. Thrusting through my grip, I quickly let go and get out of bed. Just jacking off isn't going to do the trick.

The house is silent as I sneak out to the back deck in just a towel with my tablet under my arm. I set both on the side of the hot tub as I climb in. The built-in lounge chair cradles me, and I let the heat melt away some of my tension.

I pull up the screenshots I'd grabbed of me and Lia, setting them to shuffle through a slideshow on repeat. Somewhere around the fifth picture, with her gorgeous tits taking up most of my screen, my hands drift back to my cock. I press my palms on both sides of my shaft, pretending I'm sliding between those mounds. My fingertips tease the head, and my eyes just start to close when I realize I won't be able to see her if they do.

When my eyes refocus on the screen, it's to the image of Lia right after she kicked off her bedsheet and showed me her pussy. I hate knowing she's like a two-minute walk through the house from me, and I could have her sitting on my face for me to taste that gorgeous cunt of hers.

“She needs her rest,” I tell myself. It doesn’t help the need I feel coursing through my veins.

My hand slides down my shaft, twisting at the head of my cock. I can’t wait until I can rub my dick against her, teasing us both before I thrust it deep inside where I belong. I want to make her beg for me to fuck her.

I look at the screen, seeing Lia’s body arched as she came for me. The small still picture of me in the corner shows my come dribbling over my fist as I reach to click the screenshot button.

“Shit!” I thrust upwards with the burst of pleasure, my hands covering my dick as the come shoots out of me. I close my fingers into fists and wipe my hands on the towel beside me.

I lay there in the dark, just breathing, as the images continue to cycle. Long after the hot tub’s jets have stopped, I finally climb out and return to my bed, alone. Alone for not much longer, I hope.

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Lia was gone when I came down from my bedroom the following morning, not that I was surprised. Her lack of response to texts over the weekend, however, did surprise me. I knew she wouldn't stay long, even if I did manage to wake up before she could sneak out. Lia doesn't have clothes at my home, and Lia and Tasha don't have the same sense of style. Even with it being a weekend, Lia likes to be up and dressed, not lounging in the prior day's clothing. Tasha is flashy and always ready for a party. Lia is... Lia. She can go from painting in her pajamas to a little cocktail dress with heels effortlessly, but it's modest skirts and oversized blouses that hide her figure which seem to dominate her wardrobe. Given how trim she is, I wonder how long it will take for the pregnancy to show.

Her tits have gotten bigger. Already generous to begin with, the soft flesh strained the neckline of her outfit at the gallery. Even while I talked to my friends and pretended I wasn't watching Lia, I had toyed with the idea of sneaking into the bathroom and having Lia kneel so that I could slide my cock into the valley between her breasts and fuck them until I came all over her chest.

We weren't given the chance then, and our tryst at the park was so sudden I didn't think of anything but being inside her, but nothing could stop us from doing that in the bathroom of my office. All I need to do is set the manual lock on the door, and Lia and I will have all the privacy we could want... What I want now is to fuck her senseless again, either up on the rooftop couch or on my desk. Maybe even the shower.

I make a mental note to get a non-slip liner for the shower. It was only meant for me to use when I couldn't get home after a trip to the gym, but that doesn't mean I can't use it for more now. I am the boss.

The light panel on my phone brightens in time with the chime of Lia entering our office. I picture how she might look when she sees the card and toy on her desk along with the vitamins. Her back is to me, denying me a glimpse of her reaction, but I can be patient. I wait for her to turn around.

Waiting.

Waiting.

More waiting. I give her two minutes to say something, anything, but she refuses to acknowledge the gifts. It's been more than forty-eight hours since I've heard a word from her, and worry creeps up my spine.

Humming, her computer starts up, and Lia bends over with a sigh. Her skirt is halfway to her knees when she reaches for something on the floor, and I jump up from my desk to get whatever it is. "I'm fine, Beck. I've got it." She stands up with her fingers wrapped around a pencil. "Thanks, though," she adds icily. It's not the warm reception I anticipated. The gifts are barely visible from inside the drawer where Lia stashes her purse and phone.

"Are you okay?" Thinking she might just be feeling ill, I give her a bit of space when she nods and steps back. "I have a meeting in ten minutes, but I thought we could talk a bit after." I reach for her but get nothing but a cold shoulder in return. This isn't the woman I was with in the front of my truck on Thursday night and then planning for a future with on Friday. "Lia?"

"I have to get things started for my day, Beck. You hired me to be your assistant and keep things organized. Jean reminded me that there is a Board of Trustees meeting after lunch, and I promised Donna I'd help her with setting up her presentation."

I'm glad that the finance assistant is delegating to Lia when needed, but I can't help

but feel that it's an excuse to avoid me. "Fine." I bite out the word and turn around, stalking back into my office.

She's still stiff and professional hours later as we return from the Board of Trustees annual review. As naughty as she once made "Mr. Huntsworth" sound, it's now just distant and unwelcome.

I usher her in front of me, holding the door as she goes beneath my arm. It quietly closes behind us, and I don't hide my movement when I flip the manual lock. Only two people have a physical key to the door, and no security clearance can undo it.

"What are you doing?" Lia's eyes widen as she backs away, hands covering her stomach.

"We're going to talk, and I don't want any interruptions. My office, now." My voice is quiet but firm. She's mine, and I'll make sure she knows it in no uncertain terms.

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I even close the door to my office and draw the shades down, something I haven't done in so long there is actually dust on the upper blinds. "Lia," I start. I pull out a chair for her before continuing, "are you ashamed of our situation?"

Lia glances at the chair but doesn't sit. She looks a bit green and shakes her head. "No."

"Have you miscarried?" My body convulses as I force out the words. I don't even want to think about that level of pain.

"No, Beck."

"Then what the fuck is it? Why the ice queen routine today?" I don't get it. When she doesn't respond, I move behind her, determined to provoke her. I know that she is attracted to me if nothing else. I can use lust to get a response.

Her hair is down today, and I grab a handful hard enough to show I mean it but not enough to hurt her. Pain is not my goal. I force her down over the desk, using my thighs to direct her as I use my grip on her hair to keep her bent down. "Tell me what the hell is going on in your head right now, or I will fuck you right here, right now." My free hand starts to crumple her skirt upwards, drawing it up her thighs. With her ass only covered by a flimsy scrap of fabric, I palm my erection. "I think you want me to fuck you, Lia." There's a wet spot from her pussy, and I trail my finger over the circle. "I think you want my cock inside your pregnant pussy, pounding you until you come. Maybe you want me to tongue fuck you first?" I take out my cock and rub it up and down her cleft, separated only by the thin fabric.

“What will it be, Lia: an answer, my cock, or my tongue?” I push aside the fabric and rest the head of my member at her entrance. She’s already so wet I could slide in with no effort.

She thrusts back against the blunt head of my cock, and whines as I pull back. I won’t let it be that easy. I hiss as she groans, teasing both of us as I deny us the coupling we want. “Tsk, ts, my love. I asked you a question.” As incentive, I give her just the head, sinking into her heat and locking my legs to keep me from burying myself all the way inside.

“No, dammit!” she yells. “I’m not ashamed and I haven’t lost our baby.” She tries to back onto me, to force me deeper, but I tighten my grip and don’t let her. The navy fabric of her underwear digs into the edge of her swollen labia, and it sets off the glistening pink lips as if it’s one of her pretty paintings.

“Then what is wrong?” I touch her, my fingers seeking more of her wetness and spreading it from clit to her tight ass and back again. For a moment, I wonder if she would let me fuck her ass, and I tease her there with a wet fingertip, sliding back down to her vagina and then clit. I pinch it between my fingers, flicking the nubbin until she cries out in pleasure.

She is breathless as she sobs my name. “I can’t tell you. I promised!” Lia wrenches free of my grip and arches her hips, finds my cock, and sinks herself onto me.

I’m home when I’m inside her. Tight, hot, and so wet, she stretches around me and moves in time with my heartbeat. It’s magic.

She’s there with me, promising that she wants me, wants our baby, and begging me to make her come. Despite being hard for what felt like the entire weekend, I didn’t jack off at all, and I’m about ready to explode just from teasing her. I thrust harder, wanting to find the angle that made her climax hands-free on our first time. Lia

makes these little whines that are so fucking hot, begging for more with each push of my cock in her. I can feel her getting close: the lifting of her hips each time to keep me inside her a bit longer, the wet heat tensing around me before she arches her back...She flails her arms when she comes and the picture frame of Tasha goes clattering to the floor. We both freeze, waiting to hear the glass break, but it doesn't. My daughter still smiles up at us from the frame, unfazed by the hard fucking just inches from where the phone resided.

Lia moves away from me, and my cock bobs free, hanging between us as she fixes her clothing. "I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow." She stands on her tiptoes and kisses me quickly. "We can talk then. I just..." She stops and shakes her head. "Just give me some time. Okay?"

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I zip my pants and sit down at my desk, trying to figure out up from down. Ruffled from more than the sex, I'm too bereft to even have blue balls over her departure. I can't answer her, even as I listen to Lia fight with the door. I hear it open at last, and it catches on the lock without closing. I'll go home soon and fix the door on my way. It's not like I could be worth any good here today. Not now with the smell of sex heavy in the air and her scent all over me.

I shut down my computer and tidy up the papers we shoved out of our way. Seeing the picture of Tasha alone couldn't have caused Lia to run, could it? Did she tell her dad already and he's upset? Is she losing the baby, despite saying she wasn't, and can't tell me? Panic has me pulling out my waistband and checking my softening dick for any signs of spotting. Finding none, I zip up and try to feel relief over that small favor.

"You look sad." Jean is leaning against my doorjamb, her lab coat open to show a white sheath dress beneath that is more lingerie than work appropriate clothing. "Can I help?"

Remembering the latch and how it would prevent the door from being locked, I sigh and shake my head. At least Jean didn't catch me with my pants down. "I just have a lot on my mind." Pushing my laptop into its bag, I close the latches and stand. "What can I do for you, Jean? Lia has already left for the day." There's nothing I can think of that I owe her department. The party planning is underway, and my part of it is taken care of.

"You could let me turn that frown upside down, Beck." She crosses the space between us with an overexaggerated sway of her hips on each step. "You've been

alone too long. You need a woman.” Her crimson tipped nails draw my eyes down as she grasps the bottom hem and lifts it up. “And I need a real man. That husband of mine is more concerned with his leech of a daughter than he is with my needs.” She’s bare beneath.

