



a collection of
erotic romances

NEW YORK

Nights

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WHITNEY G.

NEW YORK NIGHTS

A Collection of Erotic Romances

Whitney G.

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GILLIAN

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GILLIAN

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GILLIAN

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Best Readers Ever,

Thank you so much for taking a chance on *New York Nights*!

Inside of this special boxed set, you'll find *Reasonable Doubt* (Full Series), a full length novel that was originally released as a three-part serial. This series was my “breakout book” and enabled thousands of readers from around the world to find me and my words.

After *Reasonable Doubt*, you'll find *Turbulence*—a standalone novel that features one of the cockiest pilots in the skies, and a heroine that can hold her own against him.

Last, and never least, you'll find *Naughty Boss*, my most recent release and the start of my upcoming series of “Steamy Coffee Reads,” which are short and steamy standalone novellas that are best devoured over hot cups of coffee. (How cute is that name? LOL)

I hope you enjoy *New York Nights*, and if you do, be sure to [join my mailing list](#) to stay informed about what I'll be releasing next!

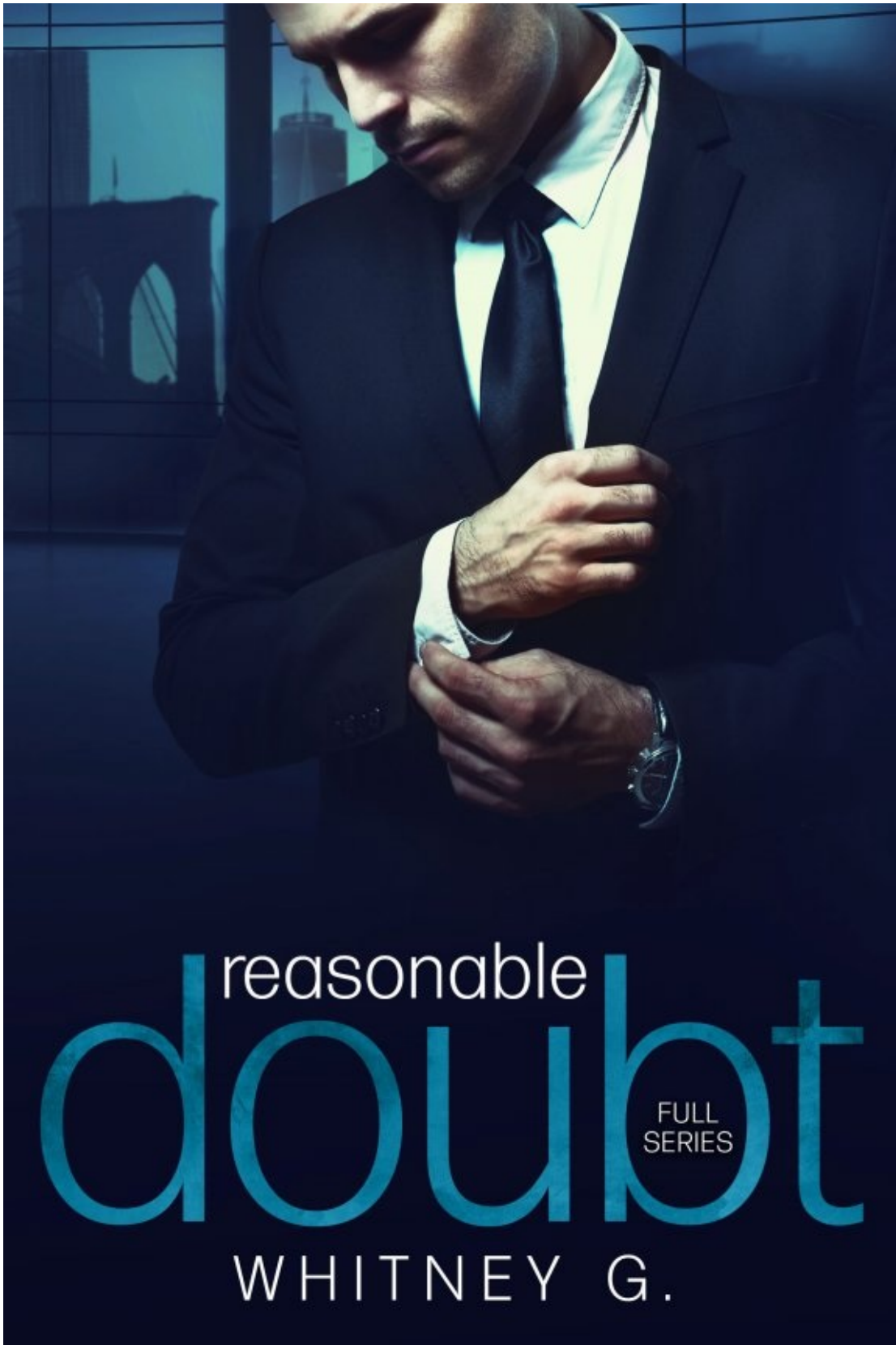
F.L.Y.

(Effin Love You)

Whitney G.

PS—If you want to drop me a line, you can do so [here on my Facebook page](#). I check it quite often. :)

REASONABLE DOUBT



reasonable
doubt

FULL
SERIES

WHITNEY G.

SYNOPSIS

The complete New York Times Bestselling serial, now available in one book!

My cock has an appetite.

A huge and very particular appetite: Blonde, curvy, and preferably not a fucking liar... (Although, that's a story for another day.) As a high profile lawyer, I don't have time to waste on relationships, so I fulfill my needs by anonymously chatting and sleeping with women I meet online.

My rules are simple: One dinner. One night. No repeats.

This is only casual sex. Nothing more. Nothing less.

At least it was, until *Alyssa*...

She was supposed to be a 27-year-old lawyer, a book hoarder, and completely unattractive. She was supposed to be someone I shared law advice with late at night, someone I could trust with details of my weekly escapades.

But then she came into my firm for an interview—a college-intern interview, and everything fucking changed...

REASONABLE DOUBT
(VOLUME ONE)

reasonable
doubt
VOLUME
ONE
WHITNEY G.

Prologue

Andrew

New York City is nothing more than a shit-filled wasteland, a dump where failures are forced to drop all their broken dreams and leave them far behind. The flashing lights that shined brightly years ago have lost their luster, and that fresh feeling that once permeated the air—that *hopefulness*, is long gone.

