







# The Allure of Ruins

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Paxton Walsh has a comfortable life, which wasn't always the case.

But ever since he left his tumultuous life on the West Coast, trading it for a new beginning on the East Coast, things have settled.

He can thank himself for the change, but also his boss and friend, Colton Gates.

Their relationship is...a bit too codependent and close for most people to understand, but it works perfectly for them.

So what if thoughts can be conveyed with a glance? That doesn't really mean anything.

Or at least not what other people think.

But now a threat from Pax's past is back, shattering that hard-won peace.

With Pax in danger and needing protection, Colton immediately steps up and takes him in.

Without distance, though, without retreating to separate homes, both men have to be honest about their feelings.

The truth is, Pax was hurt, body and soul, and if he reaches for Colton and finds they can't be more, he'll lose everything.

If Colton does the same and it doesn't work, he'll lose Pax, his best friend and the person who knows him better than anyone.

With both of them terrified of the what-ifs, it might be too hard to have faith and jump.

If only they could both be brave.

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## Page 1

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“Paxton Walsh, that is a big deal!” she insisted, her voice rising.

“Right now, we have an opening that would be perfect for you, Pax.”

“I’m simply wondering why, again, for the fifth time in—what is it?” she asked me.

“Three months,” I muttered, not daring to look at Libby.

“Three months,” she continued cheerfully, “there’s another opening for an assistant in Brize’s department.” She tapped her cheek like she was thinking.

“He expects a lot of his support staff,” Libby replied irritably.

“Is that what you’re calling it?”

Libby growled, which was fun because seeing her—the fifty-two-year-old mother of three and one of the most stylish dressers in our office—get ruffled was ridiculous.

I had no idea why she let others get under her skin.

But I did appreciate her loyalty to Mr. Redmond, even though, by all accounts, the man could sometimes be an ass.

But that could be said of everyone, really.

And Mr. Redmond was a senior partner, the head of family law, and the biggest moneymaker for the firm.

High- profile divorces, prenups, and estate planning brought in the most revenue.

Even litigation wasn't as large a cash cow, coming in second.

That division was headed by Pilar Mata, who had also sent her assistant, Ruby Hernandez, to feel me out on the subject of moving.

Apparently, I was a better assistant than my boss gave me credit for, which really, was not a surprise.

Getting any kind of compliment out of the man was like pulling blood from a stone.

But in the five years I'd been his assistant—three at the ASA office and two at Mayhew, Burgess, and Somerset—I learned to basically read the man's mind, so changing, learning someone else, was out of the question.

Plus, there was his great heart to consider.

There was no better man, period. I was where I was supposed to be.

I had never had the sense of peace I did now, and that was worth more than anything.

This all went back to being bounced from place to place as a foster child, being resented and beaten up in every home I'd been placed in. Once I was older, I'd gone from the frying pan into the fire...so now safety was not something I took for granted.

At twenty-eight, my life finally made sense, and most importantly, I was safe.

I was safe at work, safe at home, and safe with my friends.

I couldn't ask for anything better. Never again would I have to choose between keeping the electricity on or eating.

No part of me would ever be for sale again, not my time, my smile, or my body.

Now there was a safety net between me and the grasp of strangers, and especially...

people who professed their love. Because yes, friends were good, but it would be a cold day in hell before I was stupid enough to love again.

But that wasn't quite right. Because the truth was, I loved Colton Gates.

So I could, in fact, give my heart to another.

It would be impossible not to love him when I knew precisely who he was.

The man had no secrets from me. What I could not do was trust anyone, ever, with my body.

I would be celibate until I died. It was good to have things straight in my head.

Lying to myself was not something I engaged in.

"Most people can't keep up with the pace in our department," Libby said snidely to Natalie, bringing me out of my thoughts.

"I heard they're moving Taylor Kwan to litigation," I said to offer something to the conversation. When I talked to Taylor yesterday, helping her move desks, carrying a box for her, she told me how happy she was to get away from Mr. Redmond to work for Ms. Mata.

“Well, I hope she likes the pace better there, as she couldn’t handle how fast we move in family law,” Libby snapped, sounding snotty.

I squinted at Libby, because really, her statement made no sense. Yes, family law made more coin, but litigation was much faster and far more furious.

“I think she could have handled it easily,” Natalie defended her friend. “But Brize expects too much, and he has the communication skills of a mime in a body cast.”

Libby and I stared at her.

“What?” she asked me.

“What does that even mean?” Libby was as confused as I was.

“You know, like, a mime doesn’t speak, and if they can’t act shit out, what are they good for?”

I shook my head at her. “That’s a particularly terrible metaphor.”

She rolled her eyes and turned to Libby.

“Whatever. Your boss has insane expectations, which is why he can’t keep associates or support staff.

You’re the only one he likes. I mean, seriously, Libby, all his paralegals hate him.

I know this because they tell me all the time.

The other assistants hate him too, as well as the investigators.”

Libby scoffed. “They just want to be coddled.”

“It goes without saying that the associates, myself included, hate him, and that’s why we all would rather work in the pit of pro bono rather than family law.”

“Hey,” I said defensively.

“You know what I mean,” she grumbled.

Libby gave her a dismissive wave.

“We all know Gates is an asshole too,” Natalie went on, “but you don’t see people quitting left and right out of his department. That’s because Pax here is a great buffer, while you suck at it.”

Several beats went by, and I girded myself for the blast.

“I’m sorry, what did you say to me?” Libby’s tone was colder than it was outside, and it had to be below freezing at this time of night.

“Oh, come on, we both know you enjoy seeing your boss chew people up and spit them out, unlike Pax. He stands between Gates and his staff. You don’t.”

She grunted. “We all have to pay our dues.”

Which basically meant she’d been yelled at and treated like dirt and survived, so they had to suck it up as well.

“More importantly,” I soothed Libby, “you have a family to take care of. I don’t, so you can’t babysit your people. That’s not your job.”



“That’s right. That’s exactly right,” Libby granted, smiling at me and then glaring at Natalie.

“It’s all over the firm that there’s yet another associate who refuses to work with him,” Natalie remarked, her eyes flicking to me, then back to Libby. “So there’s that.”

I used to think, when I met people, that the things they worried about were small.

But the older I got, I realized it was all relative.

The things I’d concerned myself with when I was younger were life and death, but to Libby and Natalie, office politics were just as important.

To make a living, to take care of the people they cared for, they had to navigate the waters at the law firm.

I had learned not to be judgmental, even if to me, personality clashes didn’t seem so very important.

“You know,” Daisy Higgins, a third-year associate, chimed in from the other side of the appetizer table, “I think you should apply for the position in litigation too. Pilar was complaining the other day that she needs a really strong assistant. Melinda is not cutting it as Ruby’s second.”

“I thought Melinda was doing well over there.”

Daisy shook her head. “No. HR training caused her some trouble, so she has to go and do all these modules and then retake the test. If she fails a second time, she’s out.”

“What tripped her up?”

“Are we talking about Melinda?” Koji Yamada, a second year like Natalie, slipped in line in front of Libby and filled his plate with mini quiches. “And don’t look at me like that,” he warned Natalie. “This is for all of us at the pool table.”

Natalie put her hands up, wanting no beef with him.

“Daisy said Melinda flunked her HR training,” I told him. He too worked in litigation at the moment. They moved around until they became fourth years, when they picked where they wanted to be, as long as they’d put in time in pro bono. “How?” All the questions had appeared so straightforward.

“I think Melinda put way too much thought into that training. She was telling me, after she took the test, that she thought some of the examples they gave were okay.”

Daisy chuckled. “Spoiler alert: all the examples are bad.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Always err on the side of caution. Besides, most are subjective anyway. They just want to know you’re thinking about how something could look. That’s the point of all of it.”

“Yes, exactly,” Daisy agreed.

“Even more egregious than the flunking of the HR training is that Melinda screwed up Pilar’s schedule, so she missed pitching to be the new external council to handle the civil cases for Putnam Browning,” Koji explained.

“The shipping company?” I asked.

“The huge international shipping company, yeah.”

“Oh, that does not sound good.”

He shook his head. “As a result, Pilar’s looking for someone new. Even if Melinda passes the HR training, there’s no way Pilar is keeping her.”

It was interesting how all of them used the first names of the partners. Until I had permission to do so, I always used their last names. But then, the associates did move all around, whereas the assistants stuck to one attorney.

“Why doesn’t Ruby keep her schedule?” I asked, because Ruby was Ms. Mata’s first assistant.

“She does. All the second assistant has to do is put in any changes Ruby gives her and publish them to Pilar’s desktop and phone.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” Koji confirmed.

“This is sounding worse and worse.”

“That’s because it is,” he affirmed. “Now listen, the person who would get along with Ruby like peas and carrots would be you, buddy.”

“I—”

“You should totally apply. You’d love working with Ruby. She’s the best.”

“She is,” Natalie seconded. “And this way, you can move up and get some of that good litigation profit flowing through your bank account.”

“This is true,” Koji replied. “You’d actually be seen up on the top floor.”

If he knew me better, he’d know I had no desire to be seen at all. Working in the dungeon was absolutely to my liking.

## Page 2

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“Oh, I almost forgot,” Daisy began, leaning forward, lowering her voice. “I have news.”

We all leaned closer as well. It probably looked really funny from across the room.

“Drummond Burgess is starting at the firm.”

“No,” Koji groaned. “He finished law school?”

I had no idea Mr. Burgess had a son or nephew. But then again, the extent of our interaction was my going to the firm’s holiday party at his home. The rest of the time I stayed in the basement, where it was safe and nothing surprised me.

Daisy nodded. “Last fall. Harvard. Melinda accidentally looked at his transcripts when she printed them for Ruby—I guess he’s attached to litigation—and he barely graduated.”

“Litigation?” Natalie and Koji said at the same time.

“Yes,” Daisy said dryly. “Since litigation is the place to be a star.”

She was right; it was. The litigation team was in court every single day. It was rare, beyond child custody cases, that family law ever was, and the same was true for corporate that handled tax law for businesses as well as property disputes and purchases. Litigation was where you wanted to be.

“No,” Natalie grumbled, glancing at Koji. “This is going to suck.”

“Yeah, ya think? Named partner’s kid in our sandbox? What the fuck?”

That cleared it up for me. Son. “Wait? Drummond?” I asked. All eyes on me. “Does that shorten to Drum?”

“Who cares?” Natalie sounded annoyed. “None of us will be stupid enough to make friends with the little narc.”

“That’s mean,” I made sure she knew.

“And,” Daisy continued, raising her voice for a moment to get everyone’s attention, “they’re giving him his own office with a dedicated assistant. He won’t have to share Melinda or whoever the new Melinda will be.”

“What?” Koji gasped, sounding both horrified and surprised.

“Four of us share her now.” Natalie’s voice was much higher, and louder, than I was guessing she wanted. “Are you fuckin’ kidding me?”

“Maybe they’ll hire some new receptionists and move Dan or Theresa to litigation,” Koji offered. “That would make sense.”

I didn’t think either of the receptionists would accept that proposal if presented to them.

At the moment, our two receptionists sat in the lobby and greeted everyone who came through the doors.

They answered phones, directed new clients to the relevant department, and walked returning clients to their assigned attorneys.

They did not have to deal with any office politics, no one asked them to run and get coffee, and they got profit sharing, as they were the face of the firm. Why would they want to do more work?

I shook my head at Koji.

“You don’t think so?”

“It’s safe at the front,” I assured him. “And besides, it would take longer to train Dan and Theresa than it would to simply hire people who are ready to hit the ground running.”

“Yes,” Daisy assented. “I just wish Jonah wasn’t in charge of hiring.”

“Why?” I asked, batting my lashes at her.

She flipped me off.

“What even is with Jonah and his shitty string of people who quit in the first week?” Libby asked her.

“We all know he’s looking for the second missus Dumont,” Daisy replied with a roll of her eyes.

“Ew,” Natalie muttered.

“Dipping your line in the company pond is not permitted,” Koji promised Daisy.

“It is as long as they don’t report directly to him.”

Jonah Dumont was one of the senior equity partners, and he worked in corporate law

and oversaw hiring—the latter for reasons unknown to me.

It might have been that David Burgess had given him that duty when he and Henry Mayhew named Ms. Mata the head of litigation over him.

I had no clue, but as he really sucked at hiring—not as badly as the man who brought on a murderer, but it ran a close second—I was thinking it had to be something like that.

Dumont had always struck me as a slacker, though perhaps I was wrong.

It was his time away from the firm that made me and many others think like that.

He was always running out for a business meeting or a lunch with someone.

His assistant, Tobias Sinclair, had to continually rework his boss's schedule, suddenly clearing it, making calls, to the point where I'd taken to grabbing him lunch from wherever I was going and dropping it off.

In the beginning he thought I was trying to get his job, and then he revised that to me sucking up so I could change departments.

Over time, though, he'd learned that no one with half a brain had designs on his position and that I was simply trying to be nice.

Now I considered him a friend, and we did things outside of work as well, same as I did with Natalie and Koji.

“You know who would be good working for Dumont?” Koji began, smiling at me.

“No,” I said flatly.



“You would totally get him in line,” Natalie insisted, “and that’s what he needs. My personal opinion is that since his divorce, he’s floundering.”

“Are you all forgetting about Toby?”

Daisy coughed then, and we all turned to her. “There might be an opening.”

“No,” Natalie said breathlessly, making the connection first.

“Oh yes,” Daisy affirmed.

I felt so bad for Toby, though maybe working for Drummond Burgess would be a good thing. He would definitely get great visibility working for the boss’s kid, plus he might be able to leave for lunch once in a blue moon.

“I forgot to tell you the best part,” Daisy began, smiling evilly. “They’re putting Drummond’s office on the third floor with me and the other thirds and fourths, not on the second with you all.”

After a moment, Koji nearly yelled, “What?”

I was worried his brain was going to explode, but I understood.

The associates got promoted and actually moved up—literally—in our historic building downtown in the Loop on LaSalle.

There were five stories and the basement.

The latter held pro bono, investigation, IT, and human resources.

The first floor was reception, the firm’s library, and the paralegals—so they’d be

close to all the paper files.

Second floor was for first- and second-year associates, third floor was for third- and fourth-year associates, fourth floor held the partners' offices, and the fifth floor was solely for Mr. Mayhew, Mr. Burgess, Mr. Somerset, and their assistants.

I liked the building far better than the high-rises we often had to visit.

I loved that the floors creaked and that the building itself was built before the Second World War.

The moldings were all original wood, and there was marble wainscoting starting on the first floor.

Even the basement was beautiful, and the elevator was one of those ancient ones you had to pull the gate open and closed.

And though it went to the basement, we always took the stairs. Colton didn't trust it at all.

"Oh look, there's Jonah," Libby pointed out. "Since Tobias is going to work for Burgess junior, now's your chance to chat him up."

"I would rather have a root canal," I told her.

"You wouldn't have to stay long," Libby promised me. "I'll have Brize snap you up in three months tops."

"She's right," Natalie conceded. "You're never going to move up working for Gates, but you will with Brize. People would actually see you. Jonah is an excellent stepping stone."

“I don’t know why you haven’t moved already,” Koji said. “I mean, we all know you’re loyal, and you came with Gates to the firm, but it’s time to go.”

“Though, if he does transfer to a new department, he’ll definitely miss the view,” Daisy said with an eyebrow waggle.

“That’s true,” Natalie said. “Gates is gorgeous in a rumpled, just-rolled-out-of-somebody’s-bed way, and I too would enjoy looking at his shoulders and those biceps and?—”

“Oh, same,” Daisy mused, sounding more than a bit smitten. “He’s got that whole cowboy vibe going for him.”

I scowled at her.

“What? He does. And those jeans he wears to the office on Friday are?—”

“Sinful,” Libby whispered. “That man looks like trouble, but he’s gorgeous.”

We all looked at her.

“What? I’m fifty-two, not dead.”

“Please stop,” I begged them all. “I haven’t eaten yet.”

“It’s those eyes of his too,” Natalie gushed. “What do you call that color, amber?”

“They’re gold with pretty sepia chips in them.” Daisy sighed deeply.

“Oh, I’m gonna be sick,” I muttered.

“When I first saw them, I couldn’t even speak,” Natalie confessed. “Honestly, how often do you see gold eyes?”

“They’re so pretty,” Daisy asserted. “And that dirty-blond mane of his, and back to the jeans...the man’s thighs are?—”

“I think I puked in my mouth a little,” I let them know.

“All the men at this firm besides Villa?—”

“Now that is a beautiful man,” I murmured.

The firm’s lead investigator’s department was next to ours, and he always stopped on his way to his office to say good morning.

He had two others working for him, and they were always busy, but regardless if he was on his phone, he’d make an effort to greet me.

I loved that about him. I also very much enjoyed watching him walk away.

The only thing better was listening to that mellifluous voice of his converse in Italian or Mandarin or French. It was very sexy.

Natalie chuckled. “The line of people lusting after Raúl Villa forms behind me,” she stated. “First day I came to the firm, I thought, who’s the gorgeous man in the cargo pants?”

“What makes Raúl sexy is that illegal voice of his and his kindness. He really cares about people,” Libby gushed.

Natalie nodded.

“All of you are deluded,” Koji apprised us. “That man can’t even remember the names of all the women he’s slept with. I love it when someone shows up and he’s diving behind desks or other office furniture because he told whoever that he went to work in Paris for the year.”

Daisy snorted, which made the rest of us laugh.

## Page 3

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“Brize is over there too,” Libby announced, tapping me on the shoulder. “It might be helpful for you to say hello to him so when I suggest he take you from Jonah, then he will.”

“So in this scenario, I’ve left Colton and now work for Jonah Dumont?”

Before she could answer, Natalie chimed in. “You’re better off working for Pilar.” She used tongs to put spinach salad on her plate. “As I’ve said a million times, Brize is an entitled ass.”

“Again,” Libby snapped, “you simply don’t like him because he demands perfection.”

“He demands ,” she began, enunciating the word, “that people work overtime when he misses deadlines.”

I turned to look at Libby.

“That’s not true.”

“The hell it’s not,” Koji backed up Natalie.

“He expects his people to read his mind, can’t be bothered to follow up when we text him, and when we put his work aside after letting him know it won’t get done unless he actually talks to us, we end up staying late to dig him out of the hole he’s created.”

“That’s categorically untrue,” Libby defended her boss.

“At least we get paid overtime,” Natalie apprised Koji.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to get paid overtime. I want to go home and then go out and get laid.”

She snickered. “Well, good luck with that. I haven’t been on a date in ages.”

“Same,” he muttered.

“It’s not like that all the time,” Libby assured me. “And you work late for Gates, so you know we all have to burn the midnight oil on occasion.”

“It happens with Brize all the time,” Koji imparted. “Libby is lying because she doesn’t stay.”

“I’m not lying,” she retorted.

“This goes back to what I was saying before about you not protecting your people,” Natalie insisted.

“I protect my people, but associates are not mine, only the support staff.”

Koji grunted.

“Brize is gifted,” Libby told Natalie, “and sometimes that translates to late hours when he’s discovered some masterful loophole.”

“He’s lazy,” Natalie declared, shooting me a look. “And he has all of us doing his work while he takes the credit.”

“Clients want to see partner hours,” I reminded them. “Makes them think they’re being taken care of. Brize has to take the credit, you all know that.”

It got quiet for a moment before they all ended up nodding. Libby was smiling at me before she pointed over my shoulder. “He’s right there. Hurry up and introduce yourself.”

“Who are you pointing at? Brize or Jonah?” Natalie asked her.

“Jonah. I’ll talk to Brize first, then I’ll reintroduce you.”

“Will you two get out of the way,” ordered Koji, waving his hand to get us to move. “I need the quiche and the baby pickles off that plate too.”

Stepping out of line, Libby took hold of my bicep and drew me after her. When we were standing near the prime-rib station—it must be nice to have both the space and the money for a catered work dinner with waitstaff—she pointed at Dumont, who was talking to a strikingly beautiful blonde girl.

I had never been the kind of person who thought girl instead of woman , but in this case, it fit. Her outfit conveyed grown-up, but one look told me she was very young. And more importantly, very uncomfortable.

Her left arm was across her chest, almost like she was hugging herself, and in her right hand was a filled-to-the-brim glass of champagne.

Clearly, she had not come from the same grueling day the rest of us had, as she was wearing a tiny skintight black dress that didn’t leave much to the imagination.

Dumont, standing too close, was the cause of her distress, as evidenced by the slight steps she took back.



All that ended up doing was to bump her into another man, dressed like Dumont, in a suit with a dress shirt and no tie.

He too turned and smiled, also too close, looming over her.

“You know what, Libby,” I said softly, passing her the plate I’d filled with food, “I really am happy working for Gates.”

“What?” she asked, horrified.

Moving quickly, I made it to the girl’s side at the same time Dumont closed his hand around her upper arm.

“Becky, is that you?” I said far too loudly, using a weird high-pitched, excited voice, stepping in front of her, jostling her on purpose so that the champagne never stood a chance.

Some of it splashed me—which was fine, I was wearing jeans, an old Henley, and sneakers that had seen better days—but the rest got on the sleeve of the very expensive bespoke Italian suit Dumont was wearing.

Dumont yelled and recoiled. His buddy bumped me out of the way as he passed me to grab napkins from the table to our left. As both men were distracted, I put my hand out for the girl, offering, and the second she took my hand, I led her away.

I didn’t stop moving, and walked her all the way to one end of the long kitchen before rounding on her. “Are you okay?”

She seemed stunned.

“I had to get you outta there, am I right?”

“Ohmygod,” she whimpered, putting the almost empty flute on the counter before launching herself at me. It wasn’t hard. In her three-inch stilettos, we were more or less the same height, both of us hovering near five-nine.

I hugged her back, able to, as she was a woman.

With men, I could only manage a brief clench before the pressure, the holding, even the suggestion of restraint, started to make me queasy.

Always, I had to step away quickly. It was not at all the same when a woman embraced me and so I waited until she was ready to let me go.

“Who are you? What’s with the dress? Are you here alone?” I fired the questions at her quickly, my concern making me panicky. “Also, why are you talking to men twice your age? Are you in trouble? Do you need help?”

It took her a moment, and I understood that. I’d asked a lot of questions all at once.

Deep breath out. “I’m Janelle, Winston’s daughter, and I’m waiting for my friends to show up. We’re going to a party at our friend Ruben’s house in River North.”

My scowl was automatic. “Aren’t you, like, fourteen?”

Her eyes got big like an anime character. “I’m seventeen ,” she said firmly, defensively, like how dare I.

“Girl,” I said, because for starters, she still was one, and secondly, she needed to wake up. “Did your father see this outfit?”

“Yes,” she stated, her voice rising.

I crossed my arms, squinting at her. “If you go out to a club with your fake-ass ID, if someone puts something in your drink and then walks you out of there, that’s it.

No one will ever see you again.” She opened her mouth to say something.

“Yes, in a perfect society where every man respected every woman, and vice versa, we’d never have to worry about that scenario, but that’s not where we’re currently at, is it? ”

“I told you I’m going to a house party?”

I tipped my head.

“Fine,” she grouched. “I’m going to a club.”

“I get the fake-ID thing. I had one too. But I’m fully prepared to narc to your father if you don’t go change.”

“I—”

“And make your friends change too before they get here,” I said, piling on another stipulation. “Because they have to come in to get you, and I want to see what everyone’s wearing before you go anywhere with them.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” she proclaimed haughtily.

I grinned. “You wanna be grounded until you’re, like, thirty-five?”