Livid at how she would make such an advance on me—her boss—and while married, I shove her away from me. “No, Jean. You’re married, and I am not interested. Go and don’t come back like this ever again. I’ll let this lapse in your judgement go for Lia’s sake and for the fact that you are a valuable employee. But you and me? We are never going to happen. Now get out.” I can’t bring myself to call for security; I don’t want that debacle. I just want to get home and think about Lia. I’m too worried about her and our baby for anyone else to matter right now.

6

Lia

It’s hard to hide my news and how awful my day went when I call Tasha. Keeping it to myself is like swallowing bile repeatedly, burning with each word. She needs me, though. I owe it to Tasha to give her my undivided attention. Tomorrow, I’ll deal with Beck and trying to focus on him, on us, but now is for his daughter.

Or one of his daughters, if I’m having a girl. My hand drops to my stomach at the thought, and I imagine what he or she is like. I haven’t dared so much as look at a pregnancy site for fear of Jean or my dad walking in and catching me.

“So, I’m like seven weeks along.”

I long to tell her “me too!” but keep my mouth shut as she continues.

“It’s too early to tell anyone according to the book Chris got at the library. They

suggest waiting until after the first trimester, which is like twelve weeks, in case...” Her voice trails off in a sad whimper, and the tears I had just managed to get her to stop crying start up again.

“You’re fine, Tasha,” I promise her. “And your baby is fine right now. Have you called your doctor?”

Her voice is shaky, but after blowing her nose she is able to form understandable sentences again. “She won’t see me until after next week when I miss a second period.” I know if I told Beck that Tasha needed in to see the doctor, he would make it happen... I can’t out her like that, though. She deserves the chance to tell him on her own terms.

“What does Chris think about everything?” He can’t be as excited as Beck. I steal a glance at my purse where the card and toy are hidden. I shouldn’t have acted like that toward Beck, but he caught me so off-guard. I don’t know how long I can keep this a secret from him. “Is Chris scared?” We’re all so young.

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“Not really. He’s worried about money of course, but we’re looking into the possibility of me moving in with him before the baby comes. He lives above the shop where he works, and he has been brought on as a full time mechanic.” Tasha doesn’t sound as if she’s sure that’s what she wants, to live with all that noise, but her love for him is stronger than her uncertainty. “I think we’re going to drive out to Vegas and elope,” she admits.

Stunned, I lean back in my papasan until it almost flips. “You-you-you-bitch! You would just abandon me here to go get married without me? I thought I was your best friend!” I’m mostly teasing, but the sting of her admission pains me. “I am so unloved!” I pout, sulking until she backpedals.

“Okay. Okay, Lia. If we go to elope, you can come too. Just don’t tell my dad. I know he’s privy to like all your secrets now that you’re his secretary—not those secrets, I hope. Oh, God! I need the brain bleach. Lia, no playing naughty secretary and powerful CEO with my dad. I don’t even want to think about him doing anything. He’s so old! Yuck!”

She doesn’t see him the way I do: his passion and intelligence, the muscular strength that gives him the physical power to do all that he dreams, the way he moves... My whole body tightens when I think about how Beck moves.

The two of us begin giddily planning her wedding, even if it’s nothing more than an Elvis impersonator and the three of us on a road trip. I’ll be there for her throughout the entire pregnancy, and with luck, she’ll return the favor. “Have you been sick often?” I ask. I long to tell her that we’re sharing this experience, but I can’t do that yet. Over the phone is not the way to spring that kind of knowledge.

My door flies open, bounces off the wall, and hits Jean on the arm as she steps into my room. "I've gotta go." I end the call without explanation to Tasha. "How much did you hear?" If Jean goes to Beck, Tasha would be devastated for him to learn about her pregnancy that way.

She grins at me, lips twisted into a vicious facsimile of a smile. "Enough. It's not why I was listening, but it's definitely bonus information." Jean closes my bedroom door and leans back against it, voice so soft it's hard to hear her. "I'm not stupid, Lia. I've been paying attention, and I know something is up with you and Beck. You're too lazy to keep a full time job this long without screwing the boss." Venom drips from her words, and I can't help but flinch at the insinuations she makes.

Jean reaches for the box of tissues beside my bed and throws it at me. "I saw you leave with tears in your eyes today. Poor little rich girl can't cut it in the real world again and has to make some moves on the boss to try and keep her job? Is that it?"

She slips to the floor and kneels in front of me, one pointed, manicured fingernail directed at me. "Beck has been acting as if some slut was distracting him." She spits out the word slut as if she prefers it to my name.

Anger stuns me; I just don't know how to answer the accusations. She's right, I mean, about Beck and me being together, but not for the reasons she suspects. "Jean, no; it's not like that," I start to say. I get up and try to defend myself, wiping away tears of frustration as I get berated anytime I pause to catch my breath.

"And I bet you were going to make a move on Beck, Jean, and you're married to my dad!" I hear myself yelling, but I can't stop. Maybe it's the pregnancy hormones, or the jealousy burning in the pit of my stomach that she would get that close to Beck, but I hate everything about Jean. That she would even contemplate cheating on my father is near the bottom of my list.

Her hand raises as if she'll slap me, and I dodge the blow. "I overheard everything, Lia. Tasha is pregnant, probably by that good for nothing mechanic downtown. You'd think that she would have found someone decent given their money and connections." Jean sneers at me as she climbs to her feet. "I bet she doesn't want dear ol' Daddy to know about her being knocked up, does she?" Jean's voice goes sickeningly sweet. "If you want to be a good friend to Tasha, you'll stay far away from Beck, or else."

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Jean starts to leave, her nails scratching into the painted trim of my doorway. “You will not stay late or spend any time with him that isn’t one hundred percent about work. If you do, he’ll find out about Tasha, and I’ll tell your dad that you’re banging the boss.”

She slams my door behind her, causing everything in the room to rattle. It’s only from my years as a moody teen and slamming the door repeatedly that I’ve gotten all my art affixed in such a way it won’t fall.

I climb into my bed and cry. Jean has ruined everything. There’s nothing I can do that will end well for any of us. I can’t be with Beck, not if I want to protect Tasha. Jean would destroy that friendship in a heartbeat. And to lose my father’s trust at the same time? I sob into my pillow, throat burning with the tightness of my grief. Just when I started to get my pieces put back together, Jean had to come destroy it all.

I could leave. The thought flits through my mind and is discarded almost immediately. Yes; I could leave now and raise our baby alone. Could, but I won’t. I can’t do that to Beck. It nearly destroyed him when Tasha’s mom cheated on him and then left. I won’t be the cause of that much pain. I care about him too much.

I can’t be with him, not with Jean blackmailing me to stay away, but I can’t leave him either. We still have time for me to figure out how we can raise the baby without being together.

It’s still early, but I curl up in bed without having eaten supper. The food wouldn’t stay down now anyways. At least I did take one of the vitamins Beck bought for me and the baby. That’s something.

My blankets are soft, a refuge against the world outside my door. Beck's shirt is inside my pillowcase, hiding from prying eyes, and I reach for it, letting my fingers close around the cuff. "Oh, Beck," I cry. I'm only twenty-two; this is too much. "I don't know what to do."

7

Beck

My bowtie tightens each time I swallow a mouthful of champagne, or at least it feels like it. I've tugged at it more times than I can count, and I'm reminded of why I normally wear a clip-on when I have to dress up. Tonight has to be perfect. Sliding my fingers deep into my pants pocket, I feel for the house key I had made for Lia. If nothing else, I'm going to convince her to go public with our relationship; that will make everything else easier. No one needs to know how sudden this has been for us; the fact that we're together will be enough. I have to have her, and knowing how long she has wanted me makes this façade of merely being coworkers into a knife that drags along my ribcage whenever I see her.

"That's your secretary?" I already regret inviting my brother to the company party, but he's attended all the prior ones. Uninviting him would have caused more questions than I'm willing to answer. Scott takes a step toward Lia, and I grab him. He's not going to make a move on my woman.

"That's Lia, Paul's daughter," I confirm.

My brother stops, does the math, and shakes his head. "Little Lia grew up to be a hottie. Does Tasha have any older friends who are just as attractive?"

Hearing her name, Lia looks up at me from her perch on a barstool, and her eyes are swollen despite a makeup job that would rival any magazine photoshoot. I doubt

anyone who is unfamiliar with her will notice. Her jaw tightens when she sees me staring, and I watch her hands flex before she spins around, returning to the cold shoulder from before she melted in my arms and begged me to just give her a bit of time.

“I don’t think she likes being your secretary, brother dear. That or you pinched her derriere one too many times.” I watch as Scott wanders off to find a woman a little closer to his age to hit on, and I pray that he doesn’t try and take someone to my office for a little “I’m the boss’s brother” nookie on my desk. It wouldn’t be the first time.

The rooftop garden has been decorated to look like a magical palace, complete with a water fountain doubling as a bar with mermen bartenders. I had no part in the decision on tails; I had given my company’s advertising team full creative control over the party. That’s one mistake I won’t be making again. At least the Christmas lights and greenery make for plenty of places to sneak off a text to Lia without worry of being caught.

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I type out my inquiry of how she's doing, hoping that she's only trying to keep a professional front. From my vantage point near the DJ, I watch as Lia checks her phone. Her eyes light up for the first time all night, and her smile brightens. I see her fingers start to move across the screen, and my own phone lights up with the little dots telling me she's typing.

Paul and Jean join her at the bar, and Lia slips her phone back into her clutch, message unsent. In the same instant, her whole countenance shuts down. Lia's body seems to shrink, shoulders curving inwards, and she hides in plain sight. Gone is the vibrant young woman, leaving a shadowed twin in her place.

Something is wrong, and I'm going to find out what that is. Fuck discretion. I've gone all fucking week giving her the space she begged for, being allowed to bring her water while she throws up in the bathroom during bouts of morning sickness, but not allowed to show her any affection otherwise. We need to go public. I can't love her at a distance much longer.

I bide my time, watching until Lia excuses herself to use the restroom. It's near the exit from the party, and I cling to the corner of the brick wall and wait. She emerges, a goddess in a silver dress that skims her figure. Tasteful but teasing, the lace and satin can't fool my body. I remember those curves and how they feel against me. "Lia." Her name sounds like a prayer.