Every person I once considered a friend is now an enemy, and the word “trust” has been ripped from my vocabulary. My name and reputation are tarnished thanks to the press, and after reading the headline that *The New York Times* ran this morning, I’ve decided that tonight will be the last night I ever spend here.

I can’t deal with the cold sweats and nightmares that jerk me out of my sleep anymore, and as hard as I try to pretend like my heart hasn’t been obliterated, I doubt that the agonizing ache in my chest will ever go away.

To properly say goodbye, I’ve ordered the best entrées from all my favorite restaurants, watched *Death of a Salesman* on Broadway, and smoked a Cuban cigar on the Brooklyn Bridge. I’ve also booked the penthouse suite at the Waldorf Astoria, where I’m now leaning back on the bed and threading my fingers through a woman’s hair—groaning as she slides her mouth over my cock.

Teasingly darting her tongue around my tip, she whispers, “Do you like this?” as she looks up at me.

I don’t answer. I push her head down and exhale as she presses her lips against my balls, as she covers my cock with her hands and moves them up and down.

Over the past two hours, I’ve fucked her against the wall, forced her to bend over a chair, and pinned her legs to the mattress while I devoured her pussy.

It’s been quite fulfilling—*fun*, but I know this feeling will only last for so long; it never stays. In less than a week, I’ll have to find someone else.

As she takes me deeper and deeper into her mouth, I tightly tug her hair—tensing as she bobs her head up and down. Pleasure begins to course its way through me, and the muscles in my legs stiffen—forcing me to let go and warn her to pull away.

She ignores me.

She grips my knees and sucks faster, letting my cock touch the back of her throat. I give her one last chance to move away, but since her lips remain wrapped around me, she leaves me no choice but to cum in her mouth.

And then she swallows.

Every. Last. Drop.

Impressive...

Finally pulling away, she licks her lips and leans back against the floor.

“That was my first time swallowing,” she says. “I did that just for you.”

“You shouldn’t have.” I stand and zip my pants. “You should’ve saved it for someone else.”

“Right. Well, um...Do you want to order some dinner? Maybe we could eat it over HBO and go at it again afterwards?”

I raise my eyebrow, confused.

This is always the most annoying part, the part when the woman who previously agreed to “One dinner. One night. No repeats.” wants to establish some type of imaginary connection. For whatever reason, she feels like there needs to be some type of closure conversation, some bland reassurance that’ll confirm that what just happened was ‘more than sex,’ and we’ll become friends.

But it *was* just sex, and I’m not in need of any friends. Not now, not ever.

“No, thank you.” I walk over to the mirror on the other side of the room. “I have someplace to be.”

“At three in the morning? I mean, if you just want to skip the HBO and go for another round instead, I can...”

I tune out her irritating voice and begin to button my shirt. I’ve never spent the night with a woman I met online, and she isn’t going to be the first.

As I adjust my tie, I look down and spot a tattered pink wallet on the dresser. Picking it up, I flip it open and run my fingers across the name that’s printed onto her license: Sarah Tate.

Even though I’ve only known this woman for a week, she’s always answered to “Samantha.” She’s also told me—*repeatedly*, that she works as a nurse at Grace Hospital. Judging by the Wal-Mart employee card that’s hiding behind her license, I’m assuming that part isn’t true either.

I look over my shoulder, where she’s now sprawled across the bed’s silk sheets. Her creamy colored skin is unmarred and smooth; her bow shaped lips are slightly swollen and puffy.

Her green eyes meet mine and she slowly sits up, spreading her legs further apart, whispering, “You know you want to stay. *Stay...*”

My cock starts to harden—it’s definitely up for another round, but seeing her real name has ruined any chance of that for me. I can’t stand to be around anyone who’s lied to me, even if she does have double D tits and a mouth from heaven.

I toss the wallet into her lap. “You told me your name was Samantha.”

“Okay. *And?*”

“Your name is *Sarah.*”

“So what?” She shrugs, beckoning me with her hand. “I never give my *real name* to men I meet on the internet.”

“You just fuck them in five star hotel suites?”

“Why do you suddenly care about my real name?”

“*I don’t.*” I glance at my watch. “Are you spending the night in this room or do I need to give you cab money to get home?”

“*What?*”

“Was my question unclear?”

“Wow...Just, wow...” She shakes her head. “How much longer do you think you’ll be able to keep doing this?”

“Keep doing *what?*”

“Chatting someone up for a week, fucking her, and moving on to the next. How much longer?”

“Until my dick stops working.” I put on my jacket. “Do you need cab fare or are you staying? Check out is at noon.”

“Do you know that men like you—*relationship avoiders*, are the type that typically fall the hardest?”

“Did they teach you that at Wal-Mart?”

“Just because someone from your past hurt you doesn’t mean that every woman after her will.” She purses her lips. “That’s probably why you are the way you are. Maybe if you tried to actually *date* someone you’d be a lot happier. You should take her out for dinner and actually listen, see her to her door without expecting an invitation inside, and maybe bypass the whole ‘let’s go fuck’ in the hotel suite thing at the end.”

Where are my keys? I need to go. Now.

“I can see it now...” She can’t seem to shut up. “You’re going to want more than sex one day, and the person you want it from is going to be someone you least expect. Someone who will force you to give in.”

I pull my keys from underneath her crumpled dress and sigh. “Do you need cab money?”

“I have my own car, dick-face.” She rolls her eyes. “Are you really this incapable of having a regular conversation? Would it kill you to talk to me for a few minutes after sex?”

“We have nothing more to discuss.” I put my room key on the nightstand and walk toward the door. “It was very nice meeting you, Samantha, *Sarah*. Whatever the hell your name is. Have a great night.”

“*Screw you!*”

“Three times was more than enough. No, thank you.”

“Things are going to catch up to you one day, asshole!” She yells as I step into the hallway. “Karma is one hell of a bitch!”

“I know.” I toss back. “I fucked her two weeks ago...”

Contract (n.):

An agreement between two people that creates an obligation to do or not do a particular action.

Six years later...

Durham, North Carolina

Andrew

The woman who was currently sitting across from me was a fucking liar.

Dressed in an ugly ass grey sweater and a red plaid skirt, her hair looked as if it'd been dyed with a box of crayons. She looked nothing like the woman in the picture online, nothing like the smiling blonde with C-cup breasts, butterfly tattoos, and plump, pink lips.