She bit her bottom lip.

“Well?”

“Okay,” she whispered, and I heard it then. She wasn’t fighting me, I suspected, because she was still a bit spooked from Dumont giving her the attention of a woman he was interested in and not his boss’s underage daughter.

“That’s what it’s like in clubs too, unless one of your guy friends is going to stick to you like glue all night. But they probably want to pick someone up, so where does that leave you?”

“I get it.”

I stared into her big brown eyes. “I’m really not trying to frighten you. I just want you to be careful.”

“No, I know,” she said, giving me a hint of a smile. “Who even was that guy?”

I winced.

“He works for my dad, right?”

I nodded. “That’s Jonah Dumont.”

“Dumont? Really? I think his daughter is in my geometry class.”

“Maybe don’t tell her.”

She put up both hands. “Don’t even worry.”

“Okay, so where’s your phone?” She pointed in the living room, and I saw the tiny drawstring black-sequin bag.

“Let’s go get it, because I want you to call me, and I’m gonna save your number, so if

anything weird ever happens, you'll have another person to call if you can't reach your dad or whoever he's dating. "

"Oh, I am not making friends with any of those whores he's dating."

"Whores?" I grimaced. "Isn't the one he's seeing now an oil and gas heiress or something? I thought I read that."

"I swear to God she's maybe five years older than me."

"She is not."

"Swear to God, look it up."

I pulled my phone, and she leaned in close so we both saw my screen. When her age came up as twenty-three, we both ewwed.

"Told you," she said with a shiver.

"It's probably uncomplicated."

"Double eww."

"I don't really have anything to say."

She grunted.

"None of this is the point. All I wanted was for you to know you can call me."

"Are you sure?"

“Of course.”

A real smile then, finally, tremulous but real, lit her sweet face. “I’d love to be friends. What’s your name?”

“Pax.”

“Is that short for something?”

“Paxton.”

“That’s cool,” she murmured, and then grinned big, and I could see her playfulness and spark return. She’d been scared, but her equilibrium was back. “And I meant it, I’m happy to be friends. You’re a good guy.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” I said flatly as we crossed the floor together to the couch. She pulled the phone out of her bag that was basically holding that plus a lipstick and her ID.

“I know we just met, but you were totally my guardian angel, which was awesome.”

“I—”

“And you’re prettier than me and most of my girls.”

I scowled at her. “Men don’t want to be called pretty, believe me.”

“Sucks to be you, then,” she scoffed, arching an eyebrow before taking in my expression and giggling with relief. “Thick brown hair and big blue eyes—yeah, you’re really pretty.”

“Listen—”

“And your lashes are to die for,” she said, moving so she could look at my profile.

“Damn. Even with falsies on, mine aren’t that long.”

“Would you call me already so I can store your number,” I ordered, giving her a gentle annoyed shove away from me that caused a snort of laughter. “And turn on your location so I can find you.”

“You have to do the same.”

“Fine,” I grumbled.

She smiled at me. “You have to follow me on TikTok and IG as well.”

“Whatever,” I said with an eye roll and got a gentle elbow jab in response.

We perched on the back of the couch, and I looked at her TikTok as she explained who the other people were in some of the photos.

“Who’s the guy carrying you on his shoulders?”

“Jesse,” she whispered, blushing.

I grunted.

“Janey?”

Her father stood in front of us, not glaring at me, but it was a close thing.

“Hey, Daddy,” she said softly, standing too as he leaned sideways so she could reach

his cheek to peck. “It’s a great party. Your people are all super nice, especially Pax.”

He nodded, taking in the dress, the heels, the makeup. “Is that right?”

“Yeah, he’s dope,” she sighed, smiling at me, looking utterly smitten before she left, taking off one shoe, hopping for a moment, and then the other, before she turned the corner and was gone.

Mr. Somerset stepped close to me, arms crossed, making sure I couldn’t run, effectively caging me there, still perched on the couch.

What made it okay was that I could have easily scrambled over the back of the lovely piece of furniture to safety if that became necessary.

Which it wouldn’t—of course it wouldn’t—but my brain needed the safety net.

“It’s Paxton, isn’t it?”

“Yessir,” I replied evenly, putting my feet on the floor so he had to make room or crowd me. Thankfully, he edged back as I straightened to my full height, still having to tip my head to hold his gaze. “I work for Colton Gates.”

“That’s right. He brought you with him from the state’s attorney’s office.”

“He did.”

He gave me a grin then, the one that deepened the laugh lines in the corners of his lovely peaty-brown eyes.

Handsome man who gave off a feeling of stability and fun, kindness and money, all at the same time, and of course I understood why every woman who came into the



office, our clients, always watched him walk by when he deigned to be on any floor but his own.

“So,” he said, studying me, “what made you strike up a conversation with my daughter?”

It was his focus, singularly on me, plus the serious tone, that made my flight reflex kick in. And logically I knew he wasn’t going to grab my arm and make me tell him. He wasn’t about to hurt me, but I took two steps to the left anyway, so that my back was to the room and no longer the couch.

“Are you all right?” He tipped his head, and I heard his tone change from questioning to a trace of worry.

“Yessir, I’m fine,” I answered too fast, ending up having to exhale slowly so I didn’t begin either stuttering or hyperventilating.

I was so much better with women, kids, and dogs. And cats. Cats were good too.

Shit.

“Paxton?”

Double shit. He sounded concerned. “If you’ll excuse me for a second,” I said, and tried to slip by him.

He caught my arm, and instantly I felt my face heat, my stomach fill with ice, and a noticeable tremor ran through me.

I wasn’t having a full-blown panic attack, but it was close.

As usual, even as it happened, I had to try and identify the trigger.

I was betting it was his height and his proximity, but I would need to think about it again later when I could breathe.

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Poor Mr. Somerset, he looked terrible as he took a step back from me, but even that small amount of distance helped. Leaning over, hands on my thighs, I closed my eyes and counted.

“Please tell me what’s wrong,” he asked softly, concerned, maybe even a bit unsure, like I might barf on him or his polished hardwood floors. Both, seemingly, of equal concern. For all he knew, I wasn’t house-trained. “Maybe you should come sit down on the couch.”

Sitting was never good. Standing was always better. I’d learned that lesson young. If you were on your feet, you could run, and it was much easier to get away, even without shoes. Sitting was one step closer to being held down.

I was freaking him out, and it was both stupid and not.

I learned that in group therapy in my senior year of college.

I’d gone to a survivor meeting after watching a documentary in class about the foster care system.

Watching the kids and their terrified faces each and every time they were moved, all their worldly possessions in garbage bags...

it did something to me. Of course it had.

I remembered it all so vividly myself. Logically I understood that those experiences were over for me, and would not, could not, be repeated.

But still, seeing it, the helplessness, and hopefulness at times, was too much.

The shivering was followed fast by me scrambling out of my seat and making it outside the doorway in time to lose my lunch into a trash can.

My professor was kind and walked me first to the bathroom and then to her office.

I sat on her couch and sipped on a Sprite until the end of class.

Afterward, she invited me to a survivor meeting with her.

“Oh no, I’ll be fine,” I’d said weakly, lying through my teeth.

“No,” she’d replied, smiling kindly. “Not without talking.”

I went because she was my teacher and I wasn’t sure I was allowed to say no, and even if I could, should I?

I was technically a grown-up, all of twenty-two at the time, but socially inept, awkward, and jumping at my own shadow.

As her concern was palpable, I went with her willingly, walking arm in arm through the snow, off campus to the basement of St. Anne’s Catholic Church.

The room smelled musty, the chairs were the really uncomfortable metal folding kind that squeaked when you sat down, and the lighting made everyone look jaundiced. And yet...I felt safe.

My professor started the round-robin of why she was there with the declaration that she’d been raped fifteen years prior by a friend of her husband’s.

Most days—because of therapy and group, because of how much her husband supported her, because of her kids, her extended family, and wonderful friends—she was fine.

But sometimes for no reason, and other times because she had not recognized something as a trigger, she would unravel and need to spend a day at home in her safe space and regroup.

It was, she said to all the people in the room, perfectly okay.

“No one needs to be strong every single moment of every single day. We can give ourselves a break.”

I never did that. Weakness was not something I ever tolerated in myself.

Sitting in the small circle, I heard that there was a difference between self-pity and self-care. The designation had never been made clear to me before.

Later, as I went to more meetings and got my own therapist, the truth I’d always believed since childhood was finally, inexorably, destroyed.

No more hiding.

So many people had it worse than me. I heard them in group, and when it was my turn to share, to confess, I used to feel bad.

Like I was complaining. Like how dare you whine about being beat up, or going hungry, or trading in the poverty to become a scary man’s slave, when this woman lost her son that she loved?

I’d met women who were assaulted daily, people who sold their bodies for drugs and

food, and who had children taken from them.

I'd met men who were violated by people who were supposed to love them, who were pimped out at five and six, and others who were abandoned in the streets.

There was always a more horrific tale than mine, and I'd gotten it into my head that I needed to man up.

Don't cry. Don't be a baby. But the truth was, pain, like most everything else, was relative.

I had been hurt when I was a child, and though it stopped when I ran away at sixteen, when I gave myself to another to come in from the cold, with what he did, and allowed others to do to me, those wounds were deep and jagged and still open and bleeding. Nothing had ever been stitched up.

It took me years to realize that the grief I carried around was first for the little boy I had been, and second for what I allowed when I was older.

In therapy people told me, no, you're not being a baby; yes, of course it's okay to cry.

And most importantly, that all my feelings, all of them, were valid because they happened to me.

I never knew I needed someone to simply tell me it was all right to feel broken at times. The stiff-upper-lip thing was hard to carry off on a constant basis.

"Pax?" Winston Somerset's voice broke me out of my past and brought me into the present. "I really think?—"

"Pardon me," I said quickly, trying to smile. "Sometimes I get caught up thinking

about something for a second.”

He squinted at me, the concern there in those furrowed brows and dark eyes.

“You?—”

“Your daughter and I were talking, and she told me she was going to the movies or something with her friends, and I said that was great, but that she should rethink her outfit.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“The weather,” I rushed out. “I assured her that it was much too cold for that dress.”

“It’s too everything for that dress,” he asserted with a scowl before taking a step closer and bending so that his mouth was near my ear. “She wasn’t taking one step outside this house in it. I’m better at my job than that.”

“Of course you are,” I replied, stepping sideways, smiling at him. His proximity had made my stomach clench painfully. “I didn’t mean to imply that?—”

“Calm down,” he said off-handedly, and instead of bristling like I normally did—not being a fan of any of those words that belittled someone else’s feelings, calm down , take it easy , chill out—I took it how he probably meant it.

I was apologizing, and he was saying it wasn’t necessary.

“All I meant to convey was that I appreciated you looking out for her.”

I took a breath so my voice stayed level. “It was my pleasure, sir.”

He walked away then as the newest socialite he was escorting around town was

signaling for him, and when I turned for the kitchen, Dumont was there barring my path.

“What the fuck were you doing?” he blasted me, irritated—and slightly buzzed, given the whisper of slur in his voice as well as the sharpness of his tone.

And I would have responded, but Janelle appeared on the opposite side of the room, in leggings tucked into white Ugg boots, an oversize angora sweater, a chunky infinity scarf, and a beanie.

All she needed was a parka and she’d be ready to scale Everest. But she looked good for winter in Chicago too.

“Well?” he growled at me.

I tipped my head, and when he glanced over to where I directed him, he did a double take. The way the color drained from his face was fun to see. If the scene were in a movie, people would have jeered at the screen.

“Oh shit,” choked out his friend, whom I didn’t know—he didn’t work at the firm—as he joined us, hand on Dumont’s shoulder. “The hell, man, how old is that girl?”

“Seventeen,” I offered, staring at them.

“Sonofabitch,” the friend croaked, sounding scared. He gave me a quick clap on the bicep. “Thanks, man, you’re a fuckin’ lifesaver. That was good lookin’ out.”

As though I’d saved him and not her. “Maybe ask for ID next time,” I replied snidely.

He coughed, turned on his heel, and darted over to a group of women who were



definitely in his age bracket.

“Fuck,” Dumont groaned.

I moved to leave him.

“Wait.” He stepped in front of me. “You have to believe me. If I’d known that girl was underage, I would have never bothered her.

” If he wasn’t actually horrified, his acting was damn impressive.

His coloring alone—that had changed from gray to a pale, sickly green—told the tale.

The man had definitely thought she was over the age of consent.

“I have a niece who’s seventeen,” he almost whimpered.

I had a stray thought about what Janelle said—I would have to tell her that the girl in her class was Dumont’s niece, not his daughter.

“Oh God, I’m gonna be sick.”

“Don’t throw up on the hardwood,” I cautioned. “I think Mr. Somerset, and definitely the heiress he’s dating at the moment, are worried that some of us aren’t house-trained.”

He nodded.

“Have you noticed that some people look older than they really are, and some younger,” I said innocently as the front door opened and Janelle’s high school friends spilled in.

Four girls and two boys, all of them dressed for arctic exploration, all looking so very, very young.

“Maybe, like your buddy, you should check ID going forward,” I suggested helpfully.

When Janelle waved at me, I smiled back, and then, to poor Dumont’s horror, she gestured her friends close.

It wasn’t even necessary to hear the conversation in the small huddle, as all eyes were on him as she related her tale.

There were squeals of revulsion, faces scrunched up in disgust, and a resounding gross .

One girl even mouthed the words but he’s so old!

As a man in his prime, on the prowl, the blow to his ego had to be devastating.

“It could be worse,” I placated him as he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead into his hand. “You could have given her a drink or suggested that she go home with you.”

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“Oh God,” he moaned.

“This is why we don’t touch people, ever, without consent, sir.”

“Call me Jonah.”

“This is why we don’t touch people, ever, without consent, Jonah .”

“No, I—I would never. I just?—”

“You were trying to show her you were interested. I get it.”

“I’m normally so careful, I never—you have to believe me.”

“At least Mr. Somerset didn’t see.”

His head snapped up. “You were talking to him. What did you?—”

“Not a word,” I affirmed, meeting his gaze. “Don’t make me regret that decision.”

“No, I—God,” he muttered under his breath, clearly disgusted by even the implication that he was interested in a seventeen-year-old. “I would never—could never—I?—”

“Okay,” I soothed him. “Take a breath. My interference came purely from seeing her body language, and maybe her discomfort was because she’s never been in a situation where she had to assert herself and say no to a grown-up before.”

He shot me a look, and I snorted out a laugh. I couldn't help it. I felt so much better talking to him instead of Mr. Somerset. It was probably his height and leaner build.

"She looked like she wanted to be anywhere but there," I told him.

"I missed all that," he said miserably. "You saw it, but it was lost on me."

"I get uncomfortable a lot myself," I replied honestly, "so I know what that looks like."

"This is so—I want to apologize to her."

"If you want," I said, taking in the picture of Janelle and her friends, all on their phones. "I can ask her over or you can go with me."

He was quiet a moment. "How would that go? Between the makeup and how short the dress was, I thought you were twenty-three?"

I scoffed.

"Yeah, you see? It sounds like crap."

It did.

His eyes searched mine. "Thank you again for running interference. That could have been infinitely worse than being laughed at by toddlers."

"Be more careful," I cautioned him. "And stay sober so you can read cues."

"Yeah, I know," he said quickly. "I want you to know that I'm not a bad?—"

“Oh,” I said with a long, happy exhale. “Look who it is.”

The door had opened, and now, standing there, looking around, ignoring people who called out greetings to him, was my boss, Colton Gates.

It was impossible to miss him, at any time, in any place, for the simple reason that when he entered a room, it was hard to look away.

He had been blessed genetically, and there was no doubt about that.

Thick dirty-blond hair and gold eyes, which no one could see at the moment, were only two of his many gifts.

Even standing there, with his aviators on, in the same clothes he’d worn all day at the shelter—a long-sleeve T-shirt under a flannel one, khakis, and a pair of thick-soled hiking boots that had to be at least a hundred years old—he had everyone riveted.

I wondered how they’d feel about him if they knew it was quite possible that his boots were, in fact, ancient.

The only things he didn’t buy at consignment stores were his underwear, sweats, sleep shorts, and T-shirts.

All the rest was secondhand. He liked knowing that the shoes would be comfortable because someone else had broken them in.

I found that horrifying. The few times I’d gone with him, I didn’t want to touch anything.

I had a deathly fear of crabs and lice and bedbugs, and no amount of reassurance from him that everything in the store was freshly laundered made me worry any less.

I lifted my hand so he'd see me, and he immediately started across the room. And yes, I had felt better with Jonah than with Mr. Somerset, but seeing Colton, every drop of insecurity and fear ran off me like water.

When he reached me, I sighed again, deeply, so pleased to see him, but had to shake my head at the same time. Really? He couldn't have changed?

"What?" he snarled the instant he was in front of me, seemingly furious to the untrained listener. I noted Jonah taking a step back in response, unmistakably intimidated by my boss.

"This is a catered dinner to thank everyone," I explained, sounding tired, and pained, gesturing at Jonah in his black dress pants, black cashmere turtleneck, and black cap-toe Oxfords. "This is how we're supposed to look in our boss's home."

"Thank you," Jonah said softly, smiling at me. "You know, I'm losing my assistant to Drummond Bur?—"

"No," Colton snapped at him. "And you've got a lotta balls trying to poach my assistant."

Jonah appeared startled and a bit scared. "I was kidding, Colton. I would nev?—"

"Let's go," he barked at me.

"It's Saturday night, Colton," Jonah advised him, his gaze on me for a moment and then back on my boss. I got the feeling he thought he was saving me. "Whatever this is can probably wait until?—"

"No," he said again, his tone icy, grabbing my arm and turning toward the door.

“Where are we going?” I asked, speeding up so I was right beside him.

The moment he realized I was on my way to the door as well, he let go. He always did when I matched his stride or went ahead.

“I was contacted tonight by some FBI agents from California.”

I nearly stumbled, but his hand was there, faster than I could fall, and kept me on my feet.

“I informed them that we would meet them at that pub we like near my place.”

“That you like,” I corrected him without thinking, my brain on autopilot. The establishment in question was sticky. The floors, the booths, the varnish on the bar, never all the way clean. Plus, it smelled like cigarettes, stale air, and beer. Not a winning combination.

“That I like,” he amended.

“FBI agents?”

“Yeah.”

“Is someone dead?”

“No. Out of protective custody.”

“Really?” That was not something I’d ever considered. My ex—and I could only assume that’s who we were talking about—had been, I was certain, on his way to jail all those years ago. I hadn’t imagined, in my wildest nightmares, him ever getting out.

“Really,” he stated.

I started shaking.

“Listen,” he murmured, spinning me around to face him, hands on my biceps. “I don’t know shit about whatever the fuck this is because you haven’t told me, but I’m guessing this is where the panic attacks come from. Yeah?”

“Some of them, yes.”

“We’ll get it sorted.”

I had the urge to run. Not even to go home, but to hit an ATM, buy a plane ticket to Las Vegas, and get lost in the sea of people there.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he said flatly.

He’d read that on me clear as day. Just looking at me, he knew. It was crazy. It had always been nuts, he and I, from the moment we met.

“I need you, yeah?”

I took a breath because yes, he did. I made him stop and notice things like the stars in the sky on deep blue summer nights, or the sunrise on cold, crisp winter mornings, or how good all the plants looked from the vantage point of his desk.

I made him appreciate the comfort of the furniture in our office, got him to savor coffee, not merely drink it for survival, and my crowning achievement was that I made him a better friend.

I prodded him to call people back, to show up when invited, and to ask the people he



cared about to come over just to watch TV with him.

He was stunned when old friends and new showed up for no other reason than him suggesting beer and pizza on a random Thursday night.

He was more loved than he knew, but he also needed to be more accessible.

I did that. He gave me a chance, and I reciprocated by reminding him that his time was the most precious gift he could give.

Janelle walked by with all her friends in tow and smiled at me as she did.

I noted that she and the other girls, and one of the boys, all gave my boss longing looks as they passed.

It was to be expected. When you were built like he was, and your bone structure made you resemble a manga character or a superhero, people stopped and stared.

Mr. Somerset caught us at the door.

“You run in, grab your assistant, and go, Colton?” he teased my boss, closing in on us with his hand outstretched for him to shake.

There was a slight curl of his lip before Colton shook the offered hand. He never gave Burgess or Mayhew the time of day, but Mr. Somerset, he liked. Or at least didn’t hate. It was a fine line. “We had an emergency come up, so we have to go.”

“Well, I’m glad you at least put in an appearance.” He chuckled. “What’s with the sunglasses? Are you stoned?”

My boss was an occasional drinker, but narcotics, THC, or anything stronger than

ibuprofen was never allowed in his system. To prove it to the man, he lifted the aviators and pushed them back into the mane that fell just above his shoulders. The black eye was wildly noticeable.

“Jesus, Colt, what happened?”

“One of the guys we talked to in lockup yesterday, Saul Blackburn, was suffering through a meth withdrawal, so he tagged me before I even noticed he was taking a swing.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s drying out at the hospital,” I replied, looking for my coat. I had always liked the row of hooks Mr. Somerset had on the wall in his foyer, but at the moment, with so many there, my jacket was hidden. “We got him the last bed at county around one in the morning.”

Mr. Somerset shook his head. “And why are we interested in this man?”

“Because he’s the witness who can prove that our client, Demarcus Young, did not, in fact, stab anyone at a bodega out in Pilsen a month ago. We paid Mr. Blackburn’s bail, so he’s out of jail, and once his system is clean, we can take his statement before we put him into rehab.”

“Are we paying for his rehab as well?”

Colton squinted at him. “Of course. That’s the deal we’re making.”

Mr. Somerset nodded. “Well, all the partners are more impressed with your efforts than any other’s. They suggested we expand your department and add two more lawyers on rotation. I told them we’d consider it come next quarter.”

“If nothing else, we can use more help,” Colton stated. “But third and fourth years only. If another first or second year comes down to the basement—I’m armed now.”

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Mr. Somerset's eyes darted to me.

"Don't worry, sir, he's referring to his really big water gun," I explained as I continued to look for my coat. "There's a tactical display and everything."

He glanced at Colton, who grinned evilly. I had to smile seeing that.

"I've made myself clear," he apprised Mr. Somerset. "I'm not a teacher or a mentor. We use money and resources to get people the support they need. I can't use anyone without trial experience. That doesn't help me."

Mr. Somerset could have argued with my boss, his word was law, after all, but he also knew that if he pushed, Colton would simply return to the state's attorney's office—he had an open invitation—or he might go into private practice.

Either way, he'd leave. There was nothing holding him there, which was why Mr. Somerset had insinuated he'd pay Colton's capital contribution so he could be an equity partner.

Even saying it without really saying it had earned him the patented Colton side-eye that said, in no uncertain terms, as nothing else quite could, how insane he thought that idea was.

But I understood his reasoning. As Libby had reminded me, he wasn't an equity partner. He had no skin in the game.

"What is happening?" Colton asked me, irritation filling his voice.

“I can’t find my coat. It was originally on the fourth hook, but people must have moved things around when they came in and out.”

“Which one did you bring, your red one or the?—”

“I brought the shearling-lined leather one I stole from you.”

He went to look then, shoulder-checking me out of the way so I was standing by Mr. Somerset.

“I saw you talking to Jonah,” Mr. Somerset said softly. “I know we have some changes going on. Did you want to be moved as well?”

“No moving,” Colton declared, his voice holding a noticeable thread of warning.

Mr. Somerset looked concerned when he turned to me.