Maybe it is.

"Follow me," I beg. Leading her behind the makeshift wall of trees and gauze-draped wooden frames, I shove aside one of the heavy sections and squeeze through. Once

she has slipped between them, I close the escape route I made and take Lia to the private landing where we first had sex. We can hear the party, but there is no easy way for people unfamiliar with the roof to find their way over to us. It would be easier to go downstairs and up the other elevator than to hope they found the right section of false wall to move.

“This is where it all started,” Lia whispers. She’s wringing her hands as she looks around at our gazebo. The curtains are drawn over the netting, deepening the shadows inside it.

She’s wrong, though, and I tell her as such. “This started much longer ago. You told me that.”

The night doesn’t hide her blush, and I reach for her face, letting my fingers trace her heated cheeks. “Beck, I shouldn’t have told you about my crush on you.” She leans into my palm, closing her eyes, and there are tears on her lashes when she steps back. The blush fades as pain crosses her face.

I hate seeing that emotion there. “It wouldn’t have mattered, Lia. Not to me. When we kissed in the garage, I knew then and there I had to have you. That chemistry, the fiery punch in my gut when our lips touched...Even if we had no chemistry of dancing around each other for years, I would want you. You see the world so beautifully and make art that inspires others to see things where they would otherwise turn a blind eye. Lia, you couldn’t have changed this path we’re on.” I grab her waist, closing the distance between us. “Tell me you don’t feel how much I want you, want us.”

She tastes like lemonade, sweet and tart, refreshing as my tongue taps on her lower lip. Lia opens to me with a sigh, her whole body relaxing into my grip. My hands move on her back, mapping out the panels of lace divided by a zipper that ends just before her ass. I pull her into me, the near constant hard-on she gives me already

seeking her.

Lia groans, not in passion but frustration, and she fights free of my arms. Tears flow freely down her cheeks, making lines along her throat before they get caught by the neckline of her dress. She swipes at them, marring her makeup. I offer her my pocket square, and she takes it with a heartache inducing half-smile. I hate to see her like this.

Again, I ask what happened. “Did I do something to make you hate me?” Does she regret this? I thought we were good together. Maybe I’m just bad with women, despite all my good intentions.

Her mouth opens and closes repeatedly, the first unattractive expression I’ve seen her make. “No,” she whispers at last. “How could I ever hate you?” Truly confused, she cocks her head to the side as if unsure how I could even come to that line of thought.

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My frustration and confusion snaps into my voice. “Then what the hell is it?” Could her parents be pushing her harder about money? She hates to feel like she’s taking advantage of them. “Is it about the loan you owe your dad? You should be able to pay him back in a few more months.” I know that had been hard for her to ask for, and if not for her pride I’d offer to pay back Paul now and be done with it.

When she shakes her head again, I come up with the last thing I can think of. “Are you embarrassed about our age difference? I’m not,” I promise her. “I am in love with you, Lia, and I don’t give a rat’s ass about the years between us except for the years it meant I was waiting for a love like I feel for you.” I have the money to make sure she and our child are taken care of long after I’ve gone, which hopefully won’t be for at least another forty years.

“I love you,” I repeat, coaxing Lia to let me hold her again. She gives in, just a little, and rests against my chest. “Please, Lia, tell me what’s wrong. I can’t fix it if you don’t tell me.”

She’s crying in earnest, her head tucking beneath my chin as I hold her. “I can’t tell you; it’s not my place. Don’t force me to tell you. I promised,” her voice is strained as her hands unclench and rest on my chest.

“Shh. That’s okay. It’s fine. You don’t have to tell me then. I won’t force you. Not now. Not ever if you don’t want to.” I breathe in the scent of her hair, longing to wake up to that smell on my pillow. “In exchange, I want something from you.” I use soft kisses along her cheek to coax her into looking up at me.

“I need you, Lia. I love you so fucking much. I will keep your secrets, even those you

won't share with me, if I can still hold you like this. And this," I add wickedly. My hands smooth down her back to her hips, squeezing the gentle curves, and end on her ass. I use the muscles there to seal our bodies together. "Will you be mine?"

A war rages on behind her eyes, wavering between desire and fear. Lia's tongue runs over her lips, and I can't stop myself from licking at the line of moisture she leaves behind. We fit together too perfectly, and when I feel tentative hands trembling on their journey to my shoulders, they are grabbing me—not pushing me away.

Her name drags out of me in a groan. We need to be even closer; I pick her up by her ass, and her legs spread to wrap around my waist. Thankful for my hours in the gym, I pause to lean Lia up against the gazebo's steel post. She looks at me, nodding almost imperceptibly, urging me on. I reach up under her dress and seek out the heat of her. We'll have years for proper foreplay and taking things slow; I need to be inside her. Lia sighs in my ear when my fingers wrap around her panties, and she laughs as I struggle to pull them off her one-handed.

"Fuck it!" I declare and drop her to the ground. My hands go to her back, unzipping her dress. She stands before me, arms loose at her sides, and she steps out of her dress. "It was too pretty to tear off you." A silvery gray lace bra holds her breasts up in offering, the scalloped edges giving a sneak peek at the pink tips.

"Should I lose this too?" Lia starts to slip off a strap, but I stop her.

"No. I like it. Leave it on." I kneel, taking her panties with me as I drop to the ground. Heels and a bra are all that she wears, and I am kneeling in a suit that was custom made for me. "Do you see what you do to me, Lia?" I'm not talking about how hard my cock is. It's everything about her. The way it seems the lights are focused on her alone, making her the brightest spot in my world.

Leaning forward, I kiss her stomach. I can't wait for when she's further along and

there will be even more of her to kiss. “I love you.” Resting my cheek against her belly button, I trace my fingertips up and down her thighs. “And I love our baby.” I kiss her stomach again. “And...” My fingers move up and into her unerringly. “I love how you taste.” She’s wet already, and I sink my fingers in as far as I can reach before withdrawing them, sucking them clean one by one.

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“Promise me.” I look up at her beautiful face when I part her folds with my thumbs. Slowly, unsure whom I’m teasing more, I lick from her entrance to the firming button of her clit. I know it’s manipulative as fuck to ask such demands of her when she’s aroused and needy, but no one ever said love and lust were fair, nor that I was anything but a caveman when it came to getting what I wanted. “Lia, look at me.” I take her clit between my lips, tugging at the bundle of nerves while my thumbs pry at her, stretching and just barely avoiding entering.

She thrusts forward, hips tilted toward my face. “Beck!” Her pleas make me even harder. I can feel pre-come making a sticky puddle on the tip of my cock. I like hearing her beg.

“Say it,” I demand. “Promise me we’ll be together, or at least try a relationship.” It’s a concession I’m willing to make given our circumstances. Circling my fingertips around her swollen opening, I await her answer. Spiraling around, teasing with the slightest stroke inside before slipping out again, I look up at my personal goddess and wait.

“Yes!” she sobs at last, and echoes it again as I sink three fingers into her hot pussy. I fingerfuck her until she starts to gasp on each thrust. I let her use me for her pleasure, grinding down against the palm of my hand while I unbutton and unzip my pants with the other hand. My fingers and wrist ache before Lia tightens around me, squeezing my fingers.

She quivers, and I get a glimpse of her biting her lip to hold back a cry before her head tips back and hides her expression. Lia pulses around me, body taut and almost vibrating with her climax. I withdraw my fingers, wipe them off on the back of my

pants, and hoist Lia up again. She's glassy-eyed when I get her at my level, and she giggles while trying to wrap her legs around me. "I think I'm drunk on you," she laughs into my ear.

My fingers are digging into her ass and thighs while I maneuver her into the right position, but she doesn't seem to mind any of the potential discomfort. Instead, she's whimpering and begging for more as we work to align ourselves. I feel nothing but the silken welcoming of her body as Lia lowers her body onto my cock, and I thrust up into the heat.

"Yes!" I'm unsure who says it first, but we're both chanting it in time with our fucking. I kiss her, covering her mouth to swallow the loudening cries. This is not the sort of spectacle I want my employees discovering; Lia is not here for their entertainment.

The gazebo squeaks, and I carry Lia to the brick wall leading to the stairs down to my office, and I lean her against it. "Tell me if you start to get scratched. We can go to the couch or inside," I murmur between kisses. To be inside her like this, where I'm meant to be... I can withstand the burning muscles in my arms for as long as it takes.

Our bodies rock together, thrusting in tempo with the music blaring through the night air. It's beautiful. She's beautiful. Her lips are red and parted, swollen from my kisses. Her whole body is flushed with exertion. I want to fuck her all night long, watching her face contort with orgasm after orgasm.

"Beck!" Her teeth clamp down on my neck, just above the collar of my jacket. She moans, making my body vibrate as she bites even harder, her pussy tightening around my cock.

I jerk inside her, the pinpoints of pain in her bite becoming pleasure I didn't know I liked. It explodes through me, and I'm coming before I realize. Fire and tension spiral

through my balls until I feel the come jetting out of me. I grunt, trying to stifle the sounds I long to release.

We stand, or I stand and she clings to me, until I feel myself starting to soften. We're panting, exhausted and satiated for the first time in a long while, when I hear rhythmic clicking approaching behind us. Lia panics, her eyes going wide as she tries to lift up off my dick. My come leaks out of her as I slip out, and in any other moment, I would want to kneel and watch as it dripped from her.

I lower her to the roof's floor and use my body to shield her as she scrambles for her dress and picks it up. My balls catch on my pants as I try to tuck them back inside, and pain erupts, making me limp in more ways than one.

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I spin to see who came up to my private balcony, and there is a shattering of glass as moonlight picks out glints of pale hair, bottle blonde to be sure. Jean. A very livid Jean surrounded by shards of what smells like a broken beer bottle.

“I should have known, Lazy Lia. I get it. Not even threats can keep your money grubbing paws off Beck.” She kicks a larger piece of glass in our direction, sneering as it breaks.

Threats? Did Jean threaten my Lia? Is that why Lia has been off lately? Rage colors my vision, and I feel my control thinning out to a hair’s thickness.

“So, Lia, why don’t you tell your silver fox of a fuck buddy about his whore daughter? You’re such good friends and all, but I’m sure your mouth has been too full of his cock to tell him that his daughter is knocked up.” Jean’s face twists into a mockery of a smile. Drinking has increased her cruelty and pettiness.