Before I'd agreed to this date, I'd specifically asked for three separate proof of truth pictures: one of her holding a newspaper with the most recent date on it, one of her biting her lip, and one of her holding up a sign with her name on it. When I requested these things, she'd laughed and said that I was "the most paranoid person ever," but she'd done them. Or so I thought. With the exception of telling her my real name—I stopped giving out my real name years ago, I'd been completely honest and I expected that in return.

"Well, now that we're *alone...*" She suddenly smiled, revealing a mouth full of metal and rubber bands. "It's nice to finally meet you in person, *Thoreau*. How are you today?"

I didn't have time for this. "Who's the girl in your profile picture?" I asked.

"What?"

"*Who is the girl in your profile picture?*"

"Oh...Well, that isn't me."

"*No shit* it isn't you." I rolled my eyes. "Did you hire a model? Buy a bunch of stock images and use Photoshop?"

"Not exactly." She lowered her voice. "I just thought you'd be more likely to talk to me if I used that photo instead of my own."

I looked her over again, now noticing the strange unicorn tattoo across her knuckles and the "Love is blind" quote that was inked onto her wrist.

"What were you expecting to happen when we actually *met*?" This shit was boggling my mind. "Did you *think* about what would happen when that day came? When I realized that you weren't who you said you were?"

"I was kind of expecting for you to have lied about your picture too," she said. "I didn't know that you would really look like *you*, you know? This is the first time a guy on *Date-Match* has told the truth. I think it's a *sign*."

"*It's not*." I shook my head. "And the model? How did you get someone to take all those pictures?"

"It wasn't a model. It was my roommate." Her eyes widened as I stood up. "Wait a second! All the things I said to you on the phone were absolutely true. I *am* interested in politics, and I do love studying the law and keeping up with high profile cases."

"What law school did you go to?"

“Law school?” She raised her eyebrow. “No, not *law school* type of law. Law like, I’ve watched every episode of *SVU* and I’ve read all of John Grisham’s books.”

I sighed and pulled a few bills out of my wallet, putting them on the table. I’d wasted enough time with her.

“Goodbye, *Charlotte*.” I walked away, ignoring the rest of her apology.

The moment the valet pulled my car around, I slipped inside and sped off.

This shit is getting ridiculous...

This was the sixth time this had happened to me this month, and I didn’t understand why someone would willingly lie with a potential face to face meeting on the line. It didn’t make any fucking sense.

Annoyed, I picked up a bottle of scotch from the store across the street, and made a mental note to block this latest liar from my page. I was starting to feel like I’d run out of available women to sleep with in Durham. I was also starting to feel like I needed to switch cities and start all over again; the cold sweats from years ago had returned, and I knew the nightmares were coming next.

As soon as I stepped into my condo, I poured myself three shots and tossed them back. Then I poured three more.

I scrolled through my phone and checked my emails for the day—client referrals, more requests to chat from *Date-Match*, and a message from the sexy blonde I was supposed to meet this Saturday.

The subject-line read,

Honesty is Key, right?

I tossed back another shot before opening it, hoping it was an invitation to meet tonight instead.

It wasn’t. It was a goddamn essay.

Hey, Thoreau. I know we’re supposed to meet each other this Saturday and trust me, I was sooo looking forward to it, but I need to know that you’re interested in me for me and not my looks. I’ve met a lot of creepy guys on here because they just like my picture, and when we meet, they just want to have sex. I can assure you that I am who I say I am, but I’m looking for something a little more fulfilling than casual sex. We don’t have to have a full blown relationship, or engage in an intense affair, but we could at least build a friendship first, you know? I’m looking forward to seeing you, so let me know if you’re still interested in meeting me

—Liz.

I immediately clicked on my profile and opened the “What I’m Looking For” box, making sure that it still read the same: “Casual sex. Nothing more. Nothing Less.”

That line wasn’t there for decoration, and it was in bold print for a reason.

I returned to the woman’s message and responded.

I am no longer interested in meeting you. Best of luck finding whatever you’re looking for

—Thoreau.

She replied instantly.

Are you for real?

You can’t use another friend? We can’t be ‘just friends’?

—Liz.

Hell no

—Thoreau.

I signed off and blocked her address.

Another shot made its way down my throat, and I scrolled through the remaining emails—immediately opening the one that came from the only person I considered a friend in this city. Alyssa.

Subject: Desert Dick

So, I'm emailing you right now because I just thought about how much pain you're in currently...We haven't talked about you getting laid in quite a while, and that concerns me. Greatly. Like, I've CRIED about your lack of pussy...I'm very sorry that so many women have sent you fraudulent pictures and given you a severe case of blue balls. I'm attaching the links to a top of the line lotion that I think you should invest in for the weeks to come.

Your dick is in my prayers,

—Alyssa.

I smiled and typed a response.

Subject: Re: Desert Dick

Thank you for your concerns about my dick. Although, seeing as though you've NEVER discussed getting laid, I think having Cobweb Pussy is a far more serious illness. Yes, it is true that so many women have sent me pictures, but it's quite sad that you've never sent me yours, isn't it? I'm more than willing to send you mine, and eventually help you cure your sad and unfortunate disease.

Thank you for telling me that my dick is in your prayers.

I'd prefer if it was in your mouth.

—Thoreau.

Just like that, my night was now ten times better. Even though I'd never met Alyssa in person and our conversations were restricted to phone calls, emails, and text messages, I felt a strong connection to her.

We'd met through an anonymous and exclusive social network—LawyerChat. There were no profile pictures, no newsfeed activity, only message boards. There was a small profile box where information could be placed (first name only, age, number of years practiced, high or low profile status), and a logo on each user's profile that revealed his or her sex.

Every user was "guaranteed" to be a lawyer who'd been personally invited via email. According to the site's developers, they'd "cross-referenced every practicing lawyer in the state of North Carolina against the board's licensing records to ensure a unique and one of a kind support system."

I honestly thought the network was bullshit, and if it weren't for the fact that I'd fucked a few of the women I'd met on there, I would've cancelled my account after the first month.

Nonetheless, when I saw a new "Need Some Advice" message from an "Alyssa," I couldn't resist trying to replicate my previous results. I read through her profile first—twenty seven, one year out of law school, book lover—and decided to go for it.

My intent was to answer her legal questions, slowly steer the conversation to more personal things, and then ask her to join *Date-Match* so I could see what she looked like. But she wasn't like the other women.

She sent me constant messages, and she always kept the topic of conversation professional. Since she was such a young and inexperienced lawyer, she asked for advice on the simplest topics: legal brief editing, claim filing, and exhibition of evidence. After we'd chatted five times and I'd grown tired of having three hour long info-dump sessions, I asked for her phone number.