I smiled at him. “I’m happy where I am, sir.”

He nodded. “May I count on you to get him to a black-tie event tomorrow night at the InterContinental Chicago Hotel? We’ve spared no expense, as there will be new, potential clients as well as current ones we want to retain there.”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but is it something for the whole firm or more of a partner thing? Because as you know, as a non-equity partner, there’s not much point to having him attend.

Not to mention, he’s more of a shoot-from-the-hip guy than one to charm potential clients.

I mean, he had to get stitches yesterday because after the fight in lockup, we had to

go remove a woman and her three kids from a house with her abusive spouse. ”

“And the husband attacked Colton?”

“He attacked his wife with a switchblade, and Colton took what was meant for her. Fortunately, the man slashed and didn’t stab.”

“Oh dear God,” he gasped.

“It was all of five stitches,” Colton grumbled. “Hardly worth the trip to the ER.”

“That’s why I didn’t let him do any lifting today,” I pointed out. “All he was allowed to do was supervise and yell.”

“I do enjoy yelling,” he confessed.

I chuckled because it was so true. Mostly at me. Of course, unlike most people, I knew it was all bluster.

“I wondered about that,” Mr. Somerset said to my boss. “I saw you with the clipboard, directing people.”

“Directing,” I repeated. “There’s a gentle euphemism.”

“Shuddup,” Colton ordered me.

Mr. Somerset regarded him and then me.

“The good news is,” I said, feeling the need to provide further clarification, “attacking my boss put the husband in jail, where he’ll stay until the trial.

Afterward, he'll be going away on several charges, thus allowing the very nice mother to keep her kids and her home.

We need a few more questions answered, but Raúl is on it. ”

He was quiet a moment. “You two have much more interesting days than the rest of us.”

I smiled at him. “Sometimes.”

“Here,” Colton said stiffly, holding out his coat that had been mine for the last six months I'd held it hostage. It was big on me, thus the perfect fit for layering. I was also a fan of wearing it by itself, as it hung long and I didn't need to wear gloves. I was not a fan of them.

Once I slid my arms into the coat, he spun me around and zipped me up. He pulled out of his pocket his horrible hat—a double-brim knit beanie with a red pom-pom—and passed it to me.

“Won't you be cold?” I said kindly, hopefully. I really didn't want to wear the hat.

The look I got, his flat, intense stare, told me not to screw with him. I put it on and rolled my eyes before smiling for the man whose name was on our front door.

“Thank you for the wonderful evening, sir.”

He nodded, acknowledging my appreciation, but still gazing at us oddly, back and forth, Colton, then me, then back to Colton. “Thank you for coming. Do get some rest, Colt, and let me know if you need to take Monday off.”

Quick scowl. “I have to be in court at nine in the morning on Monday. Do me a favor

and don't worry about us, everything's handled."

"I didn't say the two of you. I said you, Colt."

"What?" He sounded both annoyed and bored.

Normally I would have elbowed him, but there were stitches on the side closest to me, so I leaned into him and whispered the command to be nice.

"Sorry, we need to get going," he told our boss. "We'll see you later."

"I will expect you tomorrow," he reiterated to Colton. "I need you there to dazzle our existing clients as well as new ones we hope to take on."

He nodded but didn't commit. We turned to go, waiting while others came in, greeting Mr. Somerset, and then we went out the front door and into the hall. There were three apartments on this floor, above him being a penthouse I couldn't even imagine. Who needed that much space?

Waiting for the elevator, even though I was worried about what was going to happen, I wasn't as scared as I would have been if he hadn't been there. He was, after all, my person.



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On the elevator, he yawned so wide, I heard his jaw crack.

“I hate it when you do that.”

“As much as you hate listening to me eat?” he asked snidely. I guess maybe I’d said that too many times over the years.

“Lemme think.”

“Screw you,” he snapped. “But listen, I need you to hit the high points for me on this situation before we reach the pub.”

“Not to be tedious,” I began, “as you’ve said I am on a number of occasions, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He grunted but didn’t say because he wasn’t ready to. I suspected it was the elevator; he wanted us off so we could speak privately. He didn’t like to share much outside of our circle of two.

As people got on, he took hold of my bicep and moved me back close to him, shielding me, putting me in the corner and stepping in front. There was no way at all for me to get out. It should have been suffocating. It should have made me hyperventilate. But it didn’t. Ever. Not with him.

It was the strangest thing, but from the first moment I met him to now, as he yanked me after him out of the elevator, I could not logically account for my reaction to the man.

He was bigger than me, six-two to my five-nine.

He carried a lot of hard, lean, roping muscle on his broad-shouldered, wide-chested frame, and he did not know the meaning of the word gentle .

Always, from the start, he'd manhandled me.

Just like now. If I'd planted my feet, he would have still moved me.

The man didn't hear no from me or wait or stop because none of those words ever altered his course.

He also had a rubber ball in his desk at work that he would use to get my attention, hurling it at me if I didn't answer him fast enough.

And God help me if I didn't remember to duck.

It was pretty solid, one of the ones he played handball with, and it killed a desk lamp the one time I missed it rushing toward me and didn't catch it.

To other people, I suspected that our relationship appeared abusive, how he treated me like I belonged to him, but unlike how it had been when another man had called me his property, Colton never hurt me.

Even in his haste, he was careful. He also checked on me. Constantly.

What did I eat? Was I drinking enough water?

Was I cold? Was I hot? When I was sick, he showed up with soup, Gatorade, and vitamins.

And it was the same with me. I had keys for everything from his car to his loft and even knew the combination to his locker at the gym.

I could unlock his phone, and if, heaven forbid, anything happened to him, I was the one who knew what to do, whom to call, had all his passwords, and would clear the search history on his laptop at home.

How he was, like a grouchy, growly, pissed-off lion, should have had me doubled over in a corner in a fetal position, but...

I knew him. From the second I laid eyes on him, it was like I saw him so clearly.

He roared a lot, yes, but for me, not because of me.

He was overly protective, and in those weird times when something or someone would scare me, some trigger setting me off that I hadn't anticipated, I had him to turn to.

If it happened at work, I would retreat to his office and sit in the wingback chair with the ottoman, which was there specifically for me.

It was behind his desk, not in front of it, so I was protected.

I would curl there, quietly, until I noticed him doing something wrong in Excel and would have to rise to fix the problem.

If it happened when we were not at work, I would go to his apartment in Bucktown and wrap myself up in the heavy quilt that was there for me on his overstuffed love seat next to the window, and I'd watch the snow fall in the winter and the city lights in summer.

If he was asleep, he'd stumble out of his bedroom, squint at me, give me the tilt-up of his head, an acknowledgment, and then go back to bed.

If he wasn't home, when he walked in, he'd offer me half of whatever takeout he'd brought home or tell me I was going to love whatever he was planning to make.

On the rare occasion he brought a date home, he would apologize, call for a car for them, and then flop down on the couch facing the TV and find a movie.

"I didn't mean to ruin your night," I would whisper from the love seat.

"You didn't," he would lie, and without looking at me, would pat the seat beside him.

I would always move fast, wanting to be close, but not enough to touch. The comfort was in being in his space, not being held. At least that was the way it started.

The last time it happened, I wedged myself against his shoulder, and like he'd been doing it for years, he lifted his arm and tucked me in tight.

I had been momentarily terrified that I'd made a mistake, initiated contact I didn't need or want, but instead of the jolt of terror running through me, there came an almost overwhelming feeling of calm, followed quickly by warmth.

The heat that rolled off the man was staggering, but since I normally shivered my way through my panic attacks, that was welcome as well.

It was the weirdest thing, and there was no accounting for it, but when I told my therapist, he said it was a good thing.

Trusting anyone was an act of faith for me, and if I could do it with one person, it meant others would follow.

And he'd been right. Over the years, more followed, and I could hug people now and be around them one-on-one, but still, I had to talk myself through certain situations, and sometimes, like with Mr. Somerset scaring me earlier, even being near someone bigger than me, who could overpower me, would set me off.

The only person who'd never, ever, tripped an alarm was also the one person who was constantly in my space.

My reaction to Colton Gates made no sense, but I was thankful for him every day. And now he'd know what a coward I was, and I hoped he'd find it in his heart to forgive me.

An SUV was waiting for us, and I was surprised because normally we took the L unless we were on our way to court, rolling or carrying a lot of materials.

We also got a car if we had a witness with us.

Didn't want them to think we didn't have the resources to care for them.

But when it was just us going somewhere, we usually took the train. His getting an Uber was strange.

"Why?" I asked, sitting beside him in the back seat.

"Because I want to get there fast," he replied grouchily.

We were both quiet for several minutes.

"What if you don't like me after you've heard the things I've done?"

He was scowling when he turned his head from the window to watch me. "You mean

the things that were done to you?”

“How do you know what was?—”

“Don’t be an idiot,” he warned me. “You took me with you so I could meet your therapist because he wanted to put a face—my face—to a name. I was sitting there when he said that your relationship with me was not healthy.”

I glanced away, remembering how distressed I’d been when that analysis had been shared. What saved my relationship with Dr. Butler and allowed me to keep seeing him was that he immediately amended what he said and made clear that for me personally, trusting anyone was a step toward healing.

“Mr. Gates is ? —”

“Please call him Colton,” I had insisted.

He’d cleared his throat. “You are dependent on Colton,” he’d explained, “but he is not dependent on you outside of the office, which makes this all right.”

And when I’d thought about that for a moment, it was true.

He had old Army buddies, he had friends from law school, he had the guys he played baseball with on a league every spring.

His parents lived in La Grange, and his sister, Brooke, lived in Lincoln Park with her husband and two kids.

Everyone loved him. He was a loyal and concerned friend, the one who showed up to help you move, took you to rehab, and came when you called in the middle of the night.

He was a loving son, a doting brother, and the uncle the kids loved best because he treated them like people, not kids.

I knew that because normally I was there when he was watching them.

His sister preferred that I was in attendance because I made certain the movies they watched were age appropriate, that all the food groups were represented during their meals, and that suitable safety equipment was put on—goggles, for instance, when handling an acetylene torch— before anything was begun that involved fire, heights, or driving really, really fast.

“Having Colton in your life, someone you trust, has opened you up to others, and that’s an amazing change for you,” Dr. Butler had continued.

“Because I’m so broken.”

His brows furrowed, and I couldn’t help my smile.

“Don’t default to running yourself down. That helps nothing. You can accept what I’m saying to you without adding anything. Will you try and do that?”

And I had been. But at the moment, I was terrified.

“Hello,” Colton barked at me, and I turned my head so I could see him. After a moment of searching my face, he told the driver to pull over, that we’d walk the rest of the way.

Once we were out on the sidewalk, I realized how cold it was. Chicago in January was no joke. The addition of softly falling snow wasn’t making the situation any better.

“Why did you do that? You’re still going to have to pay for the whole ride,” I grumbled, hoping my scowl was as dark as my mood.

“I don’t care,” he replied, tipping his head to get me to move. “I need you to tell me some stuff before we get to the pub, and I didn’t want the driver to hear.”

“Like what?” I asked, falling into step beside him.

“I want to know about growing up.”

I shrugged. “There’s not a lot to?—”

“No,” he growled, rounding on me. “I want to hear it all, because God help me if you make me unseal your juvenile records and read whatever happened to you myself.”



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“No one is going to unseal my?—”

“Oh no?” he dared me.

He could probably do it. Someone, somewhere, would fall for the lazy grin, the laugh lines in the corners of his warm, honey-colored eyes, and the rumble in his whiskey-soaked voice.

It was inevitable. More importantly, the man had so many acquaintances practically everywhere.

His network was unbelievably big. I was always surprised when we had to fly to some random place, like the last time when we were in some hole-in-the-wall part of Texas and someone walked up and greeted him warmly.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Yes,” I said tiredly. “What do you want to know?”

“You were in foster care, right?”

I nodded.

“Where?”

“Los Angeles. That’s where I was born.”

“And?”

And I had all trust beaten out of me by the time I was five. I didn't say that, of course, and I had to think how to phrase what I wanted him to know.

“Just tell me. Did you get hit?”

I had to be honest. “Yes,” I husked.

“How badly?”

“Very badly,” I confessed quietly, unable to look at him.

“No. Don't hide. Eyes here.”

I met his gaze.

He took a breath, girding himself. “Were you molested?”

“No.”

“But you had the crap kicked out of you on a daily basis?”

“I did.”

“Broken bones?” he asked, and I heard how professional he sounded, like he was interviewing a witness, and for whatever reason, how dispassionate he was helped.

“Many. Yes.”

“Until when?”

“Until I ran away at sixteen,” I said, starting to walk, knowing where we were headed. He immediately got moving as well.

“You realize the trauma you suffered up until you were sixteen would be enough for a lot of people to be fucked up forever, right?”

I nodded.

“But then something else happened. Someone new came into your life.”

“Correct.”

“How did it start?”

“I got a job at a twenty-four-hour laundromat in West Hollywood, and one night this guy comes running in, and he’s bleeding, and begs me to let him into my cubicle so the guys who are after him don’t get him.”

“And you did that?”

I made a face at him. “Oh hell no. I put him in the big washer for rugs and quilts and whatever and flipped the latch so he could breathe. When three guys came in ten minutes later—all big guys, maybe Russian, definitely Slavic from the accents and the sound of the words—I put on my bored face, and they talked to me through the plexiglass.”

I had described how I was locked in there until eight in the morning, showed them the combination panel on the outside—didn’t show them the override on the inside—and yawned a lot and said they could search all around if they didn’t believe me.

“You have cameras,” one of the men said, pointing at all of them, one in every corner

of the room. “Show us the footage.”

“Those don’t work,” I lied.

“Then what is to stop us from shooting you right now?” another guy said, pulling his gun from his shoulder holster and pointing it at me.

I tapped on the six-inch-thick plexiglass. “All I have to do is duck and hit the silent alarm under the counter here.”

They looked at me, at the box I was in, and when I arched an eyebrow, the guy with the gun holstered his weapon.

It was a good choice. The police station was five minutes away, and a lot of patrol officers stopped in to say hello at three in the morning when there wasn’t much else to do.

Even criminals were in bed at that time.

They gave the laundromat a cursory check, saw nothing out of place, and left. I waited fifteen minutes before I went to the washer and informed the guy that he could come out. He said no, thank you, that he would remain there.

“But you’re bleeding,” I reminded him.

“It stopped already, and I’ve been hurt worse than this.”

Since I had been as well, I got a couple of clean towels from the lost-and-found bin, opened the door, and gave them to him.

I also got him a bottle of water from the machine and then closed the door again.

He thanked me, and I returned to my cubicle.

The same guys came back another twenty minutes after that, checked more thoroughly the second time, and still found nothing.

They would have had to open every machine, and by then, there were college students in there watching them, eyeing them suspiciously.

When they asked me if I was sure I hadn't seen anyone, I squinted at the main guy like he was stupid.

He groaned and left. Not even mad, disgusted with himself was my guess.

Now, had any of them been remotely smart, they would have known that locking me in a cubicle all night—what would happen if there was a fire?—was against the law. But they didn't, so I got lucky. Not one of them knew what an OSHA violation was.

Around six, I went to the cash office, pulled the tape out of the VCR—it was not an upscale establishment, so there were no DVDs and nothing was saved to a Cloud—and rendered it unusable, unviewable, basically dead.

Since my shift ended at eight, I woke up the guy at seven, helped him out of the washer—he had some trouble moving, he was all cramped up by then—and opened the back door so he could go out through the alley.

When my relief showed up at eight, Mrs. Kwon and her husband, I explained that the VCR had eaten the much-used tape and they would need to put a new one into the rotation.

She gave me a pat on the cheek—she liked me, I always showed up for work—and told me that was fine.

Walking down the street toward the pay-by-the-night hotel I was staying in, a black SUV rolled up beside me, and when I turned, there was a man in the back seat on the driver's side, staring at me from a partly rolled-down window.

He appeared much like every other thug I'd seen in the neighborhood.

Tatted up, expensive suit, lots of gold rings, and easily a two-hundred-dollar haircut.

When you had no money, you always knew what everything cost.

"Hey," he said, and his voice was husky and low. "Come here."

I tipped my head, the question there in the gesture. Who did he think he was talking to?

He surprised me when he smiled and grunted, leaning back so I could see the guy I saved waving from beside him. Leaning forward, he gestured me over.

I got closer, still making sure I stayed out of grabbing distance, and he held out three hundred-dollar bills. When I reached for the money, he held on, and I had to pull a bit harder. He relented, and I thanked him.

"I haven't seen you around here."

I squinted, and he laughed that time.

"You're a wiseass, kid."

Crossing my arms, I waited.

"Name?"

“Paxton Walsh,” I answered, because why not? I was hiding out from Child Protective Services, not the Russian mob. “Who’re you?”

“Genrikh,” he replied, and his eyes narrowed. “Genrikh Antonov, but I go by Gen, yes? You saved my cousin Erast, and I am in your debt, Paxton.”

I shook my head. “Just Pax, and no, this covers it fine. We’re good. I didn’t do it for a reward anyway, yanno?”

He nodded, the window rose, and he, and my good deed, were gone. I remembered thinking in that moment that I would never see them again.

If only.

I exhaled deeply and turned to Colton. “That was the first time I met Gen, but after that he’d show up out of the blue, usually when I was walking back to the hotel in the morning.

Finally, after weeks of that, he caught up with me at my second job as a barback, where I worked from three to eleven. ”

“Two jobs at sixteen and nobody cared?”

I made a face like he was ridiculous. “I got paid cash under the table. No one gave a shit. I had three a year later at seventeen.”

“Okay, go on,” he prodded, steering me around a frozen patch on the sidewalk with an arm draped around my shoulders, and not moving it even when the sidewalk was clear of anything but soft snow.

“Well, once he found me at that club, he offered me a job at his, promised to pay me

more—a lot more—and said there was an apartment in a building he owned that would be better than paying weekly for a place where I could be murdered.”

“And you believed him?”

“Where I was staying was bad. There was a bathroom everyone on the same floor shared, and it was scary, especially at night.”

“Then what?”

“I moved in. There were two other guys sharing the apartment, both young like me, both really beautiful—like, they could have modeled—and it was nice. The apartment was clean, we all had our own rooms, and when Gen came and said that in his club, all I had to do was serve drinks, it sounded great.”

“But?”

“No but. My roommates served drinks, so did I, but none of us were allowed onstage, no dancing for us, and we weren’t allowed to turn tricks in the back room—not that I ever considered that—like a lot of the dancers did.

In fact, once, I was back there, carrying a tray of drinks to Gen and his friends, who were playing poker, and this guy grabbed me, and Gen was there really fast. I don’t think he beat the guy to death, but it was close and there was a lot of blood. ”

Colton smiled down at me. “You liked that. You felt safe.”

I nodded. “I did.”

“Things changed after that, didn’t they?”



“Yeah.”

I didn't add that when I was in the bathroom, rinsing out my jeans that were soaked in vodka and beer, he came in with extra clothes for me.

When he was about to go, I took hold of his arm, made him stop and thanked him.

For years after that I'd blamed myself. If I had let him leave, never reached out, never touched him, maybe things would have been different.

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But he took hold of my chin, lifted it, and then kissed me so sweetly, so gently, that I tumbled right into his trap.

He'd been amazing since he met me, and I wanted to show him my gratitude with a gift.

I had one thing to give him, and that was my virginity.

And of course, by that time, I realized that he was beautiful and so very sexy.

With his glossy black hair and midnight-blue eyes, everyone fell at his feet.

There were women and men, all drawn to his power, money, and the immediate need to become his possession.

Much later, when I was broken, I watched gorgeous, proud, wealthy women beg him to come home with them.

Men who were bigger, stronger, would willingly submit to being taken, in front of others, tied down, put in chains, anything to please him, as long as Gen would make them his.

The trouble began when he was done, when he had whoever at his mercy, and once the fog of passion cleared, that was when he would invite others to take them as well. For a price...

I had started as his love, moved into my own apartment, showered with gifts,

supported to get my GED and then start college. He paid for everything, and I was on his arm. It was, in the beginning, a fairy tale I'd never imagined.

Yes, I knew he still had sex with other people, but he came home every night to my bed.

Yes, I knew he was a criminal, but he also took care of widows and orphans and protected everyone who worked for him, as well as their families.

The requests, when they came, started slow. He wanted a threesome, and then he wanted to watch the fun. Then a new threesome without him, instead with friends. When strangers showed up at my door, I packed my things and ran. I got as far as the bus station.

He showed up and swore he was sorry, said I'd never made it clear I didn't want to be shared, and promised me it would never happen again.

It was always fine for a while, but inevitably, the pattern would be repeated.

The amount of times I left, and then allowed myself to be talked into returning, was far too many to count.

It was easier to listen to him, to believe him.

The gutter beckoned if I ran away. And even the time before the last, when I moved out, got a new apartment and a new job, when I was attacked by a junkie on my way home, it was him, stepping from the shadows, there to save me.

I was leaning up against a wall, hyperventilating, when he stood there with me, rubbing my back, telling me everything would be all right.

I went home with him that night. But always, always, it would start again.

He would point out some man in the crowd at the club. “He thinks I’m so lucky because you’re so beautiful. Come on, let him touch you one time. I’ll be right here.”

“Why would you want any other man to touch me?” I’d asked, not understanding, my own desire always to have him all to myself.

The last time we were together alone, when I still cared, when I still loved him, I was giving him head, and suddenly there were hands on my hips.

When I jolted and gasped, that was it, there were three men clustered around us, and when I reached for Gen, he laughed and shoved me away.

When he walked out of the room and left me, my heart broke in two.

I lost time after that, days, weeks, and when I eventually came to, I was in the hospital. He was in the chair beside my bed, and he seemed wrecked. Rolling my head sideways, I was staring at him, and he startled when he saw I was awake.

“Fuck, baby,” he’d gasped, and I couldn’t pull my head away when he cupped my face in his hands. It was a fight even to try and keep my eyes open. “I didn’t know they would leave and take you with—I’m so sorry, I couldn’t find you, and...but it’s over now. They’re gone.”

Gone meant he’d killed them. They were dead.

Normally news of his protectiveness, his possessiveness, came with a surge of happiness.

He’d made someone pay for touching me or hurting me, and it made me feel loved,

prized.

But not that time, and never again. I finally knew better.

He saw me as something he owned, nothing more.

He couldn't make money pimping me out if I was gone.

I closed my eyes after that, too broken to look at him.

Once I left the hospital, I was taken to his mansion in Beverly Hills, and I had a room, just like the others.

Sometimes he slept with me, sometimes men who worked for him showed up, and men he wanted to be in business with.

He hit me because I was a robot. He wanted me to love him, but that was gone.

He showered me with jewelry and watches, so many clothes, made my suite an oasis, and beat me because I no longer gushed.

The light in my eyes, he said, had gone out.

My spirit had been extinguished. He hated that he'd done that even as he gave me to others, the money and favors they offered too much to turn down.

People wanted me whether I was willing or not.

It didn't matter to them. They enjoyed themselves either way.

Life went on, and while he thought of me as lifeless, that wasn't the truth.

I was hatching a plan. I waited and listened.

Because no one watched when he put things in his safe, but I saw all the numbers as he pressed them.

It needed his handprint and the code, and there was only one shot at it.

If he messed up, it locked down for the day, and while he grumbled about it, he liked the security.

The last night I was there, I was my old self with him.

He actually cried; he was so happy. We had sex, and he never suspected that I'd drugged him.