My emotions are everywhere. Tasha, my Tasha is pregnant? Lia is being hurt by Jean. I’m going to be a father and a grandfather all at the same time.

“Tell him, Lia. Or are you too busy fucking your way into a promotion to even care about your supposed best friend? Maybe she fucked your father to get even with you...No. Paul can’t get it up anymore.”

“Not for you at least.” Lia slaps her hand over her mouth as soon as the words come rushing out. She reaches for me, fingertips an inch from my arm before she shakes her head and hugs herself instead. “I promised her, Beck. I promised Tasha that I wouldn’t tell her secret. She’s not a whore!” Lia snaps. I don’t know if she was

meaning it just for Jean or trying to reassure me, too.

Lia moves between Jean and me, eyes pleading with me as much as her words. “Don’t yell. Please don’t yell. Tasha is so scared. She didn’t know how to tell you, and Chris wanted to be there when she tells you. I promised her.” Lia’s crying, but the tears fall unnoticed as she rocks herself side to side. “Tasha is lost. It was their first time together. The condom broke, but they thought...I don’t know what they all were thinking.

“At least I was on the pill, but it was a bad batch or something, and I still haven’t told Tasha that I’m pregnant.” Lia is rambling, trying to rationalize all that’s going through her mind. “She’s going to hate me, and you’re going to hate me for keeping her secret about this. Oh, fuck!” Lia realizes what she said.

I grab her, pulling Lia close, as much to protect her from whatever vitriol Jean is going to spew as to reassure her. “I don’t care.” I do care, very much in fact, but this isn’t the place for that conversation. “I love you, and I love Tasha. With all that the two of you have been through together, I understand why you were keeping this secret. I could never hate you for that, for anything. You were protecting my daughter. It’s sweet,” I say.

It’s hard to play nonchalant over my daughter being pregnant, but I know it’s going to be much how Paul is going to feel when he finds out about Lia. I must be calm outwardly and hope it will sink in.

“Pregnant? You’re pregnant, too?” Jean drunkenly points at Lia. “You got knocked up by Beck? When?” She shakes her head and laughs. “It doesn’t really matter. I don’t care how happy you think you’ll be, I’m going to ruin it for both of you.” She runs off, stumbling as she bounces off the wall to change direction.

Lia is sobbing, shaking in my arms. “W-what are we going to do?”

“Take a deep breath, kiss one another for luck, find your underwear, and go do some damage control.” I brush my nose against hers. “And I’m going to go tell my girlfriend’s father that he’ll be a grandfather in a few months. At least I know he likes me, right?” I have to make Lia feel stronger about our situation.

She leans on my shoulders as she steps back into her underwear, and she pulls it up into place while I zip her dress. I could laugh at how rumpled we both look if not for fear of what is coming.

We are halfway to the wall I had moved to get us through when Lia pauses. “Can’t we just run away somewhere else instead?” She isn’t serious, but the thought is tempting.

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“Excuse me, everyone. I have an announcement.” Jean’s voice echoes through the speakers, and I can hear security trying to stop her. “My step-daughter is a whore; if you all didn’t know that, already.” She pauses for effect and then starts up again as Lia and I make our way to the bathrooms. “Lia is pregnant by her boss—our boss, Beck Huntsworth. She’s only twenty-two. He’s literally old enough to be her father.

“If that isn’t sick enough, he’s someone we thought was a family friend. Beck came to dinners, birthdays, holidays, and he even went vacationing with the family when Lia was younger. How could he be so sick? Oh, Paul. Where are you Paul?”

Lia and I reach the party, and we stop in our tracks. Jean is up on one of the tables, a microphone in one hand, a new drink in the other, and she’s kicking at a security guard who is trying to coax her down. Lia’s father stands to the side, mortified by the scene.

“There you are, baby,” Jean purrs. “You must be so upset to hear about your money-grubbing failure of a daughter banging your friend, her boss. I mean, I don’t blame her. He’s so fucking hot. I would have taken that fox for a ride if he let me, but he turned me down because he was already fucking my step-daughter.” Paul is embarrassed and angry, and I doubt their marriage is going to survive this bonus reveal.

I’m shocked, too angry to feel anything else. I cling to Lia to avoid doing something I’ll regret. My legal team will destroy Jean for me, if I let them have her. Lia’s face is red with anger and humiliation. This isn’t good for her or our baby. I need to neutralize the situation. I must make sure that Lia doesn’t have to pay for our being in love.

Pointing to one of the guards, I motion for the microphone. They snap it out of Jean's hands and offer it to me after making a show of wiping it off with a napkin. "Can I have everyone's attention please?" Given the angry and drunken ranting of Jean before me, my words carry a calm weight that silences the room. "This isn't how I wanted you to find out about Lia and me, about me and the woman I love." I squeeze her hand, bringing it up to my lips for a kiss. "We've been together a while now and are very much in love. We hope you can be happy for us." I direct the last words toward Paul. This is a lot for a father to take in, and I am hopeful that we can salvage our friendship despite the shock he's undergoing.

"Jean had been blackmailing Lia into staying away from me." I look down at our clasped hands, raising them a bit so everyone can see. "You see how well that worked out for Jean." That gets a few chuckles from the guards who have gotten her off the table. "She is fired, by the way. Wait just a moment before you take her down and call the police, please." Jean deserves to witness this.

"While I hate dealing with gossips, let alone confirming their claims, it is true that Lia and I are having a baby. Not only that, but..." I drop to one knee, still holding Lia's hand. "Can you hold the microphone for me, love?" I hand it to her and reach into my pocket. The ring was not originally for tonight; I was going to wait on it, but the time is as right as it ever will be. And maybe, just maybe, I can salvage this night in Lia's memories. I only have it with me because the jeweler finished cleaning it and checking the stone's setting this morning.

"Lia, I love you. I didn't expect you. I know this is right, though, and I want to do this with you. You are such an amazing woman, and I love you more than I ever thought I could love anyone." I pull out the velvet box and open it to reveal the white gold band with diamond. "This ring is one you picked out when you were just a little girl. I don't know if you even remember it." I had never forgotten.

When our families went to the beach together on an escape from winter, Lia had

rushed into a jewelry store after seeing their shop cat in the windowsill. She wanted to pet the cat. We all followed in after her, laughing and amused that she was more interested in the kitten than the sparkling gems. Tasha and her mother had picked out fancier rings with multiple stones. I'll have to see if Tasha still has hers. It would be great to see them side by side.

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This ring, though, Lia had loved. Small, almost quaint in its understated beauty, my then-wife and daughter overlooked it in favor of the large baubles that bordered on looking like costume jewelry. The engraved flowers on either side of the circular cut diamond add a bit of individuality. It was—and is—quintessentially Lia. It is an artisan's ring. I bought it then and tucked it away, planning on somehow giving it to her future beau to use as an engagement ring or even just as a celebration gift from Tasha to Lia someday. When I fell in love with her and then learned of the pregnancy, I knew there was no better ring to give her than one she herself had chosen and I had kept safe for a little over a decade.

“You bought Tasha the one with the rubies,” Lia replies, her voice tender with a haze of memories. “I tried to convince the owner to let me adopt their kitten. I always wanted a cat, but Dad's allergic.”

I nod. “We can go to the shelter and adopt a cat for you to have in our office when it opens Monday, but I have a more important question to ask right now.” I take a deep breath and exhale slowly, stilling my nerves. “Will you marry me?”

The whole room waits as she stares at me, their hushed whispers going silent. It's then, when all my staff and friends are watching us with baited breath, I worry. What will I do if she declines? How will—

Lia interrupts my train of thought with a squeal and kiss. “Yes, Beck, I'll marry you! You're the only man I've ever wanted to marry,” she whispers against my mouth.

Cheers erupt around us, and despite how hellish the past twenty minutes have been, I cannot bring myself to regret how we got to where we are. My security guards take

Jean off the table, and while obviously upset at everything he has witnessed, Paul hasn't punched me or started yelling. Plus, I'm going to marry Lia!

"What would you have done if I said no?" Lia hugs me tightly as she asks. There are no doubts in her voice, so I try not to allow the question to worry me.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out the housekey I had gotten copied for her. "Given this to someone else and then used the diamond from your ring to scratch something mean into your computer screen." Lia had gotten into trouble in junior high for using a nail file to write "Nate's a big, fat, lying jerk" on a monitor after the boy turned down Tasha for being her date to a school dance.

She hits me in the chest, laughing before she pauses to stare at the ring. "I can't believe you bought this ring and kept it all this time. I love it." Lia gazes into my eyes, smiling. "I love you."

It's the first time she's said it, and my heart catches in my throat. I knew from her kiss—from her acceptance of me—but to actually hear her say it after all the questionable moments... It's my turn to wipe at an errant tear.

8

Lia

"Tell me you weren't screwing my little girl all these years or grooming her for this." My father's eyes are icy and lips narrow with the mix of emotions he's enduring. I can't tell if he's angry, disappointed, or just in shock. It's the first thing he's said to us since the announcement and proposal.

Beck is shaking his head, his arm wrapped around my waist, ready to protect me from the world at the first hint of danger. He hasn't let go of me since Jean found us near

the gazebo. “I swear to you, Paul, I never touched Lia until after she came home from being out of state.” He’s careful in his word choices, making sure that whatever he says is both true and not something we mind being spread around by any reporters. We’ll be prime real estate on the front page as it is for announcing our pregnancy and engagement, but a juicy story of a teenage love affair would be too hard for them to pass up if given the slightest hints to pick apart.

My dad turns to me, his hands coming up to cup my cheeks. He searches my eyes, frowning at whatever he does or doesn’t see there. He’s been able to read me like this ever since childhood, and I hope I can do the same with my baby. I never had to prove I wasn’t lying about something; Dad would know just by looking at me long enough. Satisfied, my dad nods and releases me. “Lia, I can’t say I’m happy about you being pregnant, not when you’re so young, but I won’t give you any lectures. That’s not what you need from me right now. I love you, and I will do my best to be happy for you.” My father turns to Beck, one hand outstretched in a peace-offering. “You’ll take care of my daughter and your child?” he says, his voice clear, and it’s obvious he’s making a demand, rather than posing a question.

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“Of course, Paul. Like you even need to ask that of me.” Beck’s voice is incredulous. “I swear I’ll take care of them and treasure them from this day until my last day.”