She said no.

"Why not?" I'd typed.

"Because it's against the rules."

"I've never met a lawyer that hasn't broken at least one."

“Then you’re not a very good lawyer. I’ll find someone else to chat with now. Thanks.”

“You’re going to lose that case tomorrow.” I typed before she could end our session. “You have no idea what you’re doing.”

“Are you really that upset about me not giving you my phone number? What are you, twelve?”

“Thirty two, and I don’t give a fuck about your phone number. I was only asking for it so I could call and tell you that the brief you sent me is littered with typos, and the closing argument reads like a first year law student wrote it. There are too many mistakes for me to sit here and type them all.”

“My brief isn’t that bad.”

“It’s not that good either.” Before I could sign out of our chat, her phone number appeared on the screen, and underneath it was a short paragraph: “If you’re going to call and help me, fine. If you’re using my number to talk me into joining a dating site later, then forget it. I joined this network for career support, that’s it.”

I stared at her message long and hard—debating whether I should help her with no chance of getting anything out of it, but something made me call her anyway. I walked her through every mistake she’d made, insisted that she clear up a few sentences, and even re-formatted her brief.

Just when I was about to tell her goodbye and hang up, the strangest thing happened. She asked, “How was your day today?”

“That’s not in your brief.” I said. “You only want to talk about lawyer shit, remember?”

“I can’t change my mind?”

“No. Hang up.” I waited to hear a beep, but the only thing I heard was laughter. If it wasn’t for the fact that it was such a raspy and sexy sound, I would’ve hung up myself, but I couldn’t put the phone down.

“I’m sorry,” she said, still laughing. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“You didn’t. Hang up.”

“I don’t want to.” She finally stopped laughing. “I apologize for that hostile message I sent you...You’re actually the only guy I’ve met on here who answers all my questions. Are you busy right now? Can you talk?”

“About *what*?”

“About yourself, your life...I’ve been asking you boring legal questions every day, and you’ve been very patient so...It’s only fair that we talk about something less boring for once if we’re going to be friends, right?”

Friends?

I was hesitant to respond—especially since it didn’t seem like the ‘less boring’ topics would involve sex, and she’d said the word “friends” so easily. Yet, I was in the middle of another sex-less night already, so I began to have a regular conversation with her. Until five in the morning, she and I discussed the most mundane things—our daily lives, favorite books, her dream of becoming a late, professional ballerina.

A few days later, we spoke again, and after a month, I was talking to her every other day.

Tossing back another shot, I pressed the call button on my phone and waited to hear her soft voice.

No answer. I considered sending her a text, but then I realized it was nine o’ clock on a Wednesday and we wouldn’t be able to talk at all tonight.

Practice...Wednesday nights are always ballet practice...



“Mr. Hamilton?” My secretary stepped into my office the next morning.

“Yes, Jessica?”

“Mr. Greenwood and Mr. Bach would like to know if you want to participate in the next round of intern interviews today.”

“*I don’t.*”

“Okay...” She looked down and scribbled something onto her notepad. “Did you at least look over the resumes then? They have to narrow it down to fifteen today.”

I sighed and pulled out the stack of resumes she’d given me last week. I’d read through them all and written notes, mostly—“Pass” “Double Pass” and “I don’t feel like reading this.” All the remaining applicants were from Duke University, and to my knowledge, we were the only firm in the city who accepted pre-law *and* law school applicants for paid internships.

“I wasn’t impressed with any of the applicants.” I slid the papers across my desk. “Was that the entire selection pool?”

“No, sir.” She walked over and placed an even larger stack in front of me. “*This* is the entire selection pool. Do you need me to do anything else for you this morning?”

“Besides getting my coffee?” I pointed to the empty mug at the edge of my desk. I hated that I always had to remind her to bring it; I couldn’t function in the morning without a fresh cup.

“I’m so sorry. I’ll get that right away.”

I turned on my computer and scrolled through my emails, sorting them all by importance. Of course, Alyssa’s latest email was pushed straight to the top.

Subject: Get Over Yourself.

Thank you for the childish picture text of the white dust that was outside your condo this morning. I really appreciated it, but I can assure you that that is NOT what the inside of my vagina looks like right now.

Not that it’s any of your business, but I don’t need to get laid every other day to satisfy my needs. They are WELL taken care of with a VARIETY of tools.

—Alyssa

Subject: Re: Get Over Yourself.

I sent you *two* pictures. One of the white dust and one of a dried up lake with dying animals. Was the second picture more accurate?

The only tool your pussy needs is my tongue. It’s here whenever you want it, and it works in a “VARIETY” of ways.

—Thoreau

“Here you are, Mr. Hamilton.” Jessica suddenly set my coffee on the desk. “Can I ask you something?”

“No, you may not.”

“I thought so,” she said, lowering her voice and looking into my eyes. “I know this is a bit unprofessional, but I need a date for the gala next month.

“Then *find a date* for the gala next month.”

“That was my way of asking *you* to be my date...”

I blinked. I needed to find a way to word this “Hell no” very carefully.

Jessica was fresh out of college—way too damn young for me, working here because her grandfather started this firm, and looking for much more than I’d ever be willing to give. I’d overheard her several times on her lunch breaks, talking about how she wanted to be married before she turned twenty five. She also apparently wanted to be a stay-at-home mom with six kids, and live in a house in the suburbs.

In other words, she was completely out of her fucking mind.

“So, what do you say?” She smiled.

I tried not to roll my eyes. “Jessica...”

“Yes?” Her eyes were full of hope.

“Look, sweetheart. Not only would it be highly inappropriate for the two of us to *ever* engage in any type of relationship outside of this office, but I’m not the man you’re looking for. At all. Trust me.”

“Not even for *one night*?”

“The words ‘one night’ in my book hold certain expectations that you couldn’t possibly meet. So, *no*. Go do some work.”

“Is ‘one night’ a code for sex?”

“Why are you still in my office?”

“I wouldn’t tell anyone if we had sex,” she whispered. “I’ve actually fantasized about it since we first met. And, since you never have any calls on the books from a girlfriend, I’m assuming you’re available.”

“*I’m not.*”

“I walked in on you while you were in the restroom once... You’re at least nine inches I think.”

What the fuck?!

I was five seconds away from recording this conversation on my phone and emailing it to her grandfather.