While he was loopy, I walked him to the safe, pressed his palm to the plate, and dropped him on the floor.

He didn't move. I then entered the code and cleaned out the safe.

There was a hundred grand in cash, fake passports, a pouch full of diamonds, and an eight-terabyte hard drive.

Fortunately, there were ten of us in the house, four women, six men.

It worked out perfectly. Each person I released from their locked room received ten grand.

I didn't mention the diamonds, and nobody asked.

I was sure they probably had etched serial numbers on them, and I didn't want

anyone to get in trouble.

I took them purely because Gen was probably holding them for someone else, or they were a deposit and would be exchanged for cash later.

I didn't know, didn't care. I simply took them.

I didn't ask if everyone was escaping with me, I knew their hearts.

They all wanted out as much as I did. We'd all fallen for Gen in the beginning, each taken to his heart and his bed.

Not one of us didn't feel regret, shame and, mostly, that we were, without a doubt, the stupidest people on the planet.

To be so gullible was insane. But it was a new day and not one person didn't accompany me to the airport.

Every single one hugged and kissed me and then got on a plane.

I got a ticket for later in the day and called Erast.

"Holy shit, Pax," he barely managed to get out. "I've never seen Gen so—he's foaming at the mouth, I swear to God."

Somehow, I didn't have that need to run like the others had. I mean, I did, I was not sticking around, but not immediately. I had something to do first.

"I know you're working with the FBI," I told him. "I've heard you on the phone. I've followed you and seen you talking to them."

Silence on the line.

“I didn’t tell Gen because, let’s face it, if I had, you’d be dead.”

Shaky exhale then. “Yeah.”

“I hate you for doing nothing, but I hate him more.”

“Listen, Pax, I?—”

“Here’s what I want,” I began. “I want you and your FBI contact to come to the airport where I’m sitting outside the security checkpoint at terminal three. I will be here for two hours, so you better fuckin’ hurry.”

I hung up then. Exactly twenty-seven minutes later, he walked in, hands in his pockets, followed by a well-dressed tall Black man in a navy suit and two other men, one in a terrible, ill-fitting gray one and another in a Hugo Boss that fit him like a glove.

“You stay back,” I instructed Erast. “I only want to talk to him.”

The man strode forward, the confidence and an almost regal air rolling off him. He took a seat beside me, then pulled his credentials from his breast pocket at the same time so I could see the badge and the ID with his picture.

“I’m Special Agent in Charge Mike Lattimer,” he said, offering me his hand.

I took it and was amazed at how warm his grip was.

“You’re freezing,” he told me, replacing the badge, his brows furrowed. “You look a bit pale as well.”



No big surprise there. “I don’t want to stay,” I said flatly. “Promise me I don’t have to.”

“You don’t have to stay, Mr. Walsh, and from what Erast said, it doesn’t sound like I can even call you as a witness. You’ve had no access to Mr. Antonov’s business dealings. Isn’t that right?”

I nodded.

“You’re a victim who finally fought back. It’s impressive.”

“It was cowardly, but it’s done,” I said, unzipping my backpack. I passed him the hard drive. That must have caused Erast to move, because both agents ordered him to stay still.

“What is this?” Lattimer asked me, holding it in his hand.

“I have no idea. Erast probably does. There might be pictures or video of me being assaulted on there, as well as the others. If it’s just full of people like me being hurt, please use it as you see fit.

I suspect, though, that there might be some actual murders on there, and maybe even some blackmail material. ”

His face scrunched up a bit—probably because the idea of me and others being violated was painful for him to consider. I didn’t know, but I felt like it was a safe assumption.

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“Since I’m being truthful here, full disclosure, alongside that drive,” I continued, “there was a hundred thousand dollars in cash in the safe. There were also lots of passports, which I put in a bag for you.” I passed it to him.

He pulled one out, examined it, then his focus was back on me.

“I hope those will be helpful.”

“I’m sure they will be.”

“I’m gonna go stand in line now to get through security. I know you can find me if you want, but like you said, I’m no use to you. But if you could keep Genrikh Antonov poor so he can’t send someone to kill me, that’d be great.”

He nodded. “I will be sure to seize everything once I get back to my office.”

“Also, at his club, in the office, there’s a safe behind the safe. So make sure whoever goes in there finds the second one as well.”

Slowly, he looked over at Erast, who, as he was out of earshot, stared worriedly back.

“He didn’t tell you, did he?”

“No.”

“He’s a weasel, so watch yourself,” I warned him.

“I certainly will.”

“You’re a dead man, Pax,” Erast yelled over to scare me.

Lattimer took hold of my arm, but when I caught my breath, he let go quickly. “I promise you, you are not a dead man, Paxton Walsh.”

“Thanks,” I said and stood up.

“What about the diamonds?” Erast snarled, charging over to me, but he was once again stopped by the agents. “What happened to those?”

“What diamonds?”

“There was three million dollars in cut diamonds in that safe, all about two carats each.”

“I already told you what was in the safe. There was nothing else there.”

“That’s fine. We’ll all see. Gen has every room in that mansion under surveillance.”

“Which makes sense,” Lattimer chimed in. “What I don’t understand is, why no guards?”

“The house was normally filled with men,” I clarified for Lattimer. “But today, Gen sent everyone out on a job as you probably know from Erast here.”

“Yes,” Lattimer concurred. “I just thought, there had to be more than those that we swept up in our raid.”

“He locked all the others in their rooms but me, and once he was out cold, I released

them. And about the camera system,” I said, glaring at Erast, “yes, it works perfectly as long as no one disabled the cloud backup.”

“You fuckin’ little faggot,” he barked at me.

“Sticks and stones, man,” I said with a shrug, and enjoyed the FBI agents walking him out of the terminal. He had no more power over me. Neither did Gen.

It all started with cleaning out the safe.

Once I opened it and stopped supporting Gen, allowing him to drop like a rock to the floor, I had run to his office, powered off every camera, turned off the link to the cloud, and then unplugged the computer.

I then disconnected the hard drive, took it to the kitchen, and tenderized it with the heavy-duty meat mallet.

Once that was done, I swept it all off the counter into a soup pot and carried it to the deep end of the pool.

I then emptied the broken bits, made certain that most of them were settled well at the bottom—some were floating—and then replaced the pot in the drawer where it went.

All my life I’d been thorough. I never left anything to chance. That was the easiest way to get hurt.

On our way out the door, I had everyone put their phones into the microwave and set it on high for twenty minutes. There was no way it would take half that long. Everyone thought that was inspired idea. My only regret was that I wouldn’t get to see the outcome.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Colton directed, and it took me a moment to focus on him and remember where I was, and more importantly, when . All that had happened nine, going on ten, years ago now. It seemed like another lifetime. “Go back.”

“To what?”

“So you just got on a plane from LA to Chicago?”

“Yeah.”

“Why Chicago?”

“Originally, I wanted to go to New York because it was the farthest away, but the guy who drove us to the airport was super nice, calmed us all down because we were scared and a bit manic, and even drove us through In-N-Out on the way. He told us all about Chicago and how great it was and how much he missed it. So I thought, yeah, Illinois instead.”

“Wouldn’t Maine have technically been farther away?” he muttered.

I shook my head. “Not enough people in Maine. My plan was to blend in.”

“Of course.”

“Why do you sound mad?”

“Because it basically came down to a coin toss that I have you in my life at all!”

He yelled the last bit, and that quickly I was crying.

“Why’re you doing that now?” He could not have sounded any more exasperated if

he tried. And I loved that.

Anyone else, listening to the story I had just imparted, would have been gentle and careful, but not him. He was supportive, ready to stand between me and the world, but still annoyed when there were tears out of nowhere.

It was that, as well as a million little things, like ordering food he knew he'd never finish so I could take the rest home.

Walking slowly on purpose so we could talk, and always putting his hand on the corners of his desk when I was on the floor getting something.

He was exceedingly vigilant, and I counted on him for that.

Unlike Gen, who had told me he loved me a hundred times and then gave me away, like trash, Colton had never uttered anything close to those words, but I knew he would never allow any harm to come to me.

And he was madly possessive of my time. There was no big surprise that I loved Colton Gates.

As battered and bruised as my heart was, and having given up on loving anyone a long time ago when I was jumping at my own shadow, still, I loved him.

When I looked at him, and only him, I always thought... home.

And now what? I was supposed to drag him into danger?

"Oh God," I moaned, and bent over so I could breathe.

"It's okay," he crooned, rubbing my back. "We'll deal with whatever this is."

But how could we? And why on earth would I ever put a target on my home?

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:47 am*

When I straightened up, my first thought was, Well, Chicago's been great, but it's time to go .

“Stop,” he said immediately.

It really was something how he could read my face like that. “I will not have you in danger, and if Gen is out, I?—”

“Come here,” he ordered, tugging me after him, walking us halfway down the block to duck under an awning that got us out of the falling snow.

Once there, he brushed me off, fiddled with his hat that I was wearing, and adjusted it so it was no longer sitting slouched and stylish toward the back of my head, but was now pulled down so it covered my ears.

Standing there, letting him arrange me to his satisfaction, I almost laughed.

“What?”

“I don't...nothing.”

He cleared his throat. “I need you to listen now.”

I inhaled shakily, and the exhale was just as labored.

“Are you listening?”



I nodded fast.

“You are not going to run away. After living all this time with your real name, building a life, a reputation, a network of people who depend on you, as you do them, and working hard to fix the damage that this piece of shit and all your foster parents carved into your soul, you will not take this moment to give up because you’re worried about me. ”

“Yes, but?—”

“God,” he yelled, letting his head fall back. “Can you for once give me some goddamn credit?”

My eyes opened wide in surprise because...yeah. This was new.

“I’m not stupid. You always think you’re so much smarter than me, but fuck you, I’m the lawyer. I went to school a helluva lot longer than you.”

I waited a moment.

He crossed his arms.

A few people walked by, glanced over at us and then sped up. I was guessing that if we had been yelling, they would have known how to react, but the standing in silence was probably creeping them out.

After another moment, I said, “Are you done?”

He grunted.

“I am smarter than you in some areas, obviously none of those being the law. But

why you're being an ass about that is beyond me."

He glared at me. "You're better at Excel than me."

I squinted at him. "I refuse to have an entire conversation about what you're better at than me simply because I missed whatever convoluted point you were trying to make."

"It was not convoluted."

I crossed my arms.

"It wasn't," he muttered belligerently.

"Sometimes," I began, "not all the time, but on occasion, you have the psychological maturity of a five-year-old."

"What?" he groused at me. "Nuh-uh."

I rolled my eyes.

"So what? Who cares?"

"Could we start walking again? I'm freezing."

Grabbing my arm, he steered me into the falling snow that was coming down quite a bit harder. "All I was trying to say was that I can take care of myself and you. Think about it. Have I or have I not been doing that for the past five years now?"

He had. He'd hired me and then assumed I would leave the state's attorney's office with him. Along the way, all my many breakdowns had been met with unconditional

support and understanding.

All that was amazing, but it did not negate the fact that due to his heroic nature, he sometimes rushed into the fray when it wasn't necessary. A lot of the time, taking a step back and looking at the situation, it was easy to see what was needed.

"This, right now, is a different thing," I pointed out. "This is actual physical jeopardy you could be in."

"Could be. We don't know yet."

"But you have to admit, if I'm not standing right next to you, you probably won't get hurt. You understand that, right?"

"Maybe don't start imagining what could be the issue before you know."

"I will not have Genrikh Antonov, or anyone who works for him, anywhere near you," I said firmly, yanking my arm out of his grip. "That will not happen."

Grabbing me again, he pushed up the sleeve of his coat that I was wearing, took hold of my hand with his gloved one, and resumed walking.

"Why?" I said after a few moments, not minding the handholding as much as being steered around by my arm like I was ten.

"So you don't run away."

"As if you're not faster than me."

He grunted smugly.

“I will wait and see what they say, but seriously, I can’t have Gen?—”

“I have to tell you, that name does not inspire any kind of fear.”

“If you knew him, it would.”

“Yeah, really big man abusing people younger than him who don’t have his same resources and are basically at his mercy.”

I cleared my throat. “If he’s out, I’m sure there’s new ones, but?—”

“I wish I had a Xanax or an edible to give you.”

I smiled then.

“We’ll both have a shot of bourbon at the pub.”

“No, we will not,” I assured him. “Bourbon is vile.”

“That’s sacrilege you’re speaking now.”

I shivered hard.

“We’re almost there,” he soothed me.

“It’s not that. I... I was so stupid.”

“When?”

“All the times I went back,” I said under my breath. “You have no idea how many times I was away cleanly and then returned.”

He shrugged. “What do I say when we talk to women and men who have been through similar situations?”

“No,” I rushed out. “It’s not the?—”

“Oh, the fuck it’s not,” he rumbled. “It’s the allure of ruins and you know it.”

“No, Colt, you?—”

He tightened his hold on me so I was tucked up against him.

“You knew the ruins couldn’t sustain you.

That life was no good, nothing there, but because it’s what you were used to, because you understood how to navigate the twists and turns, you went back since you knew it would be good and safe, even if only for a short amount of time. ”

“I was an idiot,” I declared.

“You were human,” he replied with a shrug. “Give yourself a break.”

We walked in silence for a few minutes.

“How did you go to school?”

“I got my GED, and then Gen paid for my first two years of school that I started at seventeen when I lived with him. Once I moved here, I transferred to DePaul University and got my BA in criminology. One of these days I should go back and get my master’s.”

“Why didn’t you get the combined BA and master’s?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe...money?”

“Lose the sarcasm,” he demanded.

“Then don’t ask stupid questions.”

“Fine. Go on.”

“I had the ten grand as you recall, but I had to get a job fast because eating was also a priority, and the whole roof-over-my-head thing was necessary as well.”

“Right.”

I laughed suddenly. “You used your GI Bill to pay for school and, well, your parents. I basically had a drug-dealer pimp of a boyfriend for a bit before I bailed.”

He did a slow pan to me, and I lost it.

“Are you drunk?”

That was funnier because he knew better.

I’d been drunk once in all the time he’d known me, and that was because we had been celebrating putting a monster in jail forever without parole.

The little boy had been so scared of his father, and had finally, after a year, come out of his shell and was trusting his new foster parents—who had since adopted him—when he had to testify.

Another witness had overdosed, and they needed Jeremy, the lone child who had survived the night Russel Blevins slaughtered his family.

The little boy had been six at the time, had been seven when called upon, and he was terrified to face his biological father.

I had gotten permission for the family dog, Heimdall, a Doberman pinscher, to go with Jeremy into court.

They had court dogs who sat with kids, but Jeremy didn't want one of those, he wanted his own dog who slept beside him every night.

It had made all the difference in the world.

The little boy was not afraid of his father with Heimdall's head in his lap.

The judge even complimented him on what a good boy his buddy was, and the smile on the little face did something to the jury.

I saw it in their expressions, their revulsion and hatred for his father.

They'd seen the carnage, seen too the horrific damage Blevins had inflicted on his family before the last time.

To see the cutest little boy with big brown eyes appearing so much better, leaning over to whisper to his dog...

If looks could kill, his father would have been dead where he sat.

When the boy walked out of the courthouse later, hand in hand with his new father, I saw how hard his new mother was trying not to cry.

Of course when I gave him a tissue, and he ran over to her and had her crouch down so he could dab at her eyes, that was it, we were all crying.

Colton had to keep glancing up at the sky for some reason.

“What is with you?”

“Remember the Blevins case?”

Instant scowl. “That case is burned into my brain, are you kidding?”

“That was the one and only time I’ve been drunk, so no, sir, I am not, at this moment, under the influence of anything. I just realized I’m too tired to ever run from Gen Antonov again. You’re right. I won’t go anywhere.”

His flashing smile then. “I’m proud of you,” he said, his voice husky with emotion. “That’s a very?—”

“We will, however, tell them that you need security.”

“I don’t need any goddamn—oh,” he gasped because I’d leaped at him.

Arms around his neck, my body pressed tight against his, holding on for dear life. “I have too much to lose here,” I said into his ear, “and you know, of course, that begins and ends with you.”

I could feel him shaking, heard his breath catching as one hand cupped my nape, the other pressed to the small of my back.

“You’re stuck with me now, though,” I told him. “There’s no going back.”

“No,” he rasped, inhaling me. “No going back.”

His voice was odd, crackly, like he was unsure about something. I was about to ask if



he was all right.

“You always smell like oranges,” he croaked out. “What is that about?”

“It’s neroli oil,” I reminded him, easing back, gazing up into his eyes. “You always ask me that same question.”

“I do?”

“Yes,” I said, letting go of him.

I noticed he was still holding me, and normally, with anyone else, there would have been panic. But not with him. Never with him.

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From the very first moment when I walked into his office—the wrong place, as it happened, as I was supposed to be reporting to another ASA—I had looked at him and thought, He’s drowning. He needs me .

Walking over to his desk, I read his name off the plate I had to unearth from the paperwork covering it, realized I was in the wrong place, but pressed the button and answered his line anyway.

“You’ve reached ASA Colton Gates’s office,” I rushed out, pulling out my phone and typing as I listened. Once done, I promised that either Mr. Gates or his assistant would get back to them. I then did the same with the other six lines, taking notes as I did so.

Once it was blissfully quiet, I turned to him.

“Who the hell’re you?” he barked at me.

“I’m in the wrong office. I’m not your assistant. I thought I was. I’m not,” I clarified, searching for his cell phone on the desk of doom. “The girl I met in orientation is probably yours, and she seemed very nice.”

“What?”

“I’m in the wrong place,” I reiterated, speaking slower, as he was clearly having trouble parsing my words. “I’m sure the right person will be right along.”

“What?”

I squinted at him. “Listen, I have no idea how you’re not grasping what I’m saying, but more importantly, where is your mobile device?”

“What?”

“Do you have a cell phone?”

“Yes.”

“Where is it?”

“Why?”

“I took notes,” I said like he was dumb, and really, I was starting to wonder about him. “And I need to get them to you.”

“What?”

“No, not again,” I snapped, seeing the phone under a coil-bound report and picking it up.

“Gimme that,” he ordered, rising out of his chair and trying to grab it out of my hand.

I eluded him easily, taking a step back, and when he came around the desk, I slipped around the other side, barely avoiding getting tangled in the lamp cord precariously draped between the outlet and his desk—the layout was not only poorly executed, but dangerous.

“Stop moving,” he growled.

“You first,” I volleyed, calling my phone from his and storing his number, all the

while keeping one eye on him.

Of course when I focused on my phone for a moment, that was the second he tripped on the lamp cord, fell over, and had the really ugly brass lamp come crashing down on his head.

“Fuck!” he roared.

Text sent, I put his phone down on the nightmare of a desk—I had no idea how he found anything on it—and darted for the door.

“Don’t you dare leave me!”

Not where do you think you’re going , or stay where you are , or don’t take one step out of that door ! Instead, what came out of the man’s mouth was don’t you dare leave me ! He had no idea how important the me was, but I heard it loud and clear.

At which point I spun around, went back, and crouched down beside him. “Please let me take a look at you and make sure you’re not bleeding.”

“Oh, now you’re worried?” He was both surly and sarcastic at the same time. It was impressive. “I thought you were running?”

I exhaled sharply. “Just let me see,” I ordered, reaching for him.

He leaned away. “The lamp’s not even heavy, I’m fine.”

We were both quiet a moment.

“You are aware that your desk is where paperwork goes to die.” He needed to be told and perhaps no one ever had.

“I am,” he snarled. “Why do you think I need an assistant?”

Picking up the undented, unbroken abomination of a brass desk lamp, I watched as he sat up and crossed his legs like he was about to do yoga. Both the man and his office were a rumpled mess that needed help.

“This lamp is hideous.”

“Yes.”

“I’m hoping it was a gift.”

“It was.”

I was glad to hear it. At least I knew his taste didn’t run to horrible.

“The layout in here makes zero sense,” he muttered. “It’s a wonder I’m not dead.”

“Perhaps not dead, but certainly concussed.”

He shrugged.

“I think her name is Georgia.”

“What?”

I glared at him. “You must begin to make quicker intuitive leaps or this can never work.”

“What makes you think?—”

“Faster,” I gave the command, snapping my fingers.

It took him only a moment. “Oh, the other assistant.”

“Very good.”

“Is she an ass like you?”

“I beg your pardon?”

He gestured at me. “You know you’re a dick. Come on.”

I tsked at him.

“Pass me the phone.”

“Your cell or the monster on your desk?”

“The monster.”

I stood up and passed him the phone that could have twelve lines holding at once—it was a beast—and watched him as he first put it in his lap and then picked up the handset.

I was then informed that he was calling HR.

“Hey, is this Rebecca? It is Rebecca, isn’t it?”

” He listened a moment. “Tanya. Really?”

“Oh dear God,” I groaned. The man didn’t even know who the head of HR was?

“Zip it,” he growled, then, “Oh no, not you,” he advised Tanya. “Okay, so, I would prefer to have—” He looked up at me in question, eyebrows raised.

“Paxton Walsh.”

“—Paxton Walsh be my assistant.”

He was quiet, taking in whatever she was saying, and then pressed the handset to his chest instead of putting the call on hold. “Apparently Georgia—good memory, by the way?—”

“Better than yours.”

“What?”

I stared at him, waiting for him to catch up.

“Oh, yeah, well, I was eighty percent sure her name was Rebecca.”

“There has to be an organizational chart here somewhere,” I said sadly, glancing around at the boxes on the floor and then at the mess on his desk.

“It’s probably under something.” He pointed over his head at the same horror show I was eying. “But I guess Georgia came up here fifteen minutes ago, heard me curse out a police officer, and ran back to HR. She’s too scared to come back.”

“You are loud.”

“I fell!” he yelled defensively.

“Modulate,” I ordered him.

“I fell,” he repeated with much less volume.

“You scared her before you were chasing me around the desk,” I reminded him.

“Oh yeah.”

“You need to take a beat here,” I cautioned him. “From the few mere moments of interaction we’ve had together, we can already assume that if I work for you, I’ll probably drive you insane.”

He tipped his head sideways, pondering that. “But I’ll be organized, won’t I?”

“You will be that.”

His sigh was long. “It’s bad in here.”

“Yes, it is. The layout of this office, as you’ve already pointed out, is really atrocious.”

“Yeah. And?”

I shot him a look.

“I’m asking what you’re gonna do.”

“For starters, there will be bins and binders and plants. I see bookcases and a coatrack and more plants. My God, man, there is nothing alive in here, and there’s no windows and no fan. What are you doing to circulate the air, and what creates oxygen?”

“Already this is too many questions.”



“We need things like an air filter, a fan, new lamps, and again, plants. So very many plants.”

“Do you need me here for any of that?”

“Of course. It’s your office. You need to make the?—”

“No. It will take another year if I have to make decisions.”

“Fine. Then all I need is a credit card.”

“Okay,” he sighed, and got back on the phone with Tanya Howard from HR, who was really lovely and long-suffering.

She didn’t just have to make sure that Colton had an assistant, but that lots of the ASAs had help, as well as taking care of all the judicial personnel, from paralegals to court reporters to victim advocates.

She was swamped. “Yeah, so, Walsh will work for me, and whatshisname can have Georgia.” He was quiet a moment.

“Yeah, Irwin. That’s right. Irwin can have Georgia.

He’s pretty chill. I’m sure she’ll love him. ”

Before I left that day, he passed over his platinum American Express.

“I was kidding,” I told him. Already, even after three hours, the piles on the desk at least appeared manageable, half the documents having gone into his fancy cross-cut shredder because it was all old information.