I watch with happy tears as the two most important men in my life clasp hands and then pull one another into a hug, sandwiching me between them. “It’ll be okay,” I tell myself. For the first time since finding out that I’m pregnant, I feel that everything will be fine. It may take a while for us to all find steady footing, but we will get there.

“Well,” my dad starts before leaning back. “I think I need to go talk to my attorney and start getting used to living alone again.” He looks bereft—completely lost—and I hate seeing him like that. It’s too close to how he was after Mom died. Despite how much of a bitch Jean has been to me, he loved her. They were partners for a few years; this has to hurt.

“I love you, Daddy.” I stretch up onto my tiptoes and kiss his cheek and put on my bravest smile. My baby will be a wonderful distraction for him, I hope. “You’re going to spoil this little one rotten, aren’t you?” I ask.

He smiles, a dimple popping into view beyond the edge of his salt and pepper colored goatee. “I do not spoil. I merely take to heart my duties in dream-fulfillment.”

Beck barks out a laugh and tries to disguise it as a cough. “I’ll remember that, Grandpa.”

It’s my turn to laugh, and I tease Beck by calling him that as well. “Tasha and I are probably due within days of each other.” It’s a reminder of the conversation I need to have with her.

“I’m way too young to be a grandfather,” Beck complains.

My father merely arches a brow, and I know what he’s going to say before he even opens his mouth. I beat him to the punch: “Pot, meet Kettle. You have a lot in common.” My creative wheels whirl to life as new sculptures and paintings spark in my imagination: pots and kettles turned into photo frames for ultrasound images and first baby pictures.

They part with a strong handshake and promise to kick each other’s asses during the next poker night. Guys’ night. I’ll have to get used to them being friends. Maybe someday it won’t be weird.

“Lia, I...Um... Well, I won’t expect you home tonight. You two probably have a lot to talk about with you having a baby together and all.” Dad scratches the back of his head and gives us an awkward glance. “I am not going to think about any of what you staying over there entails. You’re still my baby girl. Tomorrow, though, let’s have lunch; okay? You can help me bag up Jean’s stuff for the thrift store.”

Inside, I’m bouncing with the thought of getting all her crap out of our home, but I also know that Dad does not need to see my excitement. Maybe I can get one of her power walking outfits to create an effigy to burn...

I agree to my dad’s lunch offer, accept his kiss on my cheek, and let out the breath I hadn’t known I was holding. It whistles past my teeth, releasing most of the tension that I’ve held inside since Beck and I first kissed in his garage. One down; one to go. “Beck, I should go tell Tasha. It really needs to come from me, and our news will be all over the web soon.” Part of me wants to pawn this off on Beck and play the “she’s your daughter” card, or even have him come with me, but that’s my fear and anxiety talking. She’s my best friend; I have to do this.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Beck’s arms provide all the safety I could ever

dream of, making it hard to convince myself that now is the right time versus waiting until morning. I nod and let him hold me for a few more moments. “Do you think I could sweet talk you into staying over tonight?” His breath is warm and teasing along my ear, and I lean into him until the caress becomes a kiss on my temple. “I would love to see you in my bed and actually wake up with you in my arms.”

My pussy tightens with memories of fucking outside, and I realize that he’s really mine. It will take a while for this to sink in. This isn’t just a fling; I’m actually with Beck. “We do have my dad’s approval,” I suggest. Dropping my voice to a whisper, I add, “and it might be nice to actually end up in a bed instead of on the roof or over your desk.”

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A sparkling flash catches my eye, and I look down at my ring. The diamond's facets are almost twinkling with each movement I make thanks to the strings of lights. Twisting my hand to catch the light better, I admire the ring. "I still can't believe you bought this ring!" The fact that a ring bought when I wasn't even quite a teenager is a near perfect fit... I try to put my feelings into words.

Beck captures my lips in a soft kiss. "It was fate." I love the feel of his mouth on mine, and it would be easy to forget our surroundings and lose myself in the sensations he causes. Tingles spread out from my lips, and I look forward to having time to explore his body without worry of being caught by coworkers or fear of losing Tasha.

"Do you want this, Lia? Truly? Now that we don't have an audience clinging to every word... I need to know. Do you really want to marry me?" His fear of being rejected is plainly written across his face and in the taut lines of his muscles beneath his button-down.

Nodding, I carefully adjust how Beck is holding me so that we are facing one another. He's so handsome that it makes my heart race. "I don't want to give you a big head, but I've wanted to marry you since I was at least ten. It's always been you." His mouth parts in a huge smile, and bubbles of joy cascade through my chest as he beams. "I love you, Beck."

"And I love you." He lifts me in the air, spinning us around. It's dizzying from more than the position. "Do you have any thoughts on when we should get married?"

I don't have the heart to tell him that Tasha had considered running off to Las Vegas.

Thinking of all the effort that goes into planning a wedding, I think eloping isn't that bad of an idea. "Maybe before the baby is born but not right away?" Making my way down the aisle with a huge belly was not how I envisioned looking on my wedding day, but I want to have some time with Beck to make sure we're doing the right thing. I've been set on him since pretty much forever; he's been my one and only. I want him to make sure that he wants me for more than lust and the fact that I'm pregnant.

"Is tomorrow too soon?" he questions. "Maybe next Saturday instead?" He's teasing as I protest. Beck brushes his lips across the diamond ring, grinning at me like he's won the lottery. Yeah. I can so get used to waking up to that face on the pillow beside me, even if I sort of remember him snoring when I was there for sleepovers during high school.

Beck offers me the use of a fleet car to go home. "You should go have your talk with Tasha, and I'll figure out how we can get through the rest of the planned events for this party in what little time we have left. Should I pick up an order of taco pizza from Mangia's and a two liter of grape soda on my way home?" It was always Tasha's favorite food for a late night emotional binge.

"Yeah. That would probably be good. I think she'll need it." My stomach growls and my mouth waters as I think of everything else at the restaurant. "Maybe their chocolate cherry brownie pizza for dessert?" I bat my lashes as I ask.

"We have an entire table of desserts here. We can box up anything you want." Beck looks down at my upturned face as I frown. "What?"

I drag his hands to my belly. "Baby wants chocolate cherry brownie pizza from Mangia's."

He's smiling indulgently as he kisses me. "Then I guess I better get a taco pizza, a

dessert one, and the grape soda. Text me when you are ready for me to come home.”

The tree canopy is so dense I can't make out the sky, and I regret not bringing a real flashlight to make my way through the darkness. Years of sneaking through the overgrown paths grant speed to my steps, and I run through underbrush, ducking past thorny vines and branches. One snags my hair, catching, and I tug free the strands with only a wince. The blackberries growing thickly here have done worse to me in the past.

Beck's six acres blends into a nature preserve on the back of the property, and it's in that no-man's land of wilderness that Tasha and I discovered a treehouse when we were kids. We hid in the treehouse for most of a night when she accidentally broke a window trying to recreate a favorite movie scene. It was where I ran and took shelter from the world when my mom died. The treehouse witnessed all our important moments. It was where Tasha and I talked about what it was like having her parents divorced. We were even there at fourteen when she told me about letting a boy touch her barely-there boobs and how he'd gotten hard and ran away from her in embarrassment. We laughed about boys there, cried over boys there, and it was our special place long after we should have given up treehouses at the edge of spooky woods.

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It was also in our treehouse that Tasha made me promise not to sleep with her dad. It has to be there that I tell her about Beck and me. I wasn't able to bring her to the treehouse when I first lost my virginity; being a few states away had made that conversation happening in person unlikely. All our big events had been shared in the old oak tree with its planks of wood and a rope ladder Beck had replaced with one not so dilapidated after I dislocated my shoulder falling from it.

When I called Tasha from the company party and asked her to meet me at our old hideout, there was no asking of why or delaying it to tomorrow. She knew whatever I had to talk about was big. She promised to bring the requisite popcorn. I didn't have the heart to tell her no. Rituals were meant to be kept, even if promises couldn't be. I couldn't wait. Couldn't risk her hearing it from someone else.

Ahead of me, the darkness is pierced with the golden glow of a lantern. At least one of us thought ahead. I only have my phone's flashlight, and I don't want to use up the battery that quickly. If she abandons me here, I might need it to find my way back.

"Lia?" Tasha's voice is uncertain, wavering as she calls out to my crashing through the underbrush.

"Yeah. It's me." I emerge into the clearing surrounding our refuge and look up at the sky. The stars are brilliant overhead, unchanging to my eyes despite the years. I stumble over a gnarled root exposed in the dirt and catch myself on the tree trunk.

My fingers close on the ladder's rungs, and I start to haul myself up. It is harder now than six years ago, and I have little doubt that even six months from now it will be near impossible. My forehead is sweaty by the time I reach the platform, and I sort of

wish I had gotten here first so Tasha doesn't have to witness my lack of dexterity and grace. She is the gymnastics enthusiast.

Inside, even by the yellow cast of the light, Tasha looks pale. She's sitting cross-legged with her phone resting on one thigh. An opened bag of store-bought popcorn lies in front of her. "Watch out for the board on the right. It has mostly rotted through. The rest seems stable enough except right by the tree trunk." She watches me as I crawl over to sit beside her. "I wish we still had blankets and pillows out here. I don't remember the floor being so hard before."

"We were teenagers," I remind her. "I hope I didn't pull you away from Chris." She had to work late at the gymnastics school where she works as a trainer and choreographer. Tasha had not been interested in rushing to her father's work party when it would mean she could have a night with Chris instead.

She shakes her head, curls springing free around her face from their bun. "No. I had just gotten home and showered when you called. Besides, if you had something to say here," she says while patting the floorboards, "it outranks getting laid or watching him work on old cars before we go snuggle on the couch and watch movies." We're silent for a few minutes, both of us waiting for something...anything... to break the tension. Tasha gives in first. "What's wrong, Lia? Are you moving away again? Please not that!"

The lantern light gleams on her tears, and I pull her over into a hug. She sobs into my chest, shaking while she begs. "Anything but that. I just got you back, Lia. Please don't go again!"

I rock us both side to side, biting my lip to stave off my own tears. "No. No. I'm not going anywhere." Making shushing sounds, I smooth back her hair and rub Tasha's back until she calms. "I'll be right here. Well, probably not right here unless we do a serious overhaul on the treehouse. I don't think it'll hold both our asses for many

more years.”