“I’m *really good* at giving blowjobs,” she said. “I’ve been doing it since high school. All the guys I’ve blown have said my mouth is *amazing*.” She bit her lip.

“Is there super-glue on my floor? Is that why you’re still standing there?”

“If you were my date to the gala and we ended up having a good time, you’d be the first man I’d actually went all the way with.” She blurted out, blushing. “I’m still a virgin, *down there*.”

“Then I’m *definitely* not the man for you.” I rolled my eyes. “Now, leave before I call Mr. Greenwood and tell him that his precious granddaughter is offering to suck my dick over morning coffee.”

Shocked, her cheeks tinged red and she quickly walked to the door. Then she looked over her shoulder and winked at me—fucking *winked* at me, before stepping out.

I immediately typed a note into my planner: *Find a new secretary—an older, married one...*

Before I could finish organizing my inbox, my cell phone rang. Alyssa.

“I’m busy,” I answered.

“Then why did you pick up the phone?”

“Because the sound of my voice makes you wet.”

“Funny.” She laughed. “How’s your morning?”

“Typical. My secretary just came onto me for the third time this month.”

“She sent you another ‘You and me belong together’ note with chocolates?”

“No, she offered to suck my dick.”

“What?” She gasped. “You’re kidding!”

“Unfortunately not. After that, she told me she was willing to give me her virginity. Needless to say, I’ll be posting a replacement ad pretty soon. Anyone from your office want to work for a better firm? I’ll double the salary.”

“How do you know that *my* firm isn’t better than yours?”

“Because you call and ask me for advice on cases all the time—silly cases at that. If your firm was better, you’d never have to ask.”

“Whatever.” She groaned. “Have you bucked off the online dating wagon yet?”

“*Bucked? Wagon?*” I could never understand her little Southern metaphors. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Ugh, god...” She sighed. “It means you didn’t update me about your date last night so I guess it was a bust, which means you haven’t slept with anyone in over a month. That has to be a record for you.”

“It is.”

“Do you want some advice?”

“Not unless you want to come to my office and tell me *in person*.” I smiled.

“No, thanks. Speaking of advice, I’ll need your help Friday night.”

“With what?”

“I just landed a pretty big case. I haven’t gone through all the documents yet, but I already know I’m in over my head.”

I leaned back in my chair. “If it’s that big of a case, you could bring the documents to my condo tonight. I’d be happy to help you sort through them. Categorization has always been my specialty.”

“Ha! Nice try, but I don’t think so.” She continued to talk about her case, but I was only halfway listening. It still struck me as odd that she didn’t want to meet me in person, that she shut down the very thought any time I brought it up.

“Also...” She was still rambling. “I’ll probably have to do some research on those changes. I’m not sure if—”

“Tell me the real reason why I can’t meet you in person.” I cut her off.

“*What?*”

“We’ve known each other for six months now. Why don’t you want to meet?”

Silence.

“Do I need to repeat the question?” I stood up and walked over to my door, locking it. “Did you not understand me?”

“It’s against the LawyerChat rules...”

“Fuck *LawyerChat*.” I rolled my eyes. “It’s against the rules for you and me to have each other’s phone numbers in the first place, for us to act like fucking teenagers and make each other cum over the phone at night, but you’ve never complained about that.”

“You’ve never made me cum...”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“You haven’t.”

“So, last week when I said that I wanted you to ride my mouth so I could eat your pussy until you came all over my lips, you were *pretending* to breathe hard?”

She sucked in a breath. “No, but—”

“I thought so. Why can’t we meet in person?”

“Because it would ruin our friendship and you know it.”

“*I don’t.*”

“You’ve told me that you never sleep with the same woman twice, that after you sleep with someone you’re done with her.”

“I’ve never fucked one of my *friends* before.”

“That’s because I’m your only one.”

“I’m aware, but—” I stopped. I had no defense for that.

Silence lingered over the line, and I tried to think of another argument.

She spoke up first. “I honestly don’t want to ruin our friendship over one senseless fuck.”

“I guarantee we’ll have more than *one* senseless fuck.”

Her light, airy laugh drifted over the line, and I sighed—attempting to envision what she looked like. I wasn’t sure why, but over the past few weeks, I’d been longing to experience her laughter face to face.

“You know,” she went on, “for a high profile lawyer, you have a pretty dirty mouth.”

“You’d be surprised how much filthier it can get.”

“Filthier than what I’ve already experienced?”

“*Much filthier.*” I’d been treading the waters since we began this friendship—still hopeful that we’d meet in person someday, but now that we weren’t, there was no point in holding back. “I guess I’ll *talk to you* tonight.”

“Not unless you find another date between now and then. I know you’ll be searching.”

“Of course I’ll be searching.” I scoffed. “Is Alyssa your *real* name?”

“Yes, but I’m sure *Thoreau* isn’t yours. Do you care to finally give it to me?”

“I’ll give it to you when you come to your fucking senses and let me see you.”

“You just won’t let that go, will you?” She laughed again. “What if the real reason I don’t want to meet you is because I’m ugly?”

“I have a good feeling that *you’re not.*”

“But if I *was*?”

“I’d fuck you with the lights off.”

“I prefer the lights *on.*”

“Then I’d make you wear a paper bag over your head.”

“*WHAT?!*” She burst into giggles. “You’re ridiculous! Ugh, there’s a client at my door right now. I have to go. Can I call you later?”

“Always.” I hung up, smiling. Then it hit me.

Fuck...She always finds a way out of that line of questioning...

Perjury (n.):

The willful giving of false testimony under oath.

Alyssa (Well, my real name is “Aubrey”...)

“Lies always catch up to people in the end. Why don’t people understand that?” That’s what Thoreau’s text message said this morning.

“You don’t think some lies are justifiable?” I texted back.

“No. Never.”

I hesitated. *“So, you’ve never lied to me?”*

“Why would I?”

“Because we barely know each other...”

“Only because you keep me at a distance.” He sent me another text before I could respond. *“Would you like to know my real name and where I work?”*

“I prefer our anonymous arrangement.”

“Of course you do, and I’ve never lied to you. I trust you for some strange reason.”

“Some strange reason?”

“Very strange. I’ll talk to you later.”

I tossed my phone into my purse and sighed, letting that familiar feeling of guilt wash over me. I’d never meant to continue talking to him, to become his friend outside of LawyerChat, but I was in too deep, and I didn’t want to let him go.