“You have to make decisions on colors, and textures, and what kind of decor you want, and?—”

“No. You do it.”

“What if you hate it?”

He gestured around him. “This is worse.”

It was true. His office resembled a prison. Gunmetal-green walls were uglier than I thought they would be. Maybe it was called institutional green . Either way, a sad color.

I was given the keys to his office, and my badge would get me inside the building, even on the weekends. He had no idea how excited I was. He trusted me, and it had been ages since I’d cared enough to want that from anyone.

It made no sense, but when I was standing and he was sitting on the floor, even though he was the boss and I was the assistant, he didn’t seem to care how it looked; he was utterly confident in who he was.

He didn’t need to talk down to me or make me feel small so he could feel big.

People who didn’t know him only saw the rough exterior.

They didn’t hear his voice when he was soothing a child, didn’t see a man who would sit in silence with victims, never rush them to hear their stories, instead simply waiting.

I had transformed his office so much so that when we left the state’s attorney’s office, a friend who took over his office asked him to leave everything as it was.

I felt really good about that, and though I did leave the décor, I brought all the plants with us.

As though my yucca cane, my bird-of-paradise, or my five-foot snake plant could even live without Colton.

I was certain they all needed his frenetic energy for life.

“What are you thinking about?” Colton asked softly.

“Sorry,” I said, stepping free of him, smiling sheepishly. “I don’t know why I’m being so sentimental today, thinking about the past. That’s not like me.”

“I know why,” he replied almost sulkily, taking my hand again, not my arm like normal, and walking me down the street.

“Why?”

“Because this thing with your ex is scaring the crap outta you.”

I nodded. “Yes, that seems well reasoned.”

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:47 am*

“Oh, thank...you,” he said, having started out with sarcasm, but stopping because something had caught his interest as we reached the street we had to cross to get to the pub.

Even though the snow was falling steadily now, it had warmed up a fraction, which was always strange.

What was even stranger was that after a total of nine years in the city, I could tell that.

“Is something wrong?” I asked him.

He tipped his head toward the entrance of the pub, and I saw the men there in trench coats, scarves, gloves, and trapper hats. They looked like they were freezing to death.

“That’s probably the protection for the men waiting for us inside.”

“Why would FBI agents need protection?” he asked. “From whom?”

“Whom,” I repeated.

“Whom is correct,” he declared. “Heathen. But FBI agents don’t need protection.”

“Gen Antonov is scary,” I promised him. “Or, if not Gen, then whoever else is hunting for me.”

“No. Still not buying it,” he said, his eyes never leaving the men across the street even as he yanked me sideways after him. “Walk with me, and we’ll see what?—”

“Stop!” someone yelled.

“Okay, so I think you’re probably right,” I said drolly as I ran beside him.

He didn’t even snarl at me, which told me how worried he was.

Taking a right down an alley, I was pleased that it was a full one—lots of restaurants, and the last one on the left was a nightclub because people were coming out the door scantily clad and immediately pulling on coats.

It had been a good call to make Janelle change; she would have had her legs freezing off, as one woman we ran by complained.

As soon as we were on the street again, we heard an engine revving, and then Colton was tugging me after him again to the left. Bullets hit a window we ran past, then brick, making small pieces of mortar fly off the walls.

We ducked down a second alley and stopped as Colton leaned out to peer around the corner.

“Let’s split up,” I suggested. “That way?—”

“The fuck we will,” he replied angrily.

“I don’t want you to get hurt,” I insisted, trying to pull my hand free of his grip.

“Stop that,” he ordered, scowling, his eyes like molten gold. They changed to the darker, deeper, nearly brown color when he was mad. “We stay together. We always stay together.”

“I—”

“Like I would ever let you leave me,” he grumbled, squeezing my hand for a moment.

What?

What was he saying to me?

Why did he always include the me when I was trying to go? He’d done it the first day we met, and now here it was again. I had to wonder if he even knew when the word tumbled out of his mouth.

His head turned to the right, staring over my shoulder, and I did the same, taking in the large black SUV coming fast down the alley.

We stood at the same time, then veered left, bolting down the snow-covered sidewalk toward the intersection. A van was suddenly so close, too close, and even as Colton changed directions, the door was thrown open.

“Hurry, get in,” the woman there demanded, standing in the door, hunched over, holding out her badge.

Colton shoved me forward, putting me in the van first, then followed quickly. She threw the door closed just as the van was strafed with bullets.

“Oh dear God!” she shouted, sitting down hard across from us as the driver put the van in gear and peeled away from the curb.

“What the hell is going on?” Colton barked at her.

“I’m Special Agent Veda Walker, and we’ve been keeping an eye on Gen Antonov since Sergei Csokas was released from prison two weeks ago.”

“I don’t know who Csokas is, and I would have thought Gen was in jail because—fuck!” I shrieked as the van was hit on the side Colton and I were on, sending us both tumbling onto the floor.

“For fuck’s sake, Gabe!” Walker shouted at the driver.

“Fuck off, Veda,” he roared back. “I have no idea where to go to get us—I thought you said we had goddamn backup!”

Colton crawled on his hands and knees to the driver and unclipped the guy’s seat belt. “Hold the wheel until I have it and then dive over there,” he ordered, pointing at the passenger seat.

“Are you kidding me? You’re gonna get us killed.”

“No, you’re gonna get us killed,” he bellowed. “Now move!”

Gabe did as directed, holding on to the steering wheel until Colton had a grip on it, and then dove toward the passenger side as Colton took his seat.

“Grab something!” he yelled at us as he hit the brakes hard.

Through the front window, I saw the other SUV blow by us through the intersection, other cars barely missing it, and then flip a U-turn farther down the street. Colton immediately backed us up and took a hard left, accelerating fast.

“Speak!” he commanded Walker.

She was taking shaky breaths in and out to try and calm herself, and Gabe clipped himself in as I did the same.

“Give her a second,” I pleaded.

“Fuck that,” he retorted as bullets hit the back of the van. “We’ll be dead before she tells us what the fuck is going on.”

“What was that?” I called up to him.

“That’s an AK-47,” he replied, taking a right that tipped the van a bit before it righted itself. “And we’re gonna die if I can’t lose these assholes.”

“They can’t afford to kill us,” Walker stated. “At least not Paxton. With him dead, Csokas will not be getting any intel about his diamonds.”

“Could you please explain all this?” I asked her.

She took a nervous breath. “Diamonds went missing the day you and nine others escaped from Gen Antonov. We know he made sex slaves out of the ten of you, but you’re the only one anyone can find.”

That made me terribly happy, and there was a warmth in my stomach thinking about everyone else out there free. I hoped they were all happy.

“Basically, they all got off the planes at their destination and disappeared. None of them had families, all foster kids like you, Paxton, and so they all went poof into the ether.”

“That’s good.”

“You’re the one who kept your name. You’re the one who could be tracked. Why did you do that?”



“Because I had too much time and schooling put into my life to disappear.”

“Well, Agent Lattimer should have kept you there, or at least examined that drive you gave him before he let you get on a plane.”

“Why is that?”

“Because Antonov is a very untrusting man who recorded every horrific detail of the crimes he committed and planned for his boss, Sergei Csokas.”

“As I said, I have no idea who that is.”

“That’s because Gen was paid well to look like the guy in charge of the Kulich crime family in Los Angeles.”

“But you’re saying Gen wasn’t in charge?”

“No. He worked for Csokas, who in turn worked for Nickolai Rokov back in St. Petersburg—in Russia. Rokov has since moved to Miami, and he heads the syndicate.”

“Go on.”

“What the fuck, man,” Gabe roared from the passenger seat. “Where the fuck are you—Veda, I have no idea where this madman is taking us!”

I looked out the front window, as there were no others to check. “Oh, this is Wacker Drive. We’re fine.”

“The fuck are you talking about?” he yelled at me. “I don’t see this anywhere on—what the fuck?”

I turned back to Walker. “So the diamonds Erast thought were in the safe when I opened it belonged to Csokas.”

“Correct. After Lattimer reviewed the drive you gave him, he was able to pick up Antonov and everyone who worked for him. Antonov then made a deal with us and went into protective custody and eventually WITSEC, and Csokas went to jail. He couldn’t roll on Rokov—he was still in Russia at the time, and the CIA can’t pick up Russian citizens, no matter what the movies tell you. ”

“You could have kidnapped him, though.”

“Yes, but once Csokas was arrested, Rokov cut ties with him.”

I nodded. “What does any of this have to do with me?”

“Where the fuck are we?” Gabe ranted at Colton.

“Lower Wacker Drive,” I told him.

He twisted around in his seat so he could see me. “The fuck are you talking about?”

“There are three levels of Wacker,” I began enlightening the agents. “The one we’re on now, if you don’t know where you’re going, you’re gonna end up on Lower Lower Wacker, and basically, God help you then.”

“I don’t—my GPS can’t even get a location under all this fuckin’ concrete!”

We came to a sudden jolting stop.

“The fuck are you doing?” Gabe shrieked at Colton.

“Do you see anyone?”

He was quiet for a moment, checking the side mirror, and then after another moment, got out of the van and checked around before getting back in.

“What the hell, man?”

Colton shrugged. “One wrong anything, and like Pax said, you’re way down there on Lower Lower Wacker.

Even people who’ve lived here all their lives can get mixed up now and then.

If you’re from out of town, you’re fucked.

It’ll take ’em a minute, or several, to get outta there, but we need to be gone when they do. ”

“Oh, thank God,” Gabe said with a heavy sigh.

“Where are we going?” Colton asked.

“The FBI office on Roosevelt Road, please.”

Colton glanced at me over his shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I assured him.

“Come up here and tell me. I can’t see you from here.”

Gabe was more than willing to trade places with me.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:47 am*

Zane Calhoun was the Special Agent in Charge in Chicago, IL, and he was horrified to learn that Veda Walker and Gabe Hall had left the office without backup. The whole “we thought they were with us” didn’t fly with him.

Once we were in the conference room with bottles of water, both of us having shed our outerwear, we sat across from Walker and Hall. When SAC Calhoun joined us, Walker repeated what she’d said in the van, adding more information.

“So due to some inconsistencies with evidence, DNA, and what a judge deemed improper testimony, the California Courts of Appeal concluded that a lower court admitted into evidence biased testimony, as Gen and others, like Erast, testified to charges not included in the indictment.”

“They gave too much damning information,” Colton said, “going beyond the scope of the investigation. Right?”

“Yes.”

“And because of that,” Colton continued, “the trial needs to be redone without a jury hearing all that.”

“Correct.”

“What does this have to do with Pax?”

“So Csokas is still in jail, held for the next trial, and we made a deal with one of the inmates, a guy everyone knew could procure things, and for a reduction in his

sentence, put him in contact with Csokas.”

“And of course you don’t even care what this procurer did, right?”

“He moved a lot of drugs, but no,” Walker told Colton. “Getting his twenty years down to fifteen is not keeping me up at night.”

Colton nodded.

“Once our guy talked to Csokas, of course all he wanted was a phone. We got to hear everything when he talked to Rokov, who lives in Miami at the moment, when he spelled out that Gen would have to return to court to give testimony against him a second time, and would Rokov please eliminate him before he could do that.”

“None of which explains what we’re doing here.”

“I agree,” Calhoun affirmed, sounding a bit bored.

“Rokov advised him not to worry. Well, because the office in Miami has Rokov under a microscope, when we found out he wanted to get in touch with Gen, we had the marshals release him into our custody, and let Csokas know we had Antonov and we’ll be ready for his second trial.”

“Which is not at all how any of that works, and Csokas should know better, and if not, at least his lawyer would,” Colton said, his voice dripping with derision.

“You’re right, and his lawyer apprised him not to do anything, but of course, he called Rokov to give him this news, and no more than two hours later, as soon as we had confirmation he made contact, we had Gen call Rokov.”

“So Gen called Rokov, and the big man said what to him?” Colton demanded, his

furrowed brows and clenched fists on the table letting me know how tense he was.

I leaned into his side, crowding him, and he quickly exhaled.

“Rokov notified Gen that if he could retrieve the diamonds he’d been holding for Csokas, who in turn had been holding them for Rokov, then Gen would be a free man. Rokov would take him off his kill list.”

“And Csokas just rots in prison?”

“Yeah,” Walker told him. “Rokov doesn’t give a crap about his loyal man. He only wants his diamonds.”

“And Gen?” Colton asked.

“We suspect that if Gen gets the diamonds, he will take them and disappear. I mean, really, the chances that he gets out of this alive are slim. And once we played Csokas the conversation between his boss and Gen, he rolled on Rokov, which renders Gen?—”

“Irrelevant,” Colton concluded. “You have a bigger fish, so you can ditch Antonov.”

“That’s right.”

“What I don’t understand,” Colton began, “is why doesn’t Rokov send guys after Pax?”

“Because no one knows about Pax except us and Gen. He didn’t give Pax’s name to anyone and claimed a rival organization in LA hit his house.”

“That makes no sense,” I chimed in. “Erast knew that was a lie. He was working for

you guys the whole time.”

“Not from the beginning, but you’re right. Erast would know that was a lie, and could have told that to Rokov, but his cover was blown shortly after you left, and he died in an explosion when his car blew up in his driveway.”

“Wasn’t he in protective custody?” I asked. “I thought Agent Lattimer put him in witness protection.”

“He did, but Erast was stupid and didn’t listen to the marshals. He didn’t follow their specific mandate for his safety. He contacted Rokov, wanting to get back to his old life. He hated Gen, even though they were cousins, but he had enjoyed the money and other perks.”

“And by then, they knew he was the one who had rolled on Gen,” Colton surmised.

“Correct.”

“Like house sex slaves,” I said before I even realized I was going to. “That was a perk Erast had appreciated. He never hurt me, but I heard him with all the women.”

Everyone was silent for a moment.

“Two days after contacting Rokov, Erast was dead,” Walker informed me.

“I thought he was smarter than that,” I mused as Colton put his arm around me. The heat, as well as his strength, was so appreciated.

“But now Pax is the only one who knows for sure what happened that day he and the others escaped. And Gen certainly won’t ever tell anyone that his sex slave got the better of him, turned everything over to the FBI, and skipped town with ten thousand

dollars of his money.

That's why he put out the rival-gang story all those years ago. He didn't want to lose face."

"Of course not," I agreed.

"Where is Gen now?" Colton wanted to know.

She was silent, and when Calhoun cleared his throat, we both looked at him.

"Gentlemen, as the Los Angeles office is now prepping Csokas for the witness stand, and Rokov has been taken into custody, awaiting trial, the fact of the matter is, Genrikh Antonov is no longer needed as a witness."

"No," Colton said under his breath.

"Because Antonov was given transactional immunity?—"

"He was freed," Colton stated.

"How?" I asked him.

"Because they gave him blanket immunity, and he held up his end, he's out," Colton stated.

"Now he's running around without any protection and with a giant bull's-eye on his back because everyone knows he rolled on Csokas, but that doesn't help you at all because I bet no one had eyes on him and he disappeared. "

I turned to Calhoun.



“I’m sorry, I can’t speak to how he slipped out without anyone knowing where he went because that’s not how we do things here in Chicago.”

“That’s not fair,” Walker admonished him, and I could tell, the moment the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. Because when his gaze moved from me to her, she visibly flinched. She was not a Special Agent in Charge, and I was betting she forgot that in the heat of the moment.

Calhoun then refocused on Colton and me. “All this, everything between Rokov, Csokas, and Antonov, transpired weeks ago now. The Los Angeles office has their case made with Csokas, but still, it would be nice to have the diamonds, as they would tie everything up in a bow.”

“Why’s that?” Colton asked him.

“Apparently, the diamonds were to be used as a payment for guns, RPGs, basically a whole lot of firepower Rokov was in the market for. If the diamonds can be found and Rokov gives us the name of his contact, we can make a deal for the weapons and shut down this supplier of illegal firearms.”

“This was years ago,” I reminded him.

“But the contacts are all still in place.”

“Well,” I said with a shrug, “as I told Agent Lattimer that day, there were no diamonds. I suspect Gen either never had them or perhaps put them to a different use.”

“Which I would believe,” Calhoun replied, “except we have video of him from the camera across the street from that pub you were going to. I’m betting Genrikh Antonov wants to have a word with you.”

“You used Pax as bait without even letting him know,” Colton accused Walker. “And how the hell did Antonov know Pax was in Chicago?”

“That was Erast—at least that’s our assumption,” Walker said, appearing pained. “When we recovered Gen’s phone, it had a message on it placing Pax in Chicago. The text came from a burner phone.”

“Gen’s known all this time where he is.”

“Yes. He simply couldn’t do anything about it without money and men. He was completely cut off from his accounts. All his assets were first frozen, then seized.”

“As if all his money was in one place,” I scoffed, squinting at her.

“Well, I agree it’s likely he had reserves we didn’t know about, though less than he would have had if you hadn’t given us the information about the second safe behind the first. We really appreciated that—there was a lot of money and gold bars back there, as well as another hard drive with even more evidence. ”

I nodded.

“You gave us so much that day, laying the groundwork for Rokov’s eventual arrest.”

“And you repay me by not telling me Gen Antonov is after me,” I said sourly, standing up and walking to the large mirror on the wall.

“We can protect you,” she asserted.

“Yeah, because you’ve done such a great job already,” I replied curtly, glowering at her. “I have no idea how long Gen’s been here, watching me... And how did he... How did...”

“What?” She sounded exasperated.

I surveyed Walker, then Hall, and finally turned to Colton, my voice having deserted me.

“That’s a very good question,” Colton stated, reading my mind as usual, eying Walker. “How did Gen know we would be at the pub?”

“I—” She opened her mouth, then closed it, glancing around at all of us before stopping on Hall and gasping.

“Why’re you looking at me like that?”

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“What did you do?” she barely got out, her breath catching as she searched his face, trying to uncover the man she knew.

I understood. It was the same experience I had the first time Gen hit me.

The hard slap was one thing, the shock as I hit the ground another, but all of it paled in comparison to the absolute betrayal of all I’d felt for him.

How could a man I’d given my heart to, put me on the ground?

It shifted my whole world around me. Things I had missed finally coming into sharp focus.

I suspected Agent Walker was having a similar experience.

Hall stared back, holding her gaze, the two of them locked in a battle of wills, her wanting him to speak, him resisting.

“We already know, Hall,” Calhoun said gravely, lifting his hand, gesturing for someone to come in.

“As soon as I was notified that the van was driving away from the pub, I knew you were all running for your life. Or more precisely, that one of the two visiting agents was in danger along with the lawyer and his assistant. The other agent knew that once their partner and the lawyer were dead, they would deliver the assistant to Genrikh Antonov.”

Hall's face crumpled as he regarded his partner. "I would have never hurt you."

Which didn't matter, because now, as that moment was in the past, he would not have the opportunity to hurt her.

And in his heart, because they were friends, and more, partners, and had history I wasn't privy to, he must've hoped that when push came to shove, he would have remained steadfast. But the facts were, when faced with the choice, with Gen demanding her life, there was no telling what he was capable of.

I was certain that once, long ago, he would have never thought he'd betray his oath either.

Walker seemed devastated, her eyes swimming with unshed tears, and I knew she was sad, but I was betting she was mad too. I always cried when I was furious.

He bent his head forward, closed his eyes, and put his hand on his forehead.

The door opened then, and Calhoun nodded at the two men who walked in, followed closely by a third, all coming around the table.

"What would you have done if Colton hadn't taken over the driving?" I asked him. "It all happened so fast. Would you have killed him?"

He took a shuddering breath, lifted his head, and looked at me. "Antonov and I got our wires crossed—that's why his men were outside. I thought it would be fine, though. I thought... I was certain you'd think they were the agents."

"No. Colton knew better."

His eyes flicked to him and then returned to me.

“When the two of you started running, I was scared, but by the time we got you both in the van and I started driving, I was sure I could salvage the situation when Antonov’s men caught up to us.

They were in a newer SUV, twice the horsepower, there was no way we could outrun them in that ancient fucking van. ”

Calhoun turned to Colton. “How did you do that, and why did I lose both Walker’s and Hall’s GPS signals at—oh. You took them underground to Wacker.”

“I did.”

“Smart.”

Colton shrugged. “I try.”

“What were you going to do when we got away clean?” Walker whispered to Hall.

“I don’t know, but then we were on our way here, to the office, making better time than I thought we would, and then I got a text from you, sir, saying you were sending reinforcements and that you were tracking our phones... I knew it was done.”

“Well, even though you were still a few minutes out, I wanted you to think you were closer than you were so you wouldn’t hurt your partner or Mr. Gates here.”

“What happened?” Walker barked at him. “You were so good for so long. You went through rehab and kicked?—”

“It was the money, Veda,” he rasped. “This has nothing to do with drugs. I couldn’t get out from under it. Every time I was sure I could clear the debt on a sure thing?—”

“Oh my God,” she groaned, turning away from him. “You were gambling again?”

“Antonov said he had the money to give me, and more, if I would bring him his favorite piece of ass.”

Without warning, Colton was up and around the table, ready, I was sure, to pulverize Hall. But two of the agents stopped him as the third put handcuffs on the disgraced agent.

“Get the fuck off me,” Colton warned them, yanking free, shaking off the hand that again tried to grab him.

“Leave him alone,” Calhoun ordered, and I gestured for him to come to me.

Moving quickly, Colton was in front of me in moments, slipping his hand around the side of my neck, yanking me forward to him, pressing my forehead to his chest.

I was trembling hard.

“I’m not gonna stand here and tell you that everything is gonna be great—this whole thing might get kinda sticky—but...I’m here. We’re together, so we’ll figure this out.”

“Hall texted Gen about me,” I said, like saying it out loud was going to mean something.

The feeling of abandonment, of being alone, all of it whirled through my head.

And it was ridiculous. I shouldn’t have been so hurt.

I barely knew the man. But it was his job to protect me, and he had instead made the

decision to simply hand me over to a man who wanted what I'd stolen and would then leave me for dead.

He didn't care about me, never had. To both men, I was merely a means to an end.

I gasped, and Colton's hands were on my face, tipping my head up so he could see my eyes, staring down into them.

"I figured out it's not Hall who hurt my feelings."

"I'm sorry, did he say something about his feelings?" I heard Walker ask.

Colton shushed her and then smiled. "How could it have been Hall who hurt your feelings? You don't even know him."

"Yeah, but he's supposed to be the good guy," I said, watching as two of the three agents walked the cuffed, dejected Hall out of the room. The third one was standing there, looking at Walker, as though waiting.

"I'm the only good guy you should worry about," Colton said, and the tenderness in his voice brought my attention back to him.

"You're right," I said, smiling.

"And there's no way you could have ever loved Antonov. You know better, and I'm certain you and Dr. Butler have covered this."

"Yes, but it's one thing to know and another to feel, and of course, the allure of ruins, as you pointed out."

"How old were you the last time you saw him?"



“I was nineteen.”

“You were just a baby.”

“That’s true.”

He shrugged. “It’s time to cut it all loose, don’t you think?”

“Easy to say, harder to do.”

“No. You’re giving him power he doesn’t deserve.”

And that was very true too.

“You’re smarter than you were nine years ago. You’re a grown-up and can see things for what they were.”

I sighed deeply. “You always know.”

“It’s a gift,” he deadpanned, kissing my forehead and then letting me go before turning to Calhoun. “Okay, so are we good to go?”

“I’m sorry?” Walker nearly shouted at him.

It made sense. She was reeling from the loss of her partner.