When I judge that she is ready to listen and I have the guts to tell her, I adjust our position until Tasha is leaning her head on my shoulder instead of being half in my lap. “Do you remember my promise?” It seems the most logical place to start. Jumping into the deep end and flailing in my attempt to learn to swim was always my style. Beck had been there to grab me and swing me up onto a raft for a gentler approach then. He isn’t here to save me this time, but I know he’ll be waiting with food and hugs inside when we’re ready.

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Tasha sits up, jarringly fast, and narrows her eyes. “A promise? I don’t... What did you—Oh my God!” she exclaims as the memory hits.

The fact that she hasn’t noticed the engagement ring is lucky, and I could smack myself for forgetting that detail when I climbed. I hide my hand in my lap, readying myself for that reveal too. “I’ve been seeing your dad.” Admitting it to her seems easier than facing my father, despite my anxiety. “We didn’t plan on it, and I tried to stop seeing him so I could keep my promise to you.” My voice shakes, but I press on. “We slept together before his trip.” When she looks at me incredulously, I fake a smile and nod. “Banged the boss on my first day of work. Go me!” I pump my fist in the air half-heartedly and follow it with a sigh.

“There’s more, Tasha. I’ve been on the pill since high school. You know that; you were there when I got my first prescription.” I stop, unsure how to say the rest.

“Oh, boy. I think I know where this is going.” There is pain in her voice but also love.

I open my photo album on my phone, swipe back to the right picture, and hand it over to Tasha. It’s displaying the picture I’d taken of the positive test just a few days ago. “I found out the night of my gallery, after Beck took me home from the frat party. I’m pregnant, too.” She stares at it, unspeaking. “Say something.”

“Does my dad know?” When I nod, she asks if he knows about her. I nod again. “You promised!” Her accusation stings.

“I know, and I kept that one. I swear I did!” I promise. “Jean overheard us on the phone.” I tell her about Jean attempting to blackmail me into staying away from

Beck. That leads into the public relations disaster at the party. I finish before telling her about the engagement.

She is tense beside me. “Is that all?”

Pinching my lips together, I shake my head. Using my best infomercial presenter voice, I say, “But wait! There’s more!” I hold out my left hand. “Your dad asked me to marry him. He proposed at the party after Jean told everyone about me being pregnant.” With Tasha stunned into silence, I launch into the story about the ring and the kitten, and even how he’s promised I can have a cat in the office, but maybe we should get one for the house instead if she doesn’t mind. I’m rambling to fill the space, waiting for a response.

“You’ve known you’re pregnant for a few days now and didn’t tell me?” Her chin tucks down into her chest, and I watch her chew on the inside of the cheek. It’s a bad habit she hasn’t lost despite her mother’s constant scolding as a child. “Why did you wait?”

“I felt so awful about breaking my promise. It was the only vow you ever asked me to make, and I broke it. I tried to stop everything. I didn’t want to do anything to hurt you, to hurt our friendship, but—” I stop myself from asking if she’s looked at her dad. I know that won’t go over well. “We kissed in the garage that day you got a call from Chris, and it was the best kiss of my life.” I know I’m smiling like an idiot in love when I talk about kissing Beck. “And then I tried to stop things when your dad hired me to work at Huntsworth, but we were talking up on the roof, and there were stars and good food, and it was so easy to forget that he was my best friend’s father and not just an amazing man who is as attractive inside as he is outside.

“Beck is brilliant, kind, funny, and caring.” I don’t talk about how good he is at sex; I can already imagine the face she’ll make. “We realized we were in love somewhere along the way, no matter how much I fought against it. And then Jean outed us to

everyone, and your dad proposed to me. I don't know if that was the plan, but he had the ring. Have you seen a more perfect ring?"

Promising me she hasn't, Tasha asks me the hardest question of the night. So far at least. "Would you have told me if I weren't pregnant too?"

I honestly don't know. I probably wouldn't have told anyone until I started to show. Putting it to words, I know the rambling must be obnoxious, and my attempt at an explanation falls apart somewhere around my sixth apology. "I'm sorry. I'm a bad friend," I finally end with. "You told me you were pregnant the day after I found out. You needed me. I couldn't do more to stress you out."

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“You’re my best friend, Tasha. I love you. I hope you’ll still be my friend after this.” We’ve weathered so many things, and I need her in my life. I need my best friend for getting through pregnancy and a wedding. “I need you, Tasha. I want you to be my maid of honor when I get married. And I want us to raise our kids to be not only family but friends, too. Please tell me you can forgive me.” I can barely understand my words through my tears.

She hugs me, pulling me tight to her chest, and it’s her turn to rock us as we embrace. The treehouse’s boards creak beneath us, and we freeze, hugging without movement. “It’s okay, Lia. It’s not like you’re moving away and leaving me here. You are my best friend forever. That is always and forever.” She looks at my dress. “That better not have come out of my closet. The lace is frayed from climbing up here, and you smell like my dad’s cologne. I don’t want to think of you getting laid by my dad while wearing my dress. That is too gross.”

Assured it is my own dress, not one that is borrowed, Tasha hugs me again. “I didn’t plan on falling in love with Chris, but I did. I understand that we can’t choose who we love. And I understand hiding things because we’re scared about how people will react. Is my dad mad?” she asks.

Thinking of his reaction at the party, I try to figure out how to explain his thoughts on the situation. “He’s shocked, but he isn’t mad. He is sort of too excited about me being pregnant to have anything make him mad. Except for Jean,” I correct. “So, if there’s anything else you want to spring on him, now might be the perfect time. You could finally fess up about the nail polish stains in the formal living room.” They had to get the square of carpet cut out and replaced because Carrie had refused to get a rug to hide it.

“Do you think he would accept me moving in with Chris?”

I rest my head on hers, coconspirators of the future. “The house is huge. I could move in, and Chris could move in, and we’d still have room for two nurseries and more.” We muse over the weeks and months to come, sharing our experiences with morning sickness we had longed to talk about. After so many years of sharing everything, it is lightening, an unburdening, to open up to Tasha without a filter on my thoughts.

An hour or more has passed when she starts giggling. “Lia, does this mean I have to call you ‘Mom’ now?”

I make a face, wrinkling my nose. “I’ll make out with your dad in front of you anytime you do.” It’s a threat that will be a pleasure to fulfill. “We should go back to the house. Your dad is getting you a taco pizza.”

I text Beck, letting him know we’re on our way to the house, and he writes back immediately for us to take our time and be safe. It’s weird not hiding the smile his text gives me, and I take a moment to let it all sink in. I’m marrying Beck and having his baby. His daughter is my best friend and going to be the maid of honor—or matron of honor since she’ll probably get married sooner than we do. My father isn’t disowning me, but I am getting Jean out of all our lives. I can’t help but do a happy dance once I’m back on the ground.

Tasha bangs her shoulder into mine as we walk, head down as we try to keep to the beam of light made by the lantern she carries. “I was wondering if you would mind, or think my dad would mind too much, if I invited Chris here. He should probably be part of any discussions that take place.”

“I’m good with that. I think it’s a great idea. Just, Tasha,” I say, “Chris isn’t allowed to call me ‘Mom’ either. I will kick him in the junk for getting my best friend pregnant. He didn’t even ask my permission before doing so. How rude!”

We giggle for most of the walk, and Tasha lets us into the house through the back-porch door. “Dad’s home. I can smell the pizza.”

Beck’s sitting up on the kitchen counter, long legs almost all the way to the ground, and I cross the room to him for a kiss. It’s short and sweet out of respect to Tasha, but no less warm. “Lia,” he breathes against my neck. “Your brownie pizza is in the warming tray, and there’s ice cream in the freezer in case you want it.” Beck peers over my shoulder at Tasha, and I turn to see her staring at her feet. “How are you feeling, Tasha?”

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She shifts back and forth, fidgeting beneath his stare. “A little hungry but fine.”

They keep to this banter of small talk until I can’t take the tension anymore. “Okay, you two. Beck, she’s your daughter. You know she’s pregnant. You still love her.” I point to Tasha. “And, you, this is your dad. He still loves you and isn’t mad. He even got you your favorite pizza. Now, hug it out so we can go eat. I’m hungry.”

Epilogue

Beck

I pluck at the sleeve of my tuxedo jacket, wondering if the color is what Lia envisioned when she told the tailor “I want him in midnight blue, not cornflower blue or sapphire, and definitely not navy. Midnight.” She was slightly over two months along at that point, far less miserable than she is now. She had returned the first two fabric samples with a politely worded note for him to try again. If this didn’t meet her expectations...

I guess that’s what happens when you propose to an artist.

She designed her wedding gown down to the tiny flower ribbon things she wanted sewn onto it. As long as Lia is happy with everything, I will be. I am ready to start our forever; the details are minor to me. It seems like the past six months have been nothing but wedding plans, and I’m glad that today means I don’t have to answer another question about which type of fork I like better or what pattern I want on the plates we are renting from the catering company. There are reasons I give a theme to a planning committee and then let them have their way with the parties at work.

We were up until almost midnight—Lia, Tasha, Chris, and me—finishing the party favors Lia wanted to give all the guests. There were homemade bubble wands that curved to make our initials, glass vials of bubble solution, and little fabric bags of flower petals. Lia claimed they were sachets to make everything smell pretty. I'm fairly certain they were originally intended for a different project that she knew we didn't have time for and turned them into potpourri as a last minute gift.

“How is Lia?” Paul is sitting on the arm of my favorite chair in my study, nervously rubbing his hands on his knees. He has been here since shortly after breakfast time, vacillating between being unsure if he's ready to walk his daughter down the aisle or if he's excited to see Lia in her dress. She's let me see her through all the fittings, wanting my opinion every step of the way, but she wanted it to be a surprise for everyone else. After the rocky start we had thanks to her former step-mother, Lia and I have worked hard at communicating. We talk until we think we're done talking, then clarify our positions one more time. Usually, our conversations end with us sweaty, sticky, and exhausted from great sex. After being interrupted while outside near the pool, Tasha and Lia developed a series of colored scarves that they'd leave around the house as warnings.

“Lia is not puking, which she's grateful for,” I answer him. “She is pretty tired and sore, though.” Her bouts of morning sickness and all day sickness subsided as she reached the third trimester, but our little one's constant movement is keeping Lia up at night. As much as I hate seeing her so miserable, the entire process of the pregnancy amazes me. “I think she got up to pee at least three times last night.” I managed to stay awake through two of them, trying to be supportive.