Months ago, when I’d spotted the invitation to the exclusive network on my mother’s desk, I swore to only use it when I needed to ask questions for my pre-law classes. I’d used her access code to log in, built a fake profile, and made sure all the questions I asked were weaved in a way that no one would know that they were for homework assignments.

Unfortunately for me, the pre-law program at Duke was unlike any other program in the country. It consisted of more hands-on classes, one-on-one mentoring from practicing lawyers, and it was mandated that each student find an internship for the final four semesters. In addition to that, they expected us to read through and interpret case files like we were already lawyers.

If I had known that asking Thoreau for so much homework advice would lead to an actual friendship, I might have stopped talking to him sooner. Then again, just like I was his only friend, he was my only friend, too.

He was open and honest every time we spoke, and I only wished that I could be the same—especially since he seemed to have a habit of saying, “I hate fucking liars” whenever one of his dates deceived him.

Damnit...

Smoothing the tulle fabric of my tutu, I took several deep breaths; I could think about my friendship with Thoreau later, right now I needed to focus.

Today was audition day for a production of *Swan Lake* and I was a nervous wreck; I’d barely slept the night before, skipped breakfast, and showed up to the theater five hours early.

“Please clear the stage, ladies and gentlemen!” The director shouted from below. “The official auditions will begin in thirty minutes! Please clear the stage and make your way to the wings!”

Before heading backstage, I looked out into the audience. Most of the faces were familiar—my classmates, instructors, a few directors from the ballet company I'd worked for last summer, but the faces I needed to see weren't there.

They never were.

Hurt, I found a corner in the dressing room and called my mother.

"Hello?" she answered on the first ring.

"Why aren't you here?"

"Why aren't I *where*, Aubrey? What are you talking about *now*?" She let out an exasperated sigh.

"My open audition for *Swan Lake*. You promised that you and dad were coming."

"It's Aubrey, honey!" She yelled to my dad in the background. "Your recital was today?"

"I haven't been in a *recital* since I was thirteen." I gritted my teeth. "This is an audition, a once in a lifetime audition, and you're supposed to be here."

"I guess my secretary forgot to tell me about it this morning," she said. "Have you landed any internships for your major yet?"

"I have *two* majors."

"*Pre-law*, Aubrey."

"No." I sighed.

"Well, why not? Do you think one is just going to fall from the sky and land in your lap? Is that it?"

"I had an interview yesterday at Blaine and Associates," I said, feeling my heart grow heavier by the second, "and I have another one next week at Greenwood, Bach, and Hamilton. I'm also about to audition for the role of a lifetime if you'd like to pretend to give a fuck for five seconds."

"*Excuse me*, young lady?"

"You're not here." There were tears in my eyes. "*You're not here...Do you know how huge this production is going to be?*"

"Are you getting *paid*? Is the New York Ballet Company running it?"

"That's not the point. I've told you over and over how important this audition is to me. I called and reminded you last night, and it would be really nice if my *parents* showed up and believed in me for a change."

"Aubrey..." She sighed. "I do believe in you. I always have, but I'm in the middle of a huge hearing right now and you know that because it's all over the papers. You also know that becoming a professional ballerina is not a stable career choice, and as much as I would *love* to leave my high-paying client to watch you tiptoe around on stage—"

"It's called dancing *en pointe*."

"Same thing," she said. "Regardless, it's just an audition. I'm sure your father and I won't be the only parents who couldn't make it today. Once you graduate from college and get into law school, you'll see ballet for what it really is—a *hobby*, and you'll be grateful that we pushed you into double majoring."

"Ballet is my *dream*, mother."

"It's a phase, and you're way past the prime age for becoming a professional last time I checked. Remember how you suddenly up and quit at sixteen? You'll quit again, and it'll be for the best. As a matter of fact—"

I hung up.

I didn't want to listen to another one of her dream-killing speeches, and it angered me that she'd called ballet a "phase" when I'd been dancing since I was six years old. When she and my dad had poured countless dollars into private classes, costumes, and competitions.

The only reason why I'd "quit" at sixteen was because I'd broken my foot and couldn't audition for any of the dance schools anymore. And the only reason I started to show the faintest interest in law was because I couldn't do much outside of my rehab sessions except *read*.

My heart had always belonged in pointe slippers, and that fact would never change.

“Aubrey Everhart?” A man suddenly called my name from the theater door. “Is that you?”

“Yes.”

“You’re next to take the stage. Got about five minutes.”

“Be right there...” I stuffed my bag into a locker. Before I could close it, my phone rang.

Knowing it was my mother calling to offer a half-assed apology, I tried my best not to scream. “Please spare me your apologies.” I immediately picked up. “They don’t mean anything to me anymore.”

“I was calling to tell you good luck,” a deep voice said.

“Two minutes!” A stagehand glared at me and motioned for me to head onto the stage.

“*Thoreau?*” I turned my back to the stagehand. “What are you telling me good luck for?”

“You mentioned having some type of audition weeks ago. It’s today, right?”

“Yes, thank you...”

“You don’t sound too excited about your *dream* right now.”

“How can I be when my own parents don’t believe in it?”

“You’re *twenty seven years old.*” He scoffed. “Fuck your parents.”

I laughed, guiltily. “I wish it was that simple...”

“It really is. You make your own money, and despite the fact that you don’t really know shit about the law, you seem to be a pretty decent lawyer. Fuck them.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said, trying to steer that subject away. “I’m shocked you remembered that my audition was today.”

“*I didn’t.*” He hung up, and I knew he was smiling as he did that.

“Fifteen seconds, Miss Everhart!” The stagehand grabbed my arm and practically pulled me onto the stage.

I smiled at the judges and stood in fifth position—arms over my head, and waited for the first note of Tchaikovsky’s composition to play.

There was a rustling of papers, a few coughs from someone in the audience, and then the music began.

I was supposed to demonstrate an arabesque, a pirouette, and then perform the routine that I’d been rehearsing in class for the past month and a half. I didn’t feel like it, though, and since this was one of my last opportunities to make an impression, I decided to dance how I wanted.

I shut my eyes and completed pirouette after pirouette, fouette turn after fouette turn. I wasn’t even on beat with the music, and I could tell the pianist was confused and trying to keep up with me.

I demonstrated every jump I knew, perfectly landing each one of them, and when the pianist gave up and struck the last note, I returned to fifth position—smiling.

There was no applause, no cheers, nothing. I tried to read the judges’ faces to see if they looked mildly impressed, but they were stoic.

“That will be all, Miss Everhart,” one of them said. “Will Miss Leighton Reynolds please take the stage?”