“You have Csokas to make your case with. Rokov is in custody, and he’s probably the top stop here in the US, but you have the information now to take down a large criminal organization, so there can’t possibly be anything more you need from us.”

“We need to discuss the diamonds,” Walker rasped.

“No,” Calhoun advised her. “Because of Mr. Walsh, on both the day he left and the part he unwittingly played in drawing everyone out with these supposed diamonds, we have the case Mr. Gates outlined. And because Mr. Gates is good under pressure?—”

“It was the Army, sir. They teach you not to panic.”

“They do, it’s true,” Calhoun agreed. “But because Mr. Gates here knows the streets of Chicago so well, he saved you and Mr. Walsh, and also allowed us to bring your wayward partner to justice.”

“I—”

“You have to give a statement now about Hall, while everything is clear in your head, and then you need to get on a plane home, Agent, to be debriefed by your SAC.”

She took a shaky breath. “How do we know Mr. Walsh is giving us the truth?”

“We don’t, but thus far, he’s the only one who has,” Calhoun told her flatly.

The fact of the matter was, no one but Antonov, Csokas, and Rokov had ever seen the diamonds.

No one except for Gen could say with any certainty that they had ever been in his safe at all.

I didn’t really mind that he was on the hook for them, nor did I care that him not having them meant he couldn’t go live the rest of his life on some tropical beach somewhere.

If I had derailed his plans, I was glad. He had certainly done a number on mine.

“If there were ever diamonds in that safe,” Calhoun said, “they weren’t there the day of Mr. Walsh and the others’ exodus.”

“Yes, but?—”

“Lattimer said Mr. Walsh denied finding diamonds the day he gave him everything at the airport. Of everyone who ran that day, Mr. Walsh is the one who retained his name. All the rest vanished. Perhaps the diamonds went with one of them, but the bottom line is, they’re gone.

My money’s on Erast Antonov, the cousin.

I suspect he took them, and Rokov made the mistake of blowing up the one person who could have returned them to him.”

“Sir, I?—”

He held up his hand. “You’re keeping this agent waiting. He needs to take your statement and put you on a plane home. Your ex-partner will be traveling shortly as well.”

She stood up and was almost to the door when she turned and looked at me. “I’m sorry we didn’t end up protecting you, Walsh.”

“That’s okay. I really only expect one person to never disappoint me.”

“Yeah,” she said. “You should think about marrying him.”

I was smiling as she left.

Special Agent in Charge Zane Calhoun—Zane, how cowboy was that?—had some

pictures to show me and Colton.

In his office, we sat at the table where he held meetings with his staff, Colton and me flanking him, and on his tablet, he pulled up pictures of Gen's house after I left it on that fateful Tuesday morning.

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“Holy crap.” Colton was both stunned and impressed.

“You microwaved the phones,” Calhoun said with a grin. “Is that right?”

“I didn’t want him to be able to track anyone.”

“The computer hard drive at the bottom of the pool was a nice touch, though all the things that went in as well was a bit overkill.”

So much furniture, practically all the appliances, the TV from the living room, glassware and all the plates, bowls, and so many bottles of liquor.

“I didn’t do any of that. It’s kind of a blur, though. I remember being frantic and wanting to go, but I guess while I was destroying specific things, the others went wild.”

“You sound pleased,” Colton said.

“I am. That’s a lot of therapy right there.”

“You’re not wrong.” Colton choked on a laugh. “I love how the fish tank is pristine.”

“Not surprising. I hope they got a good home.”

“I’m certain the tank and fish were removed by a service,” Calhoun apprised me.

“When we seize property, everything is calculated down to the penny. That’s what

forensic accountants are for, to not miss anything.

Like, there's a fortune in art in this house, and again, no one touched any of that or the cars. ”

“A lot of those pieces got me through some hard times,” I told him. “When things are happening to your body, you can disassociate, and it helps to have something to focus on, especially something beautiful. Not that I would ever want to see any of them ever again for as long as I live.”

“Well, I understand why you and the others went a bit scorched earth on this place.”

“And in such a short time,” I commented, because really, it was impressive.

Interesting to see the decimation of the kitchen, and then, in Gen's office, the amount of paperwork, the open safe, and the safe behind it, the gold bars on display.

The number of kilos of cocaine in the gun safe was also impressive.

The rooms with locks on the outside were hard to see again, and the media room downstairs, where he could watch everything, as well as the over-the-top sex dungeon that I had missed being defaced.

“I'm sure it looks better destroyed than it did before,” Colton granted.

Yes, it did. Without question. So strange to think of myself living there, and worse, choosing that life. I had been so desperate to be loved and cherished that I accepted how I was treated, wagging my tail even as I was being tortured.

“Is that Antonov?” I heard Colton ask, and when I checked the tablet, realizing I'd been lost in my memories for a moment, there he was, the man who used to haunt my

dreams, not allowing me to sleep, being walked out of his home in handcuffs by FBI agents. It was an amazing picture.

“Thank you so much,” I said, standing and offering Calhoun my hand. “I really appreciate your letting me have those images in my head instead of old ones.”

He stood up and took my hand. “You’re very welcome.”

“What’s going to happen with protection for Pax?” Colton asked.

“I’ve notified the Chicago PD, and they’ll have a patrol car in front of your place after five for the next month, and all day every weekend.”

“That makes sense. During the day I’m at work. I’m safe there.”

“Not his place, though,” Colton informed Calhoun. “At my place in Bucktown, that’s where he’ll be. His apartment is in an unsecured building near a not-so-great area. The cops would be too busy with other emergencies to watch out for him.”

“Then let’s do this. I’ll send some agents with you, you pack him up, and then they’ll escort you both to your place so we’ll know precisely where that is, as well as the layout.”

“That sounds great, thank you.”

As Calhoun walked to his desk to use his phone, I rounded on Colton. “Hello, do I have a say in any of this?”

The flick on my forehead was both painful and unexpected. Putting my hand over where it hurt, I tried to rub the sting away even as I glared at Colton. “Ow,” I grumbled.

“This is not up for debate, so I need you not to argue for once in your life.”

“I never argue with you unless you’re wrong.”

He flicked my ear that time.

“That really hurts!” I muttered instead of yelling, not wanting to make a scene in front of SAC Calhoun since he’d been so nice to us. I rubbed my ear, though.

“Gimme a break,” he warned me.

I took a step sideways, and he, of course, grabbed my bicep and yanked me right back.

I rolled my eyes and stood there trying to wait patiently for Calhoun, before he called over to Colton to give him his address for CPD.

Funny that right then I was reminded of a conversation with one of his friends from two years ago.

While he was at a party, I had brought him some papers that had to be signed and scanned in so they could be filed before our midnight deadline with family court.

Since it was the middle of summer, everything was outside on the enormous deck, so the hostess, his friend’s wife, had led me into the kitchen, where I could use the table to get everything ready for him.

“Excuse me,” a woman said, taking a seat beside me, smiling. “May I speak to you for a moment?”

“Certainly.”



She put her hand on her chest. “I’m Gwen Evans, and you’re Paxton, aren’t you? I’ve spoken to you on the phone.”

“Oh yes, very nice to put a face to the voice.”

Taking a breath, she said, “I have a quick question, and I have no one else to ask, but it might be a bit awkward.”

Great. “Sure.”

“Have you ever had an issue with Colton ever hurting you, and if so, did you mention it to him?”

I could not have stopped my scowl if I tried. My hackles went up, my whole body instantly bristling.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “Never?—”

“Oh, Gwen,” the hostess said, chuckling as she took a seat at the end of the table, having brought me a bottle of water. “What did you say to Colton’s darling assistant?”

“Nothing, I?—”

“I’m kidding, I heard.” The hostess reached over the papers and took her hand. “Paxton?”

I turned to her.

“I’m Sophie, by the way.”

“Thank you for allowing me into your home.”

“You’re so welcome, and I’d love for you to get yourself a plate, we have so much, but to the topic.

You know, and I know, that when Colton likes you, he forgets about his own strength sometimes.

I made the mistake years ago of using the words too rough when I spoke to him and asked him if he could be a bit gentler with me. ”

“You did?” Gwen asked her. “Oh my God, I should have just asked you, but I had no idea you?—”

“He has never hugged me since.”

Gwen’s breath caught.

“I mean, he’ll lean in, give me a pat, but then back up so fast, it’s enough to give me whiplash.

And now, of course, with Brian being born, when he’s here, Paul always gives him the baby, and a more gentle, careful, considerate man, you could not ask for.

He’s the same with my nieces and other kids.

Omar and Suzie, their daughter, Stephanie, whenever she’s throwing a tantrum, Suzie picks her up and takes her to Colton.

Kids—all kids—love him. My dogs too. Even my super annoying cat loves Colton.

He's actually outside, right now, walking Brian through our backyard, navigating around dog crap—so embarrassing—to get him to burp. ”

“Why are you?—”

“He roughhouses with Paul, he's careful with Brian, and he thought I was like Suzie, and he could grab me and hug me and hold my hand, but now, because I said something, he doesn't trust himself to be mindful, so that's it.

And I hate that it's all or nothing with him, but I also get it.

I said something, and he has changed around me so I never feel uncomfortable again.  
”

Gwen looked stricken.

“Did you say something to him?”

“I told him I didn't like to be manhandled, and now, suddenly, he's busy with work.”

“He is busy at work,” I defended him.

“Yes, but he used to make time for me.”

What was I supposed to say? “If you didn't like how he touched you, it was important to say something. No one should be uncomfortable; that's your right. Also, everyone has a different threshold for what they consider manhandling, and again, it's about your comfort level, not his.”

I turned in my seat to Sophie then.

“Oh,” she said, grinning, “this must be serious. Yes?”

“Are you serious?” I asked her. “Does he mean something to you?”

She took a breath. “I didn’t mean to be flip or?—”

I squinted at her.

“Sorry,” she said, coughing, “really. I didn’t mean to belittle your?—”

“Does he,” I repeated, my gaze locked with hers, “mean something to you?”

“Yes. Yes, he does,” she answered, all levity gone from her voice.

“Okay, then. You have to tackle him.”

“Pardon me?” The gleam in her bright green eyes was very appealing.

“If you want the connection back, I suggest you walk right up, tackle him, like put him on his ass or his back and smush him, and as he’s sputtering—which he does when he’s surprised—then, while touching him, as he’s very tactile, so the physical contact is important, then you tell him you want him exactly how he is and you love him. ”

Her eyes went round.

“And what that should accomplish is over the course of a few weeks, you’ll get the hugging back.

He’ll still be careful, but one day, in the not-so-distant future, he’ll trust that he can be himself, and you’ll get the spontaneous affection back.

It will still be different because you have a child now, and you've moved from his buddy to a mom, so with that comes inherent gentleness.

He's like that with his sister now as well. That might really suit you."

"I suspect you're right."

"But really, do what I say. I know him."

"I would say yes, you certainly do."

"Good."

Sophie took a breath, and there were tears in her eyes before she lunged at me, arms around my neck as I laughed and she squeezed the stuffing out of me.

"Why are you mauling my assistant? I think you should—Sophie!"

She had moved fast, letting go of me and launching herself at him.

Because the angle was weird, she threw him off-balance, and the two of them got tangled up and fell together onto the kitchen floor.

She came down on top of him hard, which was much better than him falling on her, because at six-two, with all the carved muscle on his frame, the man was heavy.

"The hell are you doing, woman?" he rasped.

She laughed, ended up snorting a bit, and when I saw his look of surprise and the slight smile, I knew she had him.

Gwen, on the other hand, I was guessing was done.

A friend, he could reverse how he acted.

An intimate partner who thought he was too rough—he would internalize that and never be able to let that go.

I didn't need to be a therapist to know that was not going to work.

But again, nothing against Gwen. Everyone deserved to be treated how they wanted.

I knew how it was for me. I had been worshipped and then hit hard with a closed fist. There was a difference between Gen nearly yanking my arm off and Colton tugging on my hand to make sure I was following him.

With Colton, I had always known, from the beginning, how he felt about me, because he communicated that through touch.

That absolutely worked for me, but I was guessing, with how Calhoun was staring at the moment, that to them, it was weird.

The takeaway was, I didn't need to give a crap about that.

Colton and I knew, and the two of us were the only ones who mattered.

"All right," Calhoun said, "you two can get out of here and maybe get a late dinner."

"Dinner," I whimpered.

Calhoun chuckled and held out his card to Colton.

“I’m so sorry about what happened with Hall.

Know that you’re safe with the agents here in my office, and please let me know if you see or hear anything from Antonov.

My hope is this situation tonight will scare him into leaving, but you never know. ”

“I will keep you in the loop, and we both appreciate all you’ve done.”

He nodded, smiled, and then an agent stepped into his office and we were escorted out of the building. It was so nice to be leaving, even better to have Colton take my hand. I found myself liking that more than I thought I would.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:47 am*

In the movies and on TV, FBI agents are fun and engaging. In real life, they were very yes and no with their answers, there was no smiling, and they waited outside my apartment instead of venturing inside. Apparently, there would be no banter about my lack of décor.

I was fairly certain that because I was dreaming of a house, saving money, and my place was filled with paint samples and design magazines, that this was the reason my apartment seemed like I just moved in.

“I have never been in a space that was less you,” Colton said.

I couldn’t argue that point.

“Our office is more you than me, and though certain parts of my place have no trace of you?—”

“The patio needs a makeover,” I reminded him for the hundredth time.

“—even my place looks more like you.”

“I need to get my house soon.”

“Which will be where?” he asked as he pulled my suitcases out of my closet.

“Lincoln Park, I hope, or maybe Albany Park, or Oak Park, or?—”

“A park, I get it.”



I grinned at him.

“Pack all the clothes, even the dirty ones, all your face and hair crap, and pack the suits last because I know for a fact your garment bag is still in my closet from when I borrowed it for my trip to Cancun with the guys over Christmas.”

I whirled around quickly so he didn't see me smile.

“It wasn't that bad!” he yelled defensively.

I would not utter a word.

“At least I know now that I am, in fact, very allergic to certain kinds of shellfish.”

I lost it. I still had the pictures on my phone.

I had no idea people could literally turn green.

I'd always thought it was merely a funny phrase someone came up with.

I was so happy all his friends knew me, so they made certain to share fun and interesting photos of Colton when I wasn't around.

I was so thankful for photos of him hanging over a toilet bowl with the caption, “praying for death” with many laughing emojis.

“You should have never left me over the holidays,” I scolded him. “I hope you learned your lesson.”

“Left you?”

“I will say, though, that I had an amazing time up at your family’s cabin in Lake Geneva. It was like a postcard come to life. I had no idea Wisconsin was that beautiful. The only thing missing was you.”

“Do you listen to yourself when you?—”

“It was fun. I never made Christmas cookies before.”

“Yes, I know. I got lots of pictures of you and my family from everyone,” he muttered. “You all had a nice time.”

“It was much better than nice,” I informed him. “I got to sleep on the couch, by the fire, with the tree lit up with lights all night long. It was the best. And the next day, on Christmas, your dad took me with him to put some food out for the deer.”

“Yeah. My dad took a really nice picture of you walking in the snow with the trees behind you. You look deep in thought. He sent it to me.”

I sighed. “Your dad is amazing. You know he let me use his snowblower.”

He groaned like he was in pain. “I saw those pictures as well.”

“He taught me how to string popcorn too.”

“God,” he grumbled, walking to my bedroom.

“And your mom showed me how to make her yummy bread pudding.”

He mumbled something as I joined him in the bedroom.

“What did you say?”

“I said it must be nice for her to share that with you when my sister and my cousins have been begging for years.”

“Really?” How thoughtful of his mother to not only give me her recipe, but go through it, step-by-step, with me. I would have to send her a card and thank her again.

“Hurry up and pack before the nice FBI agents shoot us.”

The packing did not take long. Besides my clothes and all the things in my bathroom, there really wasn't much. Even the agents were surprised by how little I possessed.

“Was this place furnished when you moved in?” one of the agents asked, leaning in and glancing around.

I nodded.

“Yeah, it looks like it.”

That wasn't very nice.

“You have no plates or silverware of your own?” the other asked me.

“No. I never found anything I really liked.”

“Okay, can we go?” Colton said belligerently. “Being here always makes me sad.”

“That's a terrible thing to say,” I scolded him.

“Yeah, but he's right,” the first agent said.

I had lots of clothes on hangers because I had—probably—too many shoes, and they

alone filled one suitcase. There were coats, jackets, and sweaters as well. It was nice when the agents offered to help schlep. I needed to reassess them being stuffy.

On the way to Colton's apartment, I had to roll down the window in the back.

"He's nauseous because he's hungry," Colton advised the agents.

"If you want, we can stop at Theory since it's on the way to Bucktown and open late," the first agent suggested. "The food is good, and we can check the scores."

"Of what?" I asked.

"Anything," he said.

"Fine," I agreed. "But first, since we're going to share a meal, what are your names?"

"I'm Beale, and he's Diaz," Beale said with a smile. "You're all right, kid."

"I'm twenty-eight," I told him. "Not a kid at all."

"You don't strike me as twenty-eight, and besides, anyone younger than me is a kid."

"That's right," Diaz concurred.

Theory was a sports bar, but that did not interest me in the least. Only my amazing Tuscan turkey sandwich that I ate with waffle fries and sweet-potato tots. Colton shook his head as I wiggled in my seat with happiness.

"At least he's enjoying his food," Diaz pointed out.

Colton nodded, finishing his Southwest salad, because unlike me, he'd eaten with his

friends earlier that night.

I was supposed to have eaten at Mr. Somerset's, but because of Janelle, I had to abandon my plate.

Colton had a previous engagement, so he'd chosen to eat with people he liked instead and make a cursory appearance at Mr. Somerset's dinner.

And then, of course, he ended up having to collect me.

"I gotta tell you something funny," I began, grinning. "Jonah hit on Mr. Somerset's seventeen-year-old daughter."

"For fuck's sake," he rumbled. "How is that funny?"

"Because he had no idea she was seventeen."

His eyebrows lifted. "No."

"Yes. Had no idea at all. He thought she was in her twenties."

"Which is still too young for him."

"But not illegal."

"And you did what?"

"I interfered because she looked uncomfortable, and you know I always have to say something in those situations."

"Yes, I know."

“It turned out fine, because he was mortified and I persuaded her to change out of her little black dress and into actual cold-weather clothing.”

“That was helpful.”

“Because I’m always helpful,” I concluded.

“And hungry,” Diaz chimed in. “That’s impressive how many carbs you put away.”

I smiled at him.

“So since you helped the man, is that why he’s suddenly Jonah? Did you bond after you stepped in?”

“I think we did.”

“I don’t care. You’re not allowed to go work for him.”

I waved my hand dismissively. “He doesn’t actually want me, he’s only worried because he’s losing Tobias.”

“Who?”

“His assistant.”

“Which one is Tobias?”

“You said he dresses like he should be parking cars at an Italian restaurant.”

Beale smiled. “I can totally see this guy in my head.”

“Right?” Colton said, then grinned at me. “Okay, so why is he losing Tobias?”

Reaching across the table, I slipped my hand around his wrist, because I always had to touch him when we were talking. “Because Drummond Burgess is coming to work at the firm on Monday, and Tobias is going to work for him.”

“Drummond?”

I wagged my eyebrows at him.

“David Burgess named his kid Drummond?”

“Maybe it’s a family name and he had no choice,” Beale offered.

“I think you say no in those situations,” Colton replied.

“Oh, I’m certainly not arguing with you,” Beale said as he ate another fry.

“What does that shorten to?” Colton asked me. “Drum?”

I gasped, and his grin made his eyes glint. “I asked the same question, and apparently yes, you will call him Drum, not Mond.”

“Mond is terrible,” Diaz put in. “Drum isn’t much better.”

“These are rich people, am I right?” Beale asked.

I nodded. “Drummond is the first name partner’s son.”

“Are you a partner?” Diaz asked me.

“Oh no, I’m just a lowly assistant. But my boss here, he’s in charge of the pro bono department at Burgess, Mayhew, and Somerset.”

“So you do what?” Beale asked Colton.

“We take on cases for free to serve justice.”

“For free? No shit?”

“No shit,” Colton said with a grin.

“Well, that’s all right,” Diaz told him.

After dinner—Colton treated all of us—we reached his place in Bucktown fairly quickly, turning onto the 1700 block of West Webster Avenue.

I was impressed with Beale’s parallel parking prowess, and I appreciated both him and Diaz helping us carry again.

They both liked the security of the video entry system—much safer for me.

“That place where you live is scary,” Diaz assured me. “This has the nice little lobby area here, but then to get upstairs to the fifth floor, you need a code or someone has to buzz you in from their phone.”

I squinted at him.

“You can’t be too careful.”

They were both really nice guys, and I appreciated all they’d done, but it was still amazing when they left. My social battery was running on fumes at that point, and



when it was just me and Colton alone in his quiet, warm, two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment, I nearly cried with relief.

“You’re okay,” he comforted me, taking his hat off me, giving my head a quick scratch, and then going to hang my clothes in the guest-room closet. It was the same size as the one in his room, both walk-ins with mahogany wood shelves.

He had chosen well for himself as apartments went.

There were high ceilings, windows that went from the floor to the roof, an open floor plan, shiny new stainless-steel appliances, quartz countertops, and a ridiculous number of cabinets for storage.

The bedrooms were both big, as were the bathrooms, he had a washer and dryer in his apartment, a heated spot in the garage that he was renting out at the moment, as he didn't own a car himself, and most importantly, he could walk out his front door to the right, and in two blocks be at a grocery store, or take a left, and be at the Metro station.

I was wildly jealous, but still, it wasn't a house, and I really wanted one of those.

Once he reminded me that my folded clothes went in the beautiful antique armoire in my room, he went to take a shower. I spent time doing as he'd directed, and then unpacked and filled up the guest bathroom with a myriad of products. I made sure to move the hamper to a better spot as well.

I took a shower after that, changed into flannel pajama bottoms, a long-sleeved T-shirt—I couldn't handle the buttons on the top, it was a sensory issue—and heavy socks. I put his cardigan sweater on over that. I had stolen it six months ago and forgot I didn't want him to see I had it.

Once I was standing in his living room, I went to the gas fireplace, flipped it on, and that fast, there were flames making the room so very cozy.

He didn't like big overhead lights any more than I did, so I flipped off the track lights, and then walked around and turned on the individual lamps that were all on timers.

Now that I was there, I would get everything synced up so that, much like the fireplace, one switch would take care of everything.

I had brought my lemon balm tea with me, having stocked his kitchen with all my favorites years ago, except for that one. Once I filled and plugged in his electric kettle—it was quieter for later in the evening—I went to find him.

He had apparently gotten out of the shower and passed out on his bed in a towel.

“Colt,” I called out to him.

Nothing.

Walking in, I went to the small chest of drawers across from the large one that held his clothes, and pulled out a quilt.

I then returned to his bed, tugged on the towel until it came loose, and then quickly covered him up.

And yes, I would have liked to look my fill of the miles of golden skin stretched over hard, chiseled muscle, run my fingers through the dirty-blond mane, trace over his eyebrows and eyelashes with my fingertips, touch his nose and mostly...

kiss him. But I would never do anything without his permission.

And how would that work? How could that ever be something I would ask for?

As much as Colton was my person, it had been nearly a decade since anyone had touched me, or I had touched anyone else.

Lately, there had been flickerings of desire when I watched him move.

I had trouble tearing my eyes away from his forearms when he leaned over me at my desk, sleeves rolled up, telling me something that fluttered right out of my brain like a butterfly.