Paul snorts and tries not to smile. “It's practice for the sleepless nights to come.” He goes silent as he counts on his fingers. “She has what, three weeks left?”

I nod and fasten the cuff links Lia made me as a wedding gift. They look like miniature versions of the sculpture hanging in my office. The mirrored surfaces are so

tiny they could be disco balls in a doll house. I really don't know how she could capture so many details in such a small form. "The weeks are going to go so quickly. We have our staycation sort of honeymoon with maternity spa specialists coming up to the house daily to give massages and otherwise pamper Lia." With the pregnancy so far along at this point, Lia's doctor doesn't want her traveling outside of the city in case she goes into labor. We planned some day trips around town, but nothing that exhausts her. I know we both need to rest up in the days to come in preparation for the little one's arrival.

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Paul grins, his reflection visible in the over the door mirror I'm using for adjusting my tie and cuffs. "So, Beck, do you think you can tell me what you're having? Lia still refuses."

With all the drama surrounding the reveal of our relationship and pregnancy, Lia wanted something that was just ours. As much as I wanted to scream the news from the top of Huntsworth Industries and put it in our company newsletter as soon as we found out at the ultrasound appointment, I knew that it was important to Lia. With so much out of our control, she wanted just a tidbit of news that only we were aware of.

I bite down on the inside of my cheek to stop from smiling. "Your daughter threatened my family jewels if I even consider it. I'm sorry, Paul. You'll know in less than a month," I offer.

No one except Tasha knows that we're having a little girl, and that's how Lia wants to keep it. With my own grand-daughter due to be born just three days after my daughter, the OB/GYN is joking that she will do a two-for-one deal on the delivery room if Lia and Tasha deliver on the same day. Given how close they have been for most of their lives, it's half-expected that they'll go into labor together. Lia claims it's hormones, and I say it is their sheer stubborn determination to stay the same. If one broke a bone or got a sprain as a child, we could practically set the clock by when the other would start screaming about having fallen and hurt herself, too.

My excitement over having a second daughter is hard to keep to myself, and anything pink we've bought was smuggled into the locked nursery where wedding attendees won't be able to see it. The fact that I haven't spilled the news by accident to even our housekeeper has been miraculous. I'm lucky that technology was not so far

advanced when Carrie was pregnant with Tasha. I don't think the younger me had the willpower to keep such a secret.

Paul glowers at me, trying to force the knowledge out of me with a sulk. He doesn't have even a quarter of the effect Lia does. "She already told me you're having a girl, so you can stuff the silent treatment, Beck."

I know she wouldn't have told her dad, especially without my knowing, so I just shrug. "Then you'll have to see if you're right when the baby's here." I hope he won't call my bluff, and I fix my hair as he seethes behind me. While we have chosen a handful of names, we haven't picked the one yet. We want to meet our daughter and get to know her before settling on a name, and we know we would both slip up beyond calling her "the baby."

"You and my daughter are so damned stubborn!" Paul stands up and stomps his way over to the window. "I just want to know if I'm having a grandson or granddaughter. Is that too much to ask?"

"Has the wedding planner gotten the floral arch up?" It's not a smooth segue, but I hope the distraction will work. I value my friendship with Paul, and he has been upset over the secrecy for a few months now. We've known since our sixteen-week checkup, and Lia had even considered us not finding out.

Paul hums in response to my question, tapping the window. "Yeah. They have some kid up on a ladder attaching the rest of the flowers. It looks like they're purple or blue, maybe. Dark is all I can tell from here. I don't know. Lia would know the right name for them."

The florist is right on schedule. Hiring a wedding planner to take care of everything except the actual designing was my best idea for our union. I know Lia is an amazing artist and she is fully capable of creating everything we had made for our

wedding. However, I wanted her to be able to relax and enjoy our day without unnecessary worries. It took some convincing, but she willingly handed over her sketchbooks and photos of what she wanted, and I wrote the check. Even with me begging for more from Lia and the designer pushing for a larger budget on what we decided, we only spent half of what Carrie and I had on my first wedding. I did not have the job then I do now. The most extravagant expense was having fabric designed especially for us. The midnight blue accent on Lia's gown had strands of silver woven into it while mine had an even deeper indigo shade that bordered on being black. The pattern was subtle, and I only knew that Lia was pleased with the fabric. I was happy with how the tux fit, but my tailor always did a great job.

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A chirping tweet goes off in Paul's pocket, and he swears while pulling out his phone. "This thing has been blowing up today. Oh, good, it's just Donna." As soon as his divorce was finalized, Lia and I set her father up on a date with the finance secretary. While it was still too early in his rebound phase for them to settle down, they had been going out on dates regularly. "Donna wrote that Lia has closed herself in the bedroom, refusing to come out or let them in. She wants to know if you can go do something?"

Paul is still talking behind me as I exit the room and sprint down the hall for the stairs. Any excuse to see Lia is a good one, but if she needs me there isn't a force that can stop me. I take the steps two at a time and see Tasha and Donna leaning against my bedroom door. Their voices are soft and cajoling, the way one might talk to a wounded animal instead of a pregnant bride.

"What's wrong?" I ask them. Tasha is in her bathrobe cinched tight at the waist, though her stage of pregnancy has the edges just barely meeting over her stomach. "The baby?"

Tasha holds her hands up, stopping me in my tracks. "She's just having an emotional moment. You know pregnancy and sh-tuff. Yeah, stuff." Tasha checks her watch and sighs. "I need to get dressed, so you go deal with my step-mom." She stands on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. "Do not mess up her hair, Dad. The stylist spent like an hour getting it just right."

"I would never!" I protest.

She arches an eyebrow and looks at me, hands on hips. "I think there have been

exactly three days the two of you haven't been at each other when you've both been home. One of those involved Lia going to the hospital for IV fluids because of dehydration. Spare me the 'I would never' routine." Tasha turns and begins walking down the hallway toward her bedroom. "Chris and I can hear you guys every night!"

Chris is outside with the wedding planner, trying to be useful. My son-in-law chose not to be in the wedding despite our invitation, but he is going to be in attendance. He feels uncomfortable around me even after living in my home for four months. I have been nice to him for Tasha and the baby's sake, but it is difficult knowing my baby girl is married and down the hall. I try not to think of what they're doing... It must be even more awkward for her to know that Lia and I are together.

I offered to pay for a wedding for them or to have them share our day, but they had declined. Tasha and Chris wanted a small service at the courthouse followed by a reception at the bowling alley where they'd had their first date. Tasha and Lia were barely showing at that point, and now both appear ready to go into labor at any moment.

"Paul is downstairs," I tell Donna. "Second door on the left when you go down the stairs behind me. The room just beyond the kitchen." Taking my hint, she leaves me to try and help Lia. I knock on the door. "Honey, it's me. Just me."

I listen as there are several sounds of struggling and frustrated tears. Turning the door, it doesn't open; Lia has locked it. "Can I come in, Lia? Please let me in. It's my bedroom, too," I remind her.

A minute passes, and when no footsteps near the door, I decide to take matters into my own hands. She may be having my baby and about to become my wife, and I may have made sure she knew this is as much her home as mine, but I will not be locked out of my bedroom without reason. I reach up to the top of the door frame and fumble for the small metal key. Opening the door slowly, I peer into my bedroom.

Lia is on the bed, struggling with what looks like an inverted cupcake of fluff. She doesn't answer right away when I ask what's wrong, continuing to wriggle. "I can't get it up!" she wails at last. Lia rolls side to side, pulling on the band of fabric as she tries to get it under her dress. "I was stupid and took off the hoop skirt so I could pee, thinking I could get it up again without help."

Lia starts crying, laughing as she does so. "Stupid hormones! I'm fine, really. Just embarrassed."

I close and relock the door behind me. "Let me help you, Lia." Taking my bride-to-be in my arms, I lift her to her feet and help her get the waistband up in place, then smooth down her skirt. Lia looks like a goddess. The bodice is snug across her chest, and then it flares out into a bell shape with small blue roses embroidered at the waist. The midnight blue panel matching the shade of my tux is an accent over her stomach and down to her feet with the white coming in on either side. It does not hide the beautiful curve where our baby is growing, but it also doesn't make it the centerpiece of the look. Her dress is exactly what she designed.

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She takes my breath away. I don't think I could imagine a more perfect bride. My body longs for it to be nightfall and the end of our reception, when I can sweep Lia off her feet, out of that gown, and into bed to be worshipped properly.

"Oh, fuck, my hair!" Lia has long since stopped worrying about swearing in front of me, and the further our pregnancy has progressed, the more the irritated words flow into her vocabulary and out of her mouth. Lia runs to the walk-in closet with its full-length mirror and starts fixing imaginary out of place curls. The stylist put enough hair gel in them that I don't think a bomb could mess up the hair. Half the curls are pulled up with a clip covered in metal flowers she made; the rest bounce on her shoulders.

She doesn't notice me staring. "You are beyond gorgeous, my love." I toy with one curl, wrapping it around my finger and tugging before it coils back and swings to a stop on her collarbone. "You are the most beautiful bride I've ever seen."

She starts crying in earnest, and I look around for tissues, only to see her pulling one out of her bodice. "Tasha made sure I'm prepared," she laughs. "And the design included a secret pocket for tissues between my boobs, because... Pockets." Lia reaches down her side and shows me a hidden pocket in the side of her skirt.

"Will you be upset if I'm barefoot all night? I can't get my shoes on. I can't even see my feet to get them on anyway!" Crying and laughing at the same time, I don't know what she needs from me. Smoothing my hands up and down her arms, I look at our reflection. Our image belongs in a wedding magazine. Her being pregnant doesn't detract from the image at all; if anything, it makes her that much more amazing. Lia glows despite the scowl she's giving our reflections.

“At least Tasha’s dress is flattering. I look like a medieval cow.” Lia adjusts her waistband and the front of her skirt. “When I drew this I didn’t know I was going to swallow a beach ball before our wedding day.”