I murmured “Thank you” before stepping off and rushing out of the theater. I didn’t bother watching the rest of the auditions.

For the remainder of the afternoon, I walked around campus and tried not to cry. When I was sure that no tears would fall, I sent emails to Thoreau; that was the only thing that could possibly make me feel better.

Subject: Thinking...

“One dinner. One night. No repeats.” Do you pick a cheap or expensive restaurant? Do you pay for the dinner and the hotel room? Or do you make the woman split it with you?

—Alyssa.

Subject: Re: Thinking...

Expensive dinner. Five star hotel suite. I pay for everything.

Would you like me to book a few reservations for us so I can show you?

—Thoreau.

Subject: Re: Re: Thinking...

Of course not. And a “few” reservations? What happened to just one?

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Thinking...

I told you I’d make an exception in your case. I invested in a box of paper bags today.

—Thoreau

I laughed and looked at my watch. It was five o’ clock and I was sure the results for the production had been posted hours ago, but I was too scared to look. All I wanted was a chance to be a member of the swan corps, or even an understudy for the lead.

Why did I fuck up that routine? What the hell was I thinking?

After driving myself crazy with questions, I forced myself to make the trek back to the dance theater to look at the final cast posting. When I arrived, there was a huge crowd in front of the sign, and I could hear the usual “I’m in! I’m in!” and “How could they not pick me?” revelations.

I squeezed my way through everyone and squinted at the sheet, looking for my name on the minor cast sheet but it wasn’t there.

It was on the *major* cast sheet, and right next to the lead role of Odette/Odile, the white and black swan, was my full name in bold.

I burst into tears, jumping up and down in disbelief. I wanted to call my mom and tell her the good news, but my heart suddenly sank at the thought.

I knew that at this very moment, she was probably telling my father that I’d hung up in her face, and that he needed to make sure I knew the strings behind them paying for my education: “If you drop pre-law, we’ll stop writing the checks...Pre-law pays for your classes, ballet doesn’t.”



I lifted my aching feet out of a bucket of ice and patted them dry with a towel. I wasn’t sure how I was going to juggle a leading role, classes, and a potential internship, but I didn’t have a choice.

Sighing, I glanced at the calendar on my desk where I’d scribbled “Interview prep day” in today’s slot.

My upcoming interview with Greenwood, Bach, and Hamilton—one of the most prestigious firms in the state, was more than just an interview. It was a *process*, and every intern-seeking student knew that landing an internship at that firm could do wonders for a resume.

The firm was so selective that they conducted four rounds of phone interviews, three online tests, and required each applicant to complete several essays before the final interview with the partners.

I’d soared through the phone interviews and the exams, but the essays— regarding hundred paged case files, were something that I hadn’t expected. I’d even thought they’d sent me the wrong packet so I called to say, “I believe my packet was switched with the *law-school level* intern application.” The secretary simply laughed at me.

She’d said the firm expected all of its interns—law school level *and* undergraduate level, to fill out the same packet to the best of their ability.

“Don’t worry,” she’d said. “We’re not expecting perfection from you. We just want to see how your mind works.”

I grabbed the case file that was giving me the most trouble and placed it into my lap. Then I went to the GBH firm’s website and familiarized myself with the three partners who would be interviewing me.

Greenwood, the founder of the firm, was a salt and pepper haired man with wiry framed glasses. He touted Harvard as his reason for being so demanding and thorough, and boasted that in his thirty years of practicing the law, he’d attained one of the highest victory rates in the country.

Bach, partner of the firm for over ten years, was a bald man in his early forties, though he looked a bit older. He’d worked his way up through the firm, and since he was “such a hardworking individual with unparalleled passion,” Greenwood had no choice but to make him his first partner. He had one of the second highest victory rates in the country.

Last was Hamilton—Andrew Hamilton, and he was...He was *sexy as fuck*. I tried to focus on his biography and ignore his picture, but I couldn’t help it. His deep and piercing blue eyes were staring right at me, and his short, dark brown hair was begging my hands to run through it.

He had the face of a Greek God—evenly tanned, perfectly symmetrical, strong and chiseled jawline, and his full lips were curved into a slight smirk.

Even though the picture only showed the top part of his body, I imagined that by the way he filled out his navy blue suit that there were hard and defined muscles underneath it.

I was getting wet just looking at him.

Focus, Aubrey...Focus...

Strangely, his bio was the shortest one of them all. It didn’t list his education, his background, or the year he became partner. It was just a bunch of filler words about how “the firm was so honored to have such an esteemed and proven lawyer” on their team. Oh, and he enjoyed eating chocolate.

How informative...

I copied and pasted all of their bios into a word document, and then I called Thoreau.

“Good evening, *Alyssa*,” he answered, making me melt with his voice as usual. I swore he could talk me into doing anything—*almost* anything.

“Hey, um...”

“*Yes?*”

God, I loved his fucking voice... He hadn’t said much of anything and I was already turned on.

“You called so I could listen to you breathe?” He had to be smiling.

“I did, actually.” I rolled my eyes. “Are you enjoying my sounds?”

“I’d enjoy them a lot better if you were underneath me.”

I blushed. “Um...”

“The case, *Alyssa*.” He laughed. “Tell me about your latest case.”

“Right, um...” I cleared my throat. “Long story short: My client carried a gun into a federal bank and forgot to turn on the safety lock. Someone bumped into him and his hands instinctively went to his pocket, and the gun fired—shooting him in the leg.”

“Since when do you practice *criminal* law? I thought your specialty was corporate.”

Shit... “It is, it is. I’m taking this case for a friend, pro bono.”

“Hmmm. Well, your *friend* is looking at two to five years in a federal prison if he doesn’t have any priors. What part of this do you need help with exactly?”

“The pleading part. He didn’t hurt anyone but himself.”

“Did he have a license to carry?”

“No...” I looked through my notes.

“Then I’m sure the prosecution will convince the jury that he carried that gun into the bank with the intent to harm someone other than *himself*. Take whatever deal they offer.”

“Well, I..” I looked at what the assignment sheet said. “What if I already rejected that deal?”

He sighed. “Call the prosecution and try to get it back. If they say no, plead no contest.”

“*No contest*? Are you out of your mind?”

“*Are you*? What type of corporate lawyer agrees to take an open and shut criminal case? A fairly inexperienced one at that..”

“For your information, it’s an assign—” I coughed. “Never mind. Telling me to plead no contest is pretty much the same thing as telling me to plead guilty.”