His hair on his shoulders, the way it curled, the different colors, and how soft it was when I tucked long pieces around his ears.

I was mesmerized by the muscles in his back moving under his shirt when he carried things, lifted or stacked boxes, and the vintage denim stretched over his thighs...

The other assistants were right. The man was beautifully and powerfully made, and the thought of being under him made it hard to breathe.

But there was also the fear that even if, somehow, we wound up in bed together, would I suddenly freeze?

Would my panic take over? And what could that ever be besides an experiment for him?

He was straight, and as much as he liked me, I could never be what he truly wanted or needed.

I had to realize that someday he'd find the one.

He'd find the woman who would become his wife.

I would need to be fine with that and with the resulting changes in my life.

I would need to be happy for him or lose him.

One was definitely worse. I had decided I would be content.

I would be her dear friend, and she would never know I coveted her husband.

Of course the dream was that this desire for more, even though I had no idea what precisely more could ever entail, would simply fade with time.

That would be best. Because then I could truly, in my heart, be pleased for him.

It was the height of selfishness to want to keep things as they were when I got everything from our relationship and he got nothing in return.

So instead of lying down on top of him like I wanted, instead of pressing my face to his nape and inhaling deeply, I turned off the lights, moved around the room, and put various items, socks, T-shirt, underwear, in the laundry hamper, hung up his coat, plugged in his phone, and then left quietly.

At the front door, I checked to see if the alarm was armed, which it was, then went and poured my tea.

The living room beckoned with the wooden floors, thick rugs, soft lights, and the desperately comfortable couch.

I curled up and watched the snow fall, seeing it collect on the balcony, on the covered furniture and the clay firepit he'd had shipped from Sedona the last time he was there.

It was strange to think that even though I knew Gen Antonov was somewhere in the

city, closer than he'd been since I was nineteen years old, that I was sitting there, enjoying the fire, thinking about my friend.

Instead of being terrified of Gen, I was much more invested in figuring out what I was going to do when Colton Gates someday fell in love.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:47 am*

I dreamed that I woke up and the apartment was trashed, and I had to tell Colton he'd slept through Gen being in his home.

Two years ago, that would have terrified me.

There might even have been some hyperventilating.

What had changed because of therapy, and Colton, was that now I forced myself to open my eyes, lift my head, glance around, see there was nothing...

and go back to sleep. At home, there was always a light on.

It was easier. Normally, at Colton's, I would wake up in the middle of the night and still be okay because the wall of windows showed either millions of stars, falling snow, or the city lights.

This was Chicago, and there was always someone else awake.

Rising off the couch, still wrapped in the blanket, I shuffled over to the fireplace, turned it off, plunging the room into darkness, and walked over to the window and looked down at the front of the building.

There was a CPD patrol car there, which was comforting, but I also thought, unneeded.

It was always the case, early in the morning, before dawn—it seemed hard to be scared, or even concerned with nightmares, when you weren't supposed to be up.

Heading toward my room, I heard Colton call my name.

Moving slowly, I went toward his open bedroom door and then leaned in to see if maybe he'd called out in his sleep.

But the light on his nightstand was on, and he was sitting there, still, I knew, naked under the loosely wrapped quilt.

I kept my eyes lifted, focused on his face so as not to admire the hard-muscled chest or the chiseled abdomen.

“You all right?” I asked him.

“Did you wrap me up in the blanket?”

I stared at him. Even half awake, logic had to prevail. Who else might it have been?

“Fine,” he griped. “Why did you do that?”

“Because a wet towel is no good for your comforter, sheets, or mattress.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled.

“Plus, what if you got cold?”

“I keep this apartment at seventy degrees.”

“Yeah, but still, you might have gotten cold.”

“I can't believe I passed out.”



“You were attacked on Friday. You got punched and then got stitches. Yesterday, you worked at a shelter all day and then had to deal with my shit at night. Of course you were tired. Now turn off the light, get under the covers, and go back to sleep,” I ordered, making for the door.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“You can talk to me in the morning.”

“It’s morning now.”

“Later in the morning, then,” I said, yawning. “I’ll take you to breakfast if you’re good and you go to sleep now.”

“I’m not a child. I’m older than you.”

“Are you? Are you really?” Apparently, it was impossible for me not to be snarky with him at any time of day.

He let out a frustrated huff of air.

“Please go to sleep,” I soothed him. “Kill the light like a good boy and try not to dwell on the mid-century abomination you chose.”

I was almost out the door.

“Abomination? What’d you just say?”

I didn’t stop. “I told you those nightstands were heinous. The lines, the minimalist fixtures, they make me rabid.”

“I hate this.”

That stopped me, and I spun around. “What do you hate?”

“I need to confess something to you.”

“I’m sorry, go ahead.”

He exhaled sharply.

“May I ask something while you’re thinking?”

After a moment, he said, “Yeah.”

“Did you line up someone to go with you to the black-tie event later this evening? Because if you did, you should probably call and confirm with them.”

“Have you noticed you always try and tell me what to do and it never works?”

I cleared my throat. “Have you ever noticed that nine times out of ten, you actually do what I want?”

“No. That’s not true.”

I scoffed. “It is though. You don’t like to be managed, you don’t like to be nagged at, and you really hate—most of all—for anyone to tell you what to do.

However, if I suggest something, it gets in your brain, and then a couple of days later I’ll ask you a question, and as long as you’ve forgotten that I was the one to bring it up in the first place and you think you did it on your own, then you’ll do it. ”

“No.”

“Yes,” I insisted.

“Name one time,” he dared me.

“I can name ten off the top of my head, but are you awake enough to banter?”

“I hate this.”

“You said that before. What do you hate?”

“This.”

“Arguing at four in the morning? Is that it?”

“Yes,” he muttered.

I smiled at him. “Please go to sleep. I’ll see you in the later morning.” I stopped in the doorway. “Thank you for bringing me home. You’re very good to strays.”

“You’re not a stray,” he grumbled. “You always make it sound like I did you this big favor by having you work for me and taking care of you, but you take really good care of me too.”

I sighed deeply. “That’s possibly the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Would it be scary for you if you came and lay down by me?”

My stomach flipped over, and not in a bad way, but in the good way that I had nearly forgotten. “Nothing about you has ever scared me.”

“Which is interesting, right?”

I thought about it a moment. “It is, yes.”

“Well, nothing you’ve ever done has made me think, huh, he’s strange.”

“What about weird?”

“Not even weird. Ever since you told me all those years ago that I had to make intuitive leaps and think faster, I’ve been doing that.”

He had, that was true. Now he could basically read my expressions.

“It’s not great for learning other people, like what makes them tick. It doesn’t leave room to get to know others because I just want it to work the same.”

“I know what Dr. Butler would say.”

“What would he say?”

“He’d say that codependence is bad, and that you need to have someone else work for you. We should stay friends, but I shouldn’t work for you. It’s too much time spent together.”

“What do you think?”

“It shouldn’t matter what I think, only what you think.”

“That’s crap. Tell me what you think?”

“I think it’s far too early in the morning to be having such a serious conversation. We

both need to go to bed.”

“Okay.”

I turned to go.

“Will you come lie down?”

I looked at him over my shoulder. “What are you talking about?”

“I think you want to sleep next to me, and I want to sleep next to you, so let’s do that and see if it’s all right.”

“You’re straight,” I reminded him.

“Which has what to do with what I’m asking?”

I sighed and crossed my arms. “You’re a smart man. You know precisely what it has to do with what you’re asking.”

He was quiet a moment. “I don’t want any other guy to get in my bed with me,” he said softly. “But I don’t want a woman in here either.”

I had to grab hold of the doorframe so I wouldn’t sink to the floor. “That’s new, isn’t it?” I barely got out. My breath kept catching.

“Not that new.”

Oh.

“It’s been like this for a while for me,” he confessed. “But because you were so hurt,

I didn't want to...scare you off."

"That could never happen," I promised him. "Not with you."

He stared at me, searching my face, and I was drawn farther into the room by the warmth in his eyes.

"Colton?"

He cleared his throat. "See, I think we're both unsure what to do because neither of us wants to mess up and lose the other person. I know not having you here would be the worst thing I could think of."

"Yes. Same."

"See? There you go. I may be straight, but as many times as I think about—" He stopped.

"As many times as you think about what?"

"No. It's not nice."

"Let me be the judge."

He took a breath. "I want to hold you down, and I worry that would scare you."

"I want to be held down—by you," I added, "since we're being honest. But I worry how I'll react."

"You're saying you want that, with me, but you're scared."

“Yes. I know how you are when people say you’re too rough in any way. I can’t have you leave me if I’m not ready.”

“And for me, because it’s you, and I know how I’ve been with you for the last five years, and how you’ve been with me, I feel like this, now, if you get scared, I would wait until you’re not.”

“Yes, but what if I’m never not scared?”

“But you’ve never been scared of me.”

“Because there was nothing romantic between us.”

He squinted at me. “Hasn’t there been?”

It was a lot of honesty. “I think we’re both tired,” I replied before my brain exploded.

“Okay,” he said, sounding defeated.

I had to know. “But can I sleep in here with you?” I asked, my heart in my throat, wanting to lie down next to him and at the same time being terrified of how I would react.

“Would you, please?” he rasped.

Moving quickly, I walked over to the opposite side of the bed, let the blanket drop to the floor, and then took off the sweater.

“Is that mine?” he groused at me. “I’ve been looking for that.”

I chuckled. I couldn’t help it.

He turned off the light, and I got into bed, under the covers, as he rolled onto his left side, facing away from me.

“What’re you doing?”

“I think maybe if you hold me, instead of me holding you, that might be better. Then the choices are yours, and it’s about exactly what you want.”

After a moment, I agreed.

“Do you want me to put something on?”

“No,” I whispered. “Do you want me to take something off?”

“Yeah. Can you take off your shirt?”

“I can.”

“Okay. Because if your skin feels...not right on mine, then I’ll know what we’re gonna be, and we can go from there.”

It made sense.

“Conversely, if touching my skin scares you, we’ll know something as well.”

“Very well reasoned.”

“Lawyer,” he said.

I was smiling as I pulled my shirt up over my head and put it on the bed beside me. Slowly, I got closer and felt the heat from his skin before I reached him. His breath



was shaky, ragged, and I loved that. He was afraid to be repulsed. I was afraid to be...afraid. We were quite a pair.

Sliding in close behind him, I thought, I want my mouth on the back of his neck at least once in my life. I have to know what that feels like . Easing forward, I brushed his hair to the side, then pressed a kiss to his warm skin, inhaling at the same time.

“Oh,” he husked softly, almost a whine.

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“Should I do that again?” I asked, holding my breath.

“Do you want to do it again?”

“Yeah,” I responded, my breath on his skin, my fingers threading through his hair, the temptation far too great.

He started to tremble, and his breath caught. “I want you to do it again.”

My hand slipped from his hair, slid down, around his throat, and then tipped his head back, holding him against me as I stroked his skin. “Is this all right?”

“Yeah, it’s—fuck,” he rasped as my hand slid over his shoulder and down his chest.

“Jesus, Pax, I haven’t been this excited since—oh.”

“I thought about lying on top of you,” I admitted. “I’m a bit addicted to your body.”

“That’s good, that’s so...so good,” he whispered haltingly, pressing back against me as I slid my hand over his gorgeous abs, savoring the warm, sleek skin and the definition, before reaching between his legs for his already rock-hard cock.

“Is this okay?”

“Don’t ask me anymore,” he told me as he began to push in and out of my grip. “I want you all over me.”

“That makes me crazy happy,” I said, stroking harder.

“I think about you all the time,” he confessed.

I kissed the side of his neck and then his shoulder, the urge to bite, to put a mark on him, very strong. I had always been possessive of him, but now, with this added intimacy, I felt old urges roaring through my veins. It was miraculous, and my eyes filled fast.

“Are you all right?” he choked out as I brushed away my tears.

“Yes,” I assured him, feeling my cock thickening the more I touched him. “You’re brilliant. This is perfect.” It was a revelation was what it was.

I might not have been ready to be touched, but I wanted to touch him more than anything. And now I wanted quite a bit more.

“Roll over and face me.”

He started to move.

“Wait. First, turn on the light.”

There was no hesitancy. He stretched for the lamp, flicked it on, then rolled over, his eyes locked with mine.

“There you are,” I said, smiling at him as I threw back the covers before I took him in hand and stroked him from balls to head.

His moan was long and filthy, and his eyes closed as he arched against me, entirely focused on what his body wanted and needed.

The surge of arousal was so welcome, nearly overwhelming, and I was glad he

couldn't see as more tears rolled down my cheeks.

Everything worked. Everything was aligned.

The relief was like a weight lifting off my chest. But really, it all made sense.

This was Colton. This was the man who had been my mentor, best friend, champion, my singular source of comfort, kindness, sounding board, and the one who could hear the smallest nuance in my voice, see a flicker of dread or happiness, and always, always follow where I was going.

He could tell when I was hungry or sad, and be perceptive enough to change what was expected of him to give me what I needed. He was extraordinary.

"Hey, can you open your eyes and look at me?"

It was the best thing ever. His eyes were deep, dark burnished gold, his pupils huge.

"Can I kiss you? Will you let me kiss your lips?"

"Yes," came the hoarse whisper. "Please."

"Will you let me put your dick in my mouth?"

"Is that what you want?"

"Yes."

The cry that came out of his chest was both heartbreaking and hot.

Surging forward, I took his mouth in a mauling kiss, grinding my lips down over his, tasting and licking, biting gently, before rolling him to his back.

My tongue rubbed over his, tangled, coaxed, finally sucking until I got the whimper I was after.

His hands on the sides of my neck held me still as I devoured him. Clearly, he didn't want to be parted.

When I broke the kiss, there was a litany of pleading, the word no repeated over and over.

"Kiss me some more," he said, panting.

I moved then, kissing my way down his chest, licking and nibbling each nipple, taking my time, loving the twinges of pleasure I was causing, and then moving lower, over those glorious abs, my hands mapping skin I never thought I would be allowed to touch.

When I took the thickened length in my hand, my name came out garbled and low.

He wanted me so badly, and I reveled in that feeling.

Colton Gates, the best man I knew, wanted me. How amazing was that?

I had no idea what he thought it would be, but me, running my tongue from balls to head once, then again, before taking him down the back of my throat in one long, seamless glide was probably not what he had imagined.

"Holy fuck, Pax!"

He was loud, and I loved it. I wanted to howl with happiness because the power was mine to cause the roughened breathing, to see how hard he was holding on to the headboard, straining as I licked and laved, then sucked hard, remembering how good

I was at this, how much I loved giving.

My joy had been stripped from me, but not anymore, not ever again.

This was Colton, and I wanted him desperately.

I had missed so much, made excuses for his need to constantly touch me, and for mine to do the same.

We were always together, so much more than needed, finishing sentences, asking questions with a single glance, and more than anything, our lives utterly entwined.

People saw us, remarked on the closeness, and still, we didn't see.

But now, in bed, there was no more hiding.

I saw him plainly, and since he'd basically been walking around for the past five years, belonging to me, I would make my intentions known.

"I can't—Pax! Honey, you have to—holy God."

I smiled around his cock as he nearly roared the roof down, and then I concentrated on swallowing and keeping the suction fierce as he palmed the back of my head and made sure that my mouth would not be separated from his dick.

He pushed hard against the back of my throat, and my name was beautiful as it tumbled from his lips.

When he was finally replete and happy, the aftershocks rolling through him, making him twitch and tremble, he lifted his head, and still panting, met my gaze.

Suddenly he jolted so hard, his hand released me and his softening cock slipped from my mouth, a long string of saliva stretched between my bottom lip and the head.

“Ohmygod,” he rasped, “I was holding on to you and—” His eyes searched mine, wild and terrified. “Please don’t run from?—”

My grin must have short-circuited his brain. It had to have because of the look I was getting—all his emotions rolled up into one, confusion, hope, fear, remorse running across his face. He was still trying to catch his breath as well.

“Listen to me.”

“Pax, I?—”

“Are you listening?”

After a moment he answered, “Yes,” and his voice had a tremor in it.

“There was no part of that that I didn’t love.”

He was still staring at me.

“I loved you wanting me, I loved you coming apart, and I loved that you wanted my mouth on you so badly that you made sure I couldn’t fuckin’ move. That, what we did, me giving, you taking, that is what being in bed is supposed to be.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Being in bed is supposed to be equal, and you got noth?—”

“I got everything,” I said, crawling up his body, careful of the bandage covering the five stitches on his right side. “Does this hurt?” I asked, concerned. “I’m worried you

might have?—”

“No,” he murmured, both hands lifting, reaching for me. “Please come here and kiss me.”

I didn’t sink over him, instead I moved to the right a bit so my weight wouldn’t put any pressure on his stitches. Then I bent and kissed him, his lips parting for my tongue that reacquainted quickly with his.

“You taste so good,” he groaned as I wrapped my hand around his slowly thickening length. “What the fuck?”

“What?” I teased him, my mouth on his throat for a moment before moving to his jaw. I had always wanted to kiss the scar there and then return to his mouth.

“I...” He gasped, taking my face in his hands. “What is this?”

“Five years of foreplay?”

His breath was warm as it ghosted over my face, and I took that moment to stroke him, watching his eyes flutter closed, hearing the low, ragged moan.

“Do you want me?” I asked softly.

It took a moment, like it was difficult, but finally, his eyes drifted open.

“I mean, before, I wanted that,” I told him, “but if you’re not ready to?—”

“Of course I’m ready to,” he growled. “Just your hands on me—I come home after being with you all day, and you’re all I can think about, and I wish I could be brave and say what I want...”



“What do you want?”

“I want not to hurt you, or scare you, or?—”

“You won’t scare me because you’re you, and you’re not going to hurt me. You’re going to have to take it easy because it’s been a while, but?—”

“We could— I mean, you could—” He took a deep breath, then exhaled. “Fuck this, I’m a lawyer. Words are kind of my thing.”

“They are, yes,” I soothed him.

“Listen, I will gladly roll over and let you have my?—”

I kissed him long and hard, and when I couldn’t breathe a moment longer, I lifted up so I could gulp a bit of air.

“I hate you.”

Not what I was expecting, but I couldn’t stop smiling, as I suspected he meant the exact opposite. It seemed likely that in all the years I’d become completely and utterly attached to him, that he had been doing the same. I had missed that completely. “Why exactly do you hate me?”

“You’re just walking around our office, being able to kiss like that, and...” He gestured at me, his face flushing before he turned his head away.

“And?” I goaded him.

“You know,” he said, still not looking at me.

“Words, Counselor?”

He was scowling when he rolled his head back, meeting my gaze. “Suck cock like that!” he yelled at me. “I had no idea that—you’re, like, an artist.”

“A cock artist,” I said, smiling wide before kissing the side of his neck.

“You are, damn, and I’m so happy you feel safe with me and trust me, and I know it took all this time and work and everything else for you to be able to?—”

“You’re rambling,” I informed him. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m telling you, I want to be kissed all the time now, and I want you to suck my cock all the time, and I really want you to take me inside your body, and I will be so gentle and so careful and?—”

“But that’s not how I want it,” I told him, languorously stroking his cock.

“I want you to hold me down and have me because I love bottoming, and I know we’re gonna be amazing together, and I need to reclaim that piece I lost. I need you to let me ride you and take my pleasure from your body to let my heart and soul see I’m different now.

Not all the way healed, but you’re going to help me, aren’t you? In and out of bed?”

“Yes,” he croaked out, his eyes filling fast. “Don’t get me wrong, I want to be used in any way you want.”

I couldn’t have stifled the laughter if I tried.

“But I don’t want you to kiss anyone else, or fuck anyone else, or lie in bed with

anyone else. You can't—I mean, you can, of course you can, but I don't want you to be with anyone but me. I want you to stay here with me, and I'll get you a ring and a house and?—”

The trembling was expected; I was that happy.

“You must know that I... I... There's no one else I want to be with all the time.

When you smile, I can't help myself and I smile too, and yes, you're the best assistant I've ever had, but I would be just as happy, even more so, if we did different things all day, and at night we came home to each other. ”

“Because?”

“Because I love you, idiot.”

I laughed and pressed my face down on his shoulder.

“This is when I normally want to throw a stapler at you.”

I laughed harder.

“I am dying right now.”

Lifting my head, I kissed him tenderly, then leaned back and stared into his eyes. “I love you too. You know I do. It's all over me every single day. I can't keep my hands off you, and now I won't be able to keep my mouth off you either.”

The flush on his cheeks and throat told me that the idea of me all over him was something he was looking forward to.

“I will come clean with HR on Monday, because there’s no way I can work with you after this. I can’t believe you haven’t been kissing me this whole time.”

“Maybe it will be all out of your system by Monday.”

“It’s not the sex, and you know it,” he grumbled. “And though I want to know what we need so you can ride me, I think... I think we should maybe go get that now and?—”

“Ohmygod, you’re adorable.”

“Like really, let’s change and?—”

“Can you finish what you were gonna say?”

“What was I saying?”

I growled at him, and he cackled like a crazy person, before he grabbed me and wrapped me up tight in his arms.

“If all I could be was your best friend and boss for the rest of my life, I would have taken that in a heartbeat. I wouldn’t be as happy, I wouldn’t be living my best life, as they say, but I would accept what I could have over the alternative, which would be trying to piece together half a life with someone else. ”

“I love you,” I whispered fiercely, my voice going out on me.

“Yeah, well, of course you love me. Everybody loves me.”

“That’s a wild exaggeration,” I said wryly.

“But you do,” he stated, daring me to contradict him. I could hear it in his tone.  
“Don’t you?”

“I do, and have for so very long.”

“That’s good,” he said before he kissed me.

I could kiss him endlessly, and as each grinding, possessive, drugging kiss was returned with equal passion, all I wanted was more.

“Okay, so are you ready to go to the store?” he asked.

I had to admit that being the focus of Colton Gates’s desire did not upset me even a little. And yes, I was ready to walk for lube.

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We bought several things at the store because he wanted to cook breakfast for me in the morning, plus, that way, the lube was among other items and didn't stand out. I told him we were grown-ups and it didn't matter. Fun to watch him blush.

"We should get some condoms too," I said, reaching for them.

"No," he said tightly, and I turned to him. "I've never not used one, and I know it's been a very long time for you."

My voice lowered to a whisper. "Yes, but I was taken once, from Gen, and during that time, I don't know exactly what was—"

"But that was forever ago, nearly a decade, and you've been tested since then," he said firmly. "Probably many times. I know you, so I'm sure of it."

"How?"

He shrugged. "I know you better'n anyone."

I nodded.

"And before that?"

"I've never in my life not used one."

"With anyone?"

I knew what he was asking. Had I used one with Gen? “With anyone,” I answered.

“So it’ll be our thing...the not using them.”

“Yes,” I said, overcome with his trust in me.

He threw an arm around my neck, pulling me close, tucking me in tight against him before he kissed my temple.

I had to wonder if it would be like this from now on, because I could easily get used to the constant affection and closeness.

But then as we were walking home, each of us carrying one of his recyclable tote bags and holding hands, I had an epiphany.

The affection and closeness were already there.

We always walked with me holding on to his arm, that had been the case since the beginning, and then later, him holding my hand or my bicep.

The only part that was new was the kisses, and when I made him stop in the middle of the sidewalk, hand on the lapel of his peacoat, tugging him down to me, there was a wicked grin before he took my mouth, kissing me breathless right there.

“Oh,” I murmured, my sigh long.

“Tell me.” His voice shook, gruff with affection.