I kiss her shoulder, move some curls out of my way, and I work my way up to the spot on Lia’s neck that always turns her on. She shudders in my arms, temporarily stopping her self-deprecation. “You are beautiful, Lia. I know being pregnant is not fun, especially at this stage, but see your reflection? You are glowing, even more beautiful than ever. You look every bit a goddess. I can only hope that when we look back on our wedding photos, that you’ll think me even half as handsome as I find you breath-taking.” She smells like my soap as I kiss the spot on her neck again, and I lap at a spot behind her ear where I can feel her pulse.

“Beck, look at me. Just look!”

I meet her eyes through the mirror. “I’m looking. I haven’t stopped looking at you, and I won’t ever.” Starting at her forehead, I fan out my fingers and lightly skim them over her face. “You are always so beautiful, whether it’s when you’re waking up without any make up on or right now.. It’s just you. The beauty you have inside is so radiant that it can’t help but accent your features. Your smile brightens up any room you walk into. And those eyes...” I trail off as I lightly stroke beneath her lower lids. “You can drop me to my knees with just one glance from your sparkling eyes.”

Moving down, I gently cup her breasts, lifting them so that I’m supporting their heaviness and giving her shoulders and chest some relief. Many an evening has been spent these past months with me lightly rubbing her décolletage to release the tension in the muscles there. “And these... Oh how I’d love to pull your tits out of your dress so I can suckle on them. Bury my face between them. Fuck them.” I can feel my cock throbbing inside my pants, and I know I should feel awful about wanting to fuck her like this right before our wedding. I can’t help it though, not with her looking so hot. “Is it bad, Lia, that I’m hard as a rock from thinking about titty fucking you while

you're in your wedding dress?"

Her breath catches, and her lids close partway. "Beck," she pleads. "Our ceremony starts in less than an hour!" Her chastisement doesn't matter—not when she needs to know just how beautiful she is.

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My fingers move down to her stomach. “I’ll have you downstairs and ready to walk down the aisle before then,” I promise her. “You already know how sexy I think you are, Lia. Anytime I look at you, even when you’re asleep in my sweatpants and a t-shirt, you make my stomach clench with desire. I love knowing that I made you pregnant, that this little girl growing inside you is mine, is ours. That we made this.” I grind my cock against her ass to emphasize my words. “Do you remember when we were fucking out by the pool and I pulled out and came all over your beautiful belly?” She whimpers and nods, watching our reflection. “I could do that now, rubbing it into your skin so that all through our wedding you know that my come is coating you...” I start to pull up her skirt showing me her gorgeous legs.

“And your pussy, love... How I love your gorgeous pussy. And with you pregnant, everything is that much more sensitive.” I stroke her once through the satiny shorts style underwear she has on beneath the dress. They stretch across her ass and hips like they were made just for her. “Are you wet for me, Lia? Do you want me to fuck you and remind you that you are the most desirable woman I have ever seen?” We’re both panting as I shove her panties down and slip my middle finger between her pussy lips. I groan as my finger finds the wetness near her entrance, and I rub it over her cleft.

I drop down to my knees and worship her the best way I can. “Keep watching yourself, Lia. I want you to see how beautiful you are when I make you come.” Pulling her hands down so that she can keep her skirt up out of my way, I press my lips above her mound and kiss her there. She is satiny smooth, and I am amused that she used her time at the salon yesterday to get waxed instead of having something relaxing done.

My tongue goes into her; I know exactly what she likes. Flicks across her clit change into teasing thrusts into her cunt, and between those I lick her as if my life depends on it. Over and over again I lick, sucking on her pussy lips before seeking out the nubbin. Her knees buckle, and I catch Lia around her thighs with my hands, holding her up.

I chance looking up at her and see her watching through barely open eyes. “Beck!” she begs. The way she’s holding up her skirt looks so wanton, delicious, and I almost come in my pants from how she’s looking at me. I fuck her with my tongue, fluttering it until she cries out, and her hands grab my hair, flailing for purchase. The world goes dark as her skirt falls over my face, but she won’t let go of my head. I continue to lick her through the climax, even as her pussy juices coat my face. I could die a happy man suffocating on her cunt.

She relaxes at last, trembling on shaking legs. “Bed, now.”

I know better than to hesitate, and I scramble to obey her request. Denying the very pregnant bride is a bad idea...

My four-poster bed dominates the room, and I walk backwards to it until the mattress bumps into the back of my thighs. My fingers unthread my belt from the loops and toss it aside, and my pants follow just as quickly, landing on the chair where they won’t wrinkle too badly, I hope. Tented out by my erection, my briefs hide nothing of my reaction to her. I lift my underwear’s waistband out and around my cock before pulling them down my legs, not wanting to catch myself on it. I pull up the back of my jacket as I sit, glad Lia didn’t want me in one with tails, and I lean back as my cock points up and toward my stomach. The head is darker with the blood pumping through it, the shaft veined and heavy.

Lia’s on me before I can get settled, hands pushing up my shirt and cummerbund. Her body is above me, weight holding me down as her hips straddle mine, and then she’s

got a hold of me by the cock, and then there is only heat. She's so warm and tight around me it is my whole focus.

She lifts and drops onto me, using her knees to control my movements. I buck my hips, wanting to be even deeper. This, I could do this—being inside her—forever. Lia rolls her body against mine, maximizing the thrusts. Her stomach rests on my abs, and her wedding gown hides everything from my chin to the floor. I can't see anything but her beautiful smile as she lifts and lowers herself onto me.

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Fumbling with the layers of fluff, I reach between us, finding her clit. She whines as I touch her, shoving the front of her pussy into my fingers. Lia humps my hand, bucking forward onto my fingertips while thrusting back to take my cock deeper inside her.

“You are so beautiful, Lia,” I whisper. “I love being inside you, feeling your pussy around me. I love it when you let go like this and take what you need from me. I love making you feel good, Lia. I want to hear you come for me again. Once wasn’t enough. Can you come for me, Lia, and squeeze that hot pussy of yours around my cock until I shoot inside you?”

She clenches down and whines, a high keening sound as she comes. I made her come like this one night, completely untouched as I talked her all the way to a climax. With her pussy a vice around me, I thrust up into the wet heat, letting my control go. Snapping deeper, the twisting desire shoots through me, pleasure kicking through me so hard it’s almost painful. It releases in spasms, and I can’t move from the overwhelming nature of it all.

“Fuck!” Lia gasps, pulling up and off of me to collapse beside me on the bed. She curls upward, reaching down to try and grab at her pussy but can’t reach around the baby belly. “Towel, rag, pillowcase... Beck, help!” She turns onto her side, trying to keep my come from dribbling out onto her dress.

I fumble around, reaching on the floor for the underwear I discarded and put them between her legs. “Use these while I go get a towel.” In most occasions where we’ve ended up fucking, I would offer to lick Lia clean, but I know we are definitely running short on time now, and getting myself cleaned up after would be difficult.

Given how easily she is turned on, I would also have Lia begging for a third orgasm, and she would hate to be left unsatisfied.

I go into the master bathroom and start the taps on one of the sinks. Grabbing a washcloth, I run it beneath the warm water, wringing it out and washing my face. I will likely smell like pussy despite the cleanup job, but I don't mind. I love how Lia smells and tastes; I love pleasing her even more. I wet the cloth again, and I carefully clean off my cock that has a pearlescent bead oozing from the tip. I swipe off the come and wash out the rag again, getting it hot enough that it won't turn chilly on my walk back to the bed.

Lia holds her dress up out of the way and spreads her legs, grinning as my spent cock jerks. "You really do like what you see, don't you?"

I kneel in front of her, gently wiping her pussy clean, pressing the hot cloth to her between wipes. I love the site of her: puffy and red from sex, my come a white dribble oozing out of her pussy. "Do you doubt me?" I reach down for my member and start to squeeze, knowing I could probably coax it into a second round.

She laughs and shakes her head. "No. You sort of made it clear, Beck"

I help Lia wash up until she's almost as clean as before I came into the room. When she crunches forward, supporting herself on her elbows before trying to get to a seated position, I toss my arm over her, pulling her back down and over to me on the bed. "Don't go yet." There's still a little time before we have to go downstairs. I know our guests are here by now, but I don't care. It's our wedding day; I can be selfish.

"I just want to hold you." We won't have many more days like this, where we can just take time for each other.

With my hand on Lia's belly, feeling our daughter shift position, I listen to Tasha's voice ring out from down the hall. "They're...Ugh! My dad is pretty busy right now. They better remember they have a wedding in a half hour!" I try not to laugh, not wanting to ruin my moment with Lia.

Music is starting outside, but I know that was the planner's intention to draw people out into the garden instead of wandering around the driveway or inside the house. "The wedding," Lia mumbles, but she doesn't sound as panicked as she's trying to.

I splay out my fingers over the lump moving around in Lia's belly. "I don't need a wedding. If we stay right here like this forever, I don't need food or air. I just need you, only you." This is enough for me. This is my everything.

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Lia kisses me, a tender brushing of her lips on mine, and all I can think of is how lucky I am to have this woman in my arms. I tell her as such, smiling as she tears up.

“I love you. I love you even though you are sappy and trying to make me cry. I love you so much that I’m going to forget you just messed up my makeup, hair, and dress because that sex was amazing.” She blushes as she says it, grinning at me the entire time.

“Since we do have all our family and friends outside in the garden, we probably should go get married,” I concede as I hear Tasha coming from down the hall. She’s going to give us a lecture if we don’t hurry.

Lia fixes her hair and makeup in the mirror while I get my pants back on. We open the door as Tasha knocks on it, trying to look like we were having a serious conversation instead of fucking. I watch as Lia takes Tasha’s arm, and the two walk down the hall away from me, turning to look back over their shoulders. Time stops, crystallizing the moment as I remember prior years of them doing the same thing.

“Dad, hurry up!” Tasha points to the delicate watch Lia and I picked out for her as a Matron of Honor gift. “We need to get you out the back door so you can go stand with the officiant. Lia, stop making that face at my dad so he’ll actually get his butt in gear. Don’t think I don’t know what you two were doing in there. I can’t believe you couldn’t even wait a few hours to do it after the ceremony and reception.”

Lia feigns a contrite expression as Tasha berates us, but the way she keeps glancing at me lessens the effect. “Beck, we’re going to be late to our own wedding!” She skips ahead to the stairwell and makes her way down carefully. At the bottom, Paul is

waiting for her, staring at her dress and how lovely she is in it. As she takes her father's arm, Lia looks up at me, smiling.

This was the love I was waiting for.

THE END