“Colton Gates, I love you so much.”

“I knew it all along,” he said smugly. “Whenever I look into all that blue, I think: his

eyes never get soft and dark like that for anyone but me.”

“You’ve noticed my eyes?”

“Of course,” he grumbled, taking hold of my hand and giving a gentle tug to get me moving. “Everyone does. When people come into the office and meet you for the first time, they end up staring. It happens constantly and I fuckin’ hate it.”

They didn’t, I wasn’t blind, but I loved that he thought so. “Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s—don’t be stupid.”

I didn’t laugh, just walked beside him, held his hand, and soaked in the sunshine that was him. I couldn’t remember ever being happier.

He made way too much food, but fortunately, even though he wasn’t a clean-as-you-go person, I was. When we were both drinking tea as the sun came up, he yawned loudly.

I laughed, and he shook his head. “Not sexy.”

“Actually, it very much was,” I assured him. “You’re content at the moment.”

“I’m always content when you’re with me,” he murmured, his eyelids drooping.

“Come on, let’s go lie down.”

He didn’t fight me. He slid off the barstool and let me lead him to his bedroom. We both stripped down and got under the covers.

“You should come to the party with me tonight,” he muttered as he spooned me.



I wanted to answer, but I was on sensory overload. His bicep was under my head, his arm around my waist, his chest plastered to my back, and his thighs pressed to mine. The all-over body shudder was no surprise.

“This all right?”

“Yes,” I husked.

“Good,” he said, nuzzling my hair. “And so you know, I set the alarm when we came in.”

Normally, that was the first thing I would have asked, but not this time. Not in this moment. “Thank you for telling me.”

“I know you’re worried about me, but you don’t have to be. I’ve been taking care of both of us for a long time now.”

Yes, he had.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got you.”

We slept like the dead. He because he was exhausted, and I because I felt so safe lying in his arms. When his phone woke us up around five, he grabbed it off his nightstand and stared groggily at the display.

I pressed my lips together tight so I wouldn’t laugh.

“I can’t see what this says.”

I chuckled.

He held the phone out for me and rolled over when I took it, his back to me.

“You need reading glasses,” I told him for probably the hundredth time.

“Thirty-five-year-old men don’t need reading glasses,” he grouched.

“They certainly might if they read off a computer all day , read briefs all day , and type all day . We need to get you the kind with the blue lens coating too.”

He grunted, not turning to me.

“This is Mr. Somerset sending out a reminder that the whole firm—support staff, paralegals, associates, and partners—need to be at the InterContinental Chicago Hotel tonight at seven.”

Second grunt from him.

“He reiterates to everyone that it is a black-tie affair,” I said smiling. “I’m thinking he doesn’t want to see any jeans or flannel.”

“You’re funny,” he said dryly.

“You don’t mean it,” I teased him.

“I don’t even own a tuxedo.”

“Yes, you do.”

“How do you know what—oh yeah.”

I laughed and scooted over to him, kissing his nape.

“How many of those stupid things did you make me try on?”

“Many, but in the end, Armani was the one.”

“Still needed to be altered,” he reminded me. “My chest was too wide.”

“Yes,” I said with a sigh, pressing my face between his shoulder blades.

“It is, you said so,” he said sulkily.

“Yes, I did,” I agreed. “It’s because you’re so beautifully proportioned.”

“Now you’re being snide,” he snapped at me.

“Never,” I murmured, slipping my hand around his throat and turning his head so I could reach his lips.

I kissed him languorously, sliding my tongue between his lips, loving the feel of his tongue rubbing against mine.

He rolled over to face me, careful not to part our lips even with us bumping together, and when his hand closed on my hardening length, I moaned.

“That was a good noise,” he said, smiling against my lips.

“I put the lube in your nightstand.”

“Maybe I just put my mouth on you this time,” he whispered roughly.

“Or maybe I ride you like I want and you can come inside me.”

“Fuck,” he gasped, pulling away, then rolled over and tried to open the nightstand.

The drawer stuck, as it always did, which I told him would happen before he decided to go ahead and buy the pair after all.

Not only were they odd, eyesores amid the rest of his furniture with the classic lines, but also poorly designed.

“Stop,” I said, smiling as I climbed over him, still careful of his stitches. I lifted the drawer slightly while sliding it out.

“You were right. They’re ugly, and the drawers aren’t seated right.”

“But the color matches,” I said, because that had been his reasoning at the time. “Doesn’t it?”

“We’ll get new ones, and you can give these to whoever it is at work who collects mid-century furniture.”

“It’s Natalie, and she’ll be thrilled,” I said, gently pushing on his shoulder so he was flat on his back. “Or I can take them to my place. I don’t have nightstands.”

When I looked at him, he was scowling.

“What?”

“What my ass,” he growled. “I have all your stuff here, where it belongs. You’re not going anywhere, and we both know you don’t want to.”

“No, I don’t,” I acknowledged, throwing back the covers before I climbed over him, straddling his hips. “I want to stay here with you.”

“Then it’s settled, and let’s not talk about it any…more,” he said, his voice going out on him as I flicked open the lube and poured some into my hand.

“I won’t always need this much, but this is the first time in a long time, and I don’t want to wait to have you stretch me and get me ready.”

“I know what to do,” he said, his breath catching as I fisted his length and stroked him, slathering his cock. “There’s rimming, and I can use my fingers and?—”

“Have you done all that?” I asked, lifting up and notching the wide head against my opening. Watching him, seeing the flush again on his face, on his throat, kept me present and grounded, focused on him and nothing else.

“I thought I should know about sex with men if I ever got the chance to?—”

“Did you watch porn for me?” I teased him, pressing down a bit, the pain immediate and sharp.

“I read,” he corrected me, taking hold of my shaft, stroking me with one hand, the other sliding around the side of my neck to ease me down into a kiss.

He knew. Even now, having never been in bed with me before, he knew I craved more than the physical joining; that I craved the connection to my lover. Even better, he wanted the exact same thing.

His kisses were ravenous, claiming, and I sank into the heat of his mouth, my body going boneless, wanting only to be closer.

His hand on my length, dragging through precum, was both firm and gentle, and I began to rock, forward into his grip and back onto his cock, taking more and more of him inside me.

I bit his lip when he tried to break the kiss, and he put his thumb in my mouth so I would suck on that a moment while he gulped air.

“You’re so fuckin’ tight, and your muscles are squeezing around me like—Pax, honey, I’m not gonna make it all the way in,” he rasped, panting now. “I—fuck!”

I dropped down over him, fully seated, loving him buried to his balls, and even more, savoring the feeling of fullness.

Lifting, bracing my hands on his chest, I tucked my head against my shoulder, hiding, not ready for him to see me so vulnerable.

“No,” he ordered, both hands reaching for my face and gently, tenderly, turning my head until my gaze met his. “Come on. This is us. Have faith that I’m in the same exact place.”

I noted the blown pupils and the deep honey gold, and how red his lips were from my voracious kisses. He was just as naked, body and soul, as I was.

“Is this too much? Am I hurting you?”

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“No,” I said, lifting up only to slide back down, the loosening of my muscles allowing me to move as I wanted, as I needed, to find my rhythm. As I rode him, I suddenly saw the taped gauze and remembered he was hurt. “I need to get off of—Colton!”

He was so much stronger than me and showed off his power as he grabbed my hip, holding me to him, and rolled over.

Colton coming down on top of me, buried deep, took my breath away. He was so hard and thick and long, and it felt amazing and right and I crooned his name.

“Focus on this, us, joined,” he instructed, curling forward, lifting my legs over those gorgeous broad shoulders of his. “I’m not hurt enough to stop doing what I’ve dreamed of for years.”

“Years?”

“Yes,” he rasped, staring down into my eyes. “You, all the time, every day, the man I wanted more than anyone. It’s been you from the start.”

His words rolled through me.

“Gimme the pillow,” he directed.

Reaching to the side, I grabbed his and passed it to him. He wedged it under me and then eased from my hole a bit before shoving back inside as deep as he could. He felt incredible.

“I wanna fuckin’ have you, but?—”

“Yes,” I said, slipping my hands under the headboard and gripping tight. “Have me.”

Even though I gave permission, he started out careful. I didn’t allow that. When I arched up to meet him, his moan of yearning made me smile.

It was seamless, us, together, and somehow, I knew it would be.

This was how things went when you were in bed with the person who knew you, inside and out, good days and bad, in darkness and light.

It had taken me a long time to get here, and I had to be whole before I reached for him, but now I could claim what had always been mine.

When he demanded I take hold of my cock, I knew he was close. His breath was coming in stops and starts, his thrusts wild, pounding, and he used me hard, which I loved. The surprise was the orgasm that roared up my spine, splintering me into a million pieces as my muscles clenched around him.

Head back, eyes closed, there was a final powerful stroke before he froze over me, releasing deep inside my body. My name had never sounded as good as it did right then, tumbling from his throat.

It took long moments for him to open his eyes and look at me.

“You’re loud in bed,” he informed me.

I laughed softly.

“Not that I’m complaining,” he said hoarsely. “Because I’m really not.”



Slowly, gently, he slipped my legs down his arms and then stretched over me, still inside, more than content, it seemed, to lie between my thighs, head on my shoulder, mouth open on the side of my neck. I turned and kissed his hair, loving how I was being held.

“I’ll move in a second,” he promised. “Your ass, though, doesn’t want to let me go quite yet.”

I could feel that as well, and wrapped my arms around his neck, clutching him tight as he shivered, loving his warm skin on mine.

“I wasn’t careful...at the end,” he muttered.

“No, you weren’t.”

“Pax, honey, I?—”

“Which meant you trusted me when I said it was what I wanted. It’s been so long since I wanted to be touched. You know it could only be you.”

“It can only ever be me,” he rumbled. “And I know you loved being under me because you’ve got your own cum on you, and some on me.”

I grinned and hid my face in his hair.

“Mine is dripping out of your ass, and I think your muscles have finally—lemme go for a second here.”

I didn’t want to, but I uncoiled my arms so he could lift off me and slide, tenderly, from my body.

“That’s fuckin’ hot, my cum dripping from your ass.”

I shook my head at him.

“What? It is,” he insisted, sounding ridiculously pleased with himself. “And next time, and the time after that, and the time after that?—”

“That sounds like you liked doing this with me,” I murmured, trying to banter, but it was too hard. I needed the words from him as well.

He came back down on top of me, both of us smeared and sticky and sweaty. We had wrecked his bed, and now he rolled me to the left, into his arms, hugging me tight. “Listen,” he began, his voice gravelly and low. “I loved that, and it seemed like you did too.”

“Yes,” I assured him.

“And I want to do that whenever you want me and whenever I want you. Everything works with us. I love to talk to you, I love to yell at you?—”

“Yes, you do.”

“And I love to kiss you,” he said, punctuating his soft words with a press of his lips to my forehead, “and I fuckin’ love having sex with you, and you love all that same stuff.”

I sighed deeply, happier than I ever thought I’d be.

“Don’t you?” he pressed, smoothing his hand down over my ass, cupping gently.

“Yes. I love all that.”

“Okay, then,” he said, taking a breath, his other hand sliding around the side of my neck, his thumb under my chin, lifting my eyes to his. “I think the thing for you to do now is to stay with me forever because I’m the one person who will put up with you.”

His gaze was locked with mine, and he was holding my face so I couldn’t turn away.

“That last part isn’t true,” he said, his voice low and guttural. “A lot of people will want you—I’ve seen how men look at you—but I’m the one you love, so...there it is.”

“You’re the only one for me, Colton Gates,” I whispered.

“Of course I am,” he muttered, leaning in and kissing me.

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He objected to shaving. He complained about putting on his tuxedo shirt and the cuff links. He expressed his anger toward the stupid knee-high socks and the even stupider shiny patent dress shoes with the slick bottoms that were going to kill him in the snow.

“But you’re gorgeous,” I praised him when he was standing in front of me a good hour later. “You cut a very dashing figure, Mr. Gates.”

“You look beautiful in yours,” he said with a sigh. “I remember when we bought it and you came out of the fitting room; I nearly fell out of the chair.”

I smiled at him.

“And then you were asking me questions, and I couldn’t get my voice to work.”

“You’re very sweet,” I praised him, stepping in close and slipping my hand around the side of his neck to draw him down for a kiss.

His lips melted over mine, and in moments, I had both arms wrapped around his neck and his had me clutched tight against him.

When I broke the kiss, I noted the scowl and smiled. “We have to go.”

“Or...” he began with that lethal smile of his that made his golden eyes sparkle, “we could go wreck the bed a second time.”

“I just made that bed, and?—”

“I don’t care. I’ve got lots of fitted sheets and flat sheets and pillowcases and everything else you made me buy. Even a duvet, which I still don’t know what that is or where it goes.”

I slipped out of his arms and headed for the door. “The sooner we go, the sooner we can get home. We’ll get pizza on the way back, and I’ll attack you and make you scream so?—”

“I don’t need the pizza,” he let me know. “But I would very much like to be attacked, please.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “Then let’s go.”

“Or...” he said, purposely beginning his argument the same way, like he did when he was in court, when he was driving a point home, “we could have the attacking now and forget about the?—”

“Now,” I ordered, putting on my cashmere scarf and reaching for my trench coat.

He was there fast, bumping me gently, taking my coat off the hook by the door, holding it for me so I could slide in one arm and then the other. “You need a hat. It’s snowing outside.”

“I don’t have a hat that matches, and I refuse to wear the ugly one with the big red pom-pom. We’ll get one this week.”

“No one will see it,” he muttered as he did what he always did and pulled the black hat in question off the hook and down over my head. “You’ll take it off in the coatroom. But you’re not getting pneumonia on my watch simply because you think my hat is ugly.”

“Why do I even bother doing my hair?”

He ignored me. “And you’re getting gloves too. You don’t need to be afraid of them anymore.”

I arched a brow that I hoped conveyed how ridiculous he sounded. “I am not afraid of gloves .”

“You’re being obtuse on purpose. You know what I mean,” he apprised me. “You’ll never be in a situation where not having full use of your hands will be a bad thing.”

“You can’t say that for—”

His eyes met mine. “Yes, I can. I will always be with you. I have been since we met, but it’s more now.”

Yes, it was. “Okay,” I said, lifting for a kiss.

He glared at me.

“Kiss. Now.”

“You’re making me go out when all I wanna do is lie on the couch and watch TV.”

“I thought we were going to fool around again.”

“I want that too, so much,” he croaked out. “But I want to snuggle up and watch movies with you.”

“Under a blanket, with the fire going.”

He whimpered, and it was adorable.

“You have to go be charming,” I said firmly, moving to the hook on the wall and

grabbing his wool and cashmere trench coat that looked amazing on him. “Let’s go already.”

A more unhappy man, albeit a stunning one, I had never seen. I also had no idea that one could put a scarf on so angrily. I was laughing as he opened the door.

It never occurred to me for even a moment that Erast Antonov could be there in the hallway—especially since he was supposedly dead.

“What is the cop even doing out there?” I yelled at Colton, gesturing at Erast, who was holding a gun. “How is he missing this man coming?—”

“This isn’t him,” Colton said, stepping in front of me so that if the gun went off, it would hit him, not me. “I saw pictures, and—it’s not.”

“What’re you talking about?”

He gestured at Erast.

I understood instantly. “Oh, no. You’re right. This isn’t Genrikh Antonov.”

“Okay,” Colton replied like this was normal, us chatting casually in front of a man who could shoot us both dead. “Good. I thought I was going nuts for a second.”

“No,” I said, moving so I was shielding Colton. “This is his cousin Erast.”

Colton stared at him. “No shit?”

Erast smiled slowly. While not an ugly man, he was not in the same league as his cousin, who embodied what a thousand-year-old vampire would look like. Beautiful and sexy, sleek and nearly flawless, with pale skin and dark eyes.

“Tell us the story,” I ordered Erast.

He glanced at me, then at Colton, who crossed his arms, following my lead, taking his cues from me the same way I did from him when the roles were reversed. We would not be alarmed, and there would be no yelling. Again, this was us, as we always were.

“You realize I have a gun and I’m going to murder you if you don’t tell me where the diamonds are,” Erast informed me.

“What diamonds?” I snapped at him. “Seriously, I’m so sick of being asked about goddamn diamonds I never saw. That day when you got all snarly with me and said, Oh, we’ll see when Gen pulls the surveillance footage and—” I stopped because I needed to know.

“And?” he prodded me.

“You’re here. Gen is not. Is he dead?”

He took a breath. “No. Last week he called up that fucking widow—you remember, the one from Bosnia and Herzegovina—and after all this time, she flew into New York on her private jet, picked him up, and that’s it. He’s done. Living the rest of his life as a kept man.”

It was sort of poetic. She had all the power, Gen had none. Because yes, he’d live the rest of his life carefree, but how much of his heart and soul would that choice eat?

“Why didn’t he come to ask me about the diamonds?”

“I have no idea,” he said irritably, starting to pace. “We came together, and I always have to travel in a stupid disguise because I’m supposed to be dead, and it’s fuckin’ cold here. What the fuck? How long does it stay like this?”



“I thought these guys were Russian?” Colton asked me.

“Yeah, but they were all born in Southern California, except for Csokas and Rokov, I think.”

“That’s correct,” Erast confirmed, sounding dejected, almost sad.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked, trying to keep the irritation out of my voice.

Because I’d been scared for Colton and worried for me about how I would handle seeing Gen again.

But now it was Erast, and I was just annoyed.

Plus, he sounded petulant, which was grating.

“Did you want an heiress to come whisk you away?”

“That’s your problem, all of you, all the house entertainment. You always thought I was jealous of Gen, and I wasn’t.”

“Gen was the one with the beauty and the charm,” I made clear. “He was the one who went out, found people, seduced us, then turned us out.”

“That last part isn’t exactly true. You weren’t walking the streets. He kept you all in that fucking mansion you put an end to when you left.”

“I’m all torn up about that.”

“You know that time you were kidnapped by those guys Gen gave you to, I told him not to bother getting you back, you were damaged goods at that point.”

“Makes sense,” I agreed, not about to argue with him.

“Plus, I was sure you’d never be the same. His spell was broken. You were gullible but not stupid.”

Colton moved toward him, but Erast lifted the Glock 17 and pointed it at him. “Don’t do anything foolish, boyfriend. The past is the past. Who cares?”

“That’s actually right,” I said to Colton, wrapping my arms around his waist and pressing my face to his chest.

“Wait, boyfriend?” Colton asked Erast.

“Yeah, of course. As I said to you, Gen and I were here for a week, watching Pax, seeing if he was living life off stolen stones, but he’s not, and all we could see was his assistant job, and we didn’t get it.

Then Gen, he goes out by himself and follows you around after work one night, and when he came back to the hotel, he seemed sad.

When I asked what was wrong, he said he knew you were happy.

He said you looked good, healthy, different, and he went on and on about the spark in your eyes or the spark being back in your eyes.

I don’t know. I wasn’t really listening.

But I think he was hoping you had the diamonds and that you might consider taking him back if you did. ”

“So if Pax had them, Mr. Antonov would’ve considered staying because Pax would be rich. But as Pax doesn’t have them, calling the widow was his best bet.”

“Yeah.”

Colton nodded. “He’s all heart.”

“Gen also suggested that if I wanted to know definitively if you had the diamonds,” he said to me before pointing the gun at Colton, “then I should threaten your boyfriend because you really love him.”

“Your cousin thinks Pax really loves me?” Colton asked Erast.

“What?” Erast sounded annoyed.

“Never mind him,” I said quickly, wanting Erast’s focus on me. “Let’s talk about the diamonds.”

“Yes,” Erast replied, seemingly unsure of Colton, holding the gun on him instead of me. “Gen swore Pax is crazy about you. He said that even before he fucked up, Pax never smiled at him the way he smiles at you.”

Colton was suddenly grinning, clearly so very pleased.

“You are not at all focused on the task at hand,” I assured him.

“I knew you loved me,” he said smugly.

“I told you I loved you,” I reminded him, shaking my head.

“Yes, but outside confirmation is always good.”

“Why are neither of you scared of this gun?” he roared. “I’ve killed people before. Tell him I have!” he demanded, rounding on me.

The second Erast turned his attention to me, Colton grabbed hold of his coat, yanked him off-balance, knocked the gun away, then punched him squarely in the jaw. He went down hard, that fast, out cold.

“Ohmygod, don’t you ever do that again!” I yelled at him.

“Don’t do what? Punch a guy for sharing something horrible that happened to you and then saying yeah, I said you weren’t worth saving because you were damaged goods?”

“You were upset about that?”

“I want to throw him off my balcony for that,” he said, reaching for me, wrapping me in his arms, and holding me tight. “And for the record, you’re not damaged. You’re amazing.”

I smiled into his shoulder. “As long as you think so, I’m happy.”

“Good.”

I cleared my throat. “May I ask though, why you would throw him off the balcony? Why not simply shoot him?”

“Because we’d be cleaning up for hours, and I have other plans.”

I hugged him. “Your interest in me is very flattering.”

“It’s not interest. It’s love. Say it.”

“It’s love,” I repeated, lifting for a kiss that he quickly gave me.

Later we found out that the patrol officers downstairs had left without waiting for

their relief—it was the weekend, Sunday night, so they were supposed to be there all day—so I suspected that SAC Calhoun was going to murder someone in the police department.

He seemed to like me and Colton, so I was guessing he was going to let someone know.

Once the police came and collected Erast and the gun, we gave our statements to two different officers, and by the time that was done, it was much too late to go to the very fancy party downtown.

Colton called Mr. Somerset to let him know we'd been waylaid by a Russian mobster and he could check with the police if he didn't believe him.

Colton was smiling as he hung up.

“Did he believe you?”

“Of course he believed me, and what a perfect reason that was for blowing off a black-tie event. If I didn't hate that guy Erast so much, I'd thank him.”

“You don't need to hate him. That's all over now.”

“Still hate 'em.”

Once we hung our coats up and I got to take off the stupid hat, I turned and hugged him. Hands on my face, he tilted my chin up for a kiss.

“I could get used to this,” I murmured.

“That's good. You should.”

I crossed the room then and flipped on the table lamp to the left of the fireplace.

“Wow,” he said, looking at the lights reflected all over the room as though I’d hung up a disco ball. “What is that?”

“I got this for you at Christmas, don’t you remember?”

“I recall the base part having blue marbles in it or something. Am I remembering that right?”

“Yes, you are.”

“The clear is much better, and all that refraction is really...very...beau—nooo,” he drew out the word, mouth open in awe.

I waggled my eyebrows at him, and he darted into the living room, stopping beside me to stare down at the stones that filled the piece. When lit by the soft white bulb, it made the entire room appear magical.

“How long have I had a three-million-dollar lamp?”

“It’s not a three-million-dollar lamp.” I was indignant.

“No, you’re right, how stupid of me,” he teased, smiling. “It’s a three-million-fifty-dollar lamp.”

“I’ll have you know it was more than fifty bucks. I like you more than that.”

He nodded. “Well, you better stay here and keep track of your fortune.”

“I trust you, as you can plainly see.”

“Well, regardless, you better stick around so together we can find a nice house to move into that will be warm and cozy for you.”

“A home for me?”

“Yes. We’ll pick out the perfect one.”

“And will you be there as well?”

“Of course. I’ll be the man wearing the matching ring.”

“A ring sounds terribly serious.”

“Well, I am, about you. Serious I mean.”

“That doesn’t sound terrible,” I said, smiling up at him. “I’ll agree to this plan.”

“I thought you would,” he murmured before I was kissed yet again.