“If that was the case, I would have said *plead guilty*.” He sounded annoyed. “*No contest* is your client’s best option, and any *real* lawyer would know that. Are you sure you passed the bar exam?”

“I wouldn’t have been invited to join LawyerChat if I hadn’t, would I?” I felt my heart ache with that lie. “I’m just trying to avoid my client being sentenced to prison.”

“Then you *really* should stick to corporate law.” There was a smile in his voice. “Your client is going to prison and there’s nothing you can do about it. The only negotiable thing about his case is *how long* he’ll spend there. Anything else I can help you with? Do I need to lecture you on the difference between *guilty* and *not guilty*?”

I rolled my eyes and put the file away. “Thank you for your condescending help as always.”

“My pleasure,” he said. “I need to ask you something important.”

“About my case?”

“No.” He let out a low laugh. “What do you look like?”

“*What?*” I could barely hear my voice. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. Since I may never get a chance to see you, I’d like to know. *What do you look like?*”

I stood up and walked over to my mirror, letting my eyes roam over my reflection. “I’m not sure how I’m supposed to answer that..” I needed to change the subject, fast. From everything he’d told me about his dates over the past few months, he definitely had a type he liked best, a type that intrigued him like no other: Blonde, slightly curvy, full lips...

Me.

I’d tried to envision what he looked like plenty of times. Dark haired, maybe? Dirty blond? A mouth made for kissing with deep green eyes? Six pack, no, *eight pack* that leads down to a lick-able V?

He does mention working out every day...

I was more than certain that he was attractive—he had to be if so many women put up with him on those dating sites, but each time my mind drew a picture, I’d convince myself that I had him all wrong.

“You know what?” I said, snapping out of my thoughts. “I’ve never been good at describing things. What do *you* look like?”

“I look like a man who wants to fuck you.”

Tingles ran up and down my spine. “That’s not a description..”

“What color is your hair?” He didn’t sound amused, and I knew he wasn’t going to let me direct the conversation tonight.

“Red.” I yanked the band from around my bun and let the blond strands fall to my shoulders.

“How long is it?”

“It’s short..”

“Hmmm. What about your eyes?”

I stared at my blue and grey irises. “Green, light green.”

“Do you have freckles?”

“No.” At least that part was true.

“And your lips?”

“You want to know how thin or thick they are?”

“I want to know how they’d look wrapped around my cock.”

I gasped.

“Are you playing shy tonight?” Ice cubes clinked against a glass in his background. “How much of my cock do you think you could take into your mouth?”

I remained silent, and my breathing began to slow.

“Alyssa?” His voice was soft. “Are you going to answer me?”

“It’s hard to make a prediction about something you’ve never done.” I heard him inhale a deep breath, and the line went completely silent.

I thought he’d ask me how I’d managed to have sex with boyfriends in the past without ever giving a blowjob, but he didn’t.

“Hmmm. Are you a natural redhead?”

“What does it matter?” I moved over to my bed. “I’m clearly not your type.”

“I have a *preference*, not a type, and a smart mouthed redhead who’s never had another man’s cock in her mouth is more than worthy of an exception.”

I hooked a thumb underneath my panties and peeled them off before slipping under the sheets. “Too bad I’m not a full blown virgin, huh?”

“I don’t fuck virgins.” He paused. “But considering the fact that you and I have never fucked, you might as well be one.”

Wetness slipped down my thighs, and I felt my nipples hardening. “I highly doubt—”

“I’m tired of only being able to talk to you on the phone, Alyssa...”

Silence.

“I *need* to see you...” His voice was strained. “I *need* to fuck you...”

“*Thoreau...*”

“No, *listen to me.*” His tone was a warning. “I need to be buried deep inside of you, feeling your pussy throb around my cock as you scream my name—my *real* name.”

A hand trailed down past my stomach and between my thighs, and my fingers began to strum my clit. Slow at first, then faster, faster with every sound of his heavy breaths in my ear.

“I’ve been very patient with you...” His voice trailed off. “Don’t you think?”

“No...”

“I have,” he said. “I’m tired of imagining how wet your pussy can get, how loudly you’ll scream when I suck your tits as you ride me...How hard I’ll pull your hair when I bend you over my desk and fuck you until you can’t breathe...*Tired.*”

I shut my eyes, letting my other hand squeeze my breast, letting my thumb pinch my nipple.

“I’m giving you two weeks to come to your fucking senses...”

“*What?*”

“*Two weeks,*” he whispered. “That’s when you and I are going to meet face to face, and I’m going to claim every inch of you.”

“I can’t...I can’t agree to...that.”

“*You will.*” His breathing was now in sync with mine. “And the second you do, you’re going to invite me over and I’m going to remind you of everything you’ve teased me with over the past six months.”

I was speechless. My clit was swelling with each rub of my finger, and my breaths were getting shorter and shorter.

“I’ll be gentle at first,” he whispered, “especially when I slide my cock into your mouth and pull on your hair, showing you exactly how I like it to be sucked.”

“*Stop...*” I was panting. “*Please...Stop...*”

“Trust me, *I won’t.*”

“*Thoreau...*” My legs were trembling.

“I can’t just *talk* to you anymore. I need to *feel* you, I need to *taste* you. Say yes to two weeks...”

I bit my lip, knowing that if he said it again, if he asked me one more time, I would say yes.

“Alyssa...” He was begging.

I was seconds away from coming, seconds away from screaming “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

“Promise me you’ll let me fuck you in two weeks...”

As if my mouth was under his command, it freed my bottom lip and prepared to say yes, but I hung up.

Keeping my eyes shut, I lay in bed and let the waves of an orgasm roll through me as I screamed the three yeses he couldn’t hear. When I finally stopped shaking, I rolled over and grabbed a pillow, pulling it to my chest.

Before I could force myself to sleep, I heard my phone ringing beneath me.

It was a text from Thoreau. “*I’ll take that as a yes. Fourteen days.*”

Burden of Proof (n.):

The obligation to prove or disprove a disputed fact.

Andrew

“Did I tell you that I landed the leading role for that ballet I auditioned for?” Alyssa said to me the next morning.

I’d been talking to her since I arrived at work, but I’d made no mention of the fact that she’d hung up in my face last night; I was going to punish her for that later. Severely.

Thirteen days...

“Did I tell you about it?” she asked again.

“No, and if you’re not going to tell me when and where the show is, then I don’t care.”

“Oh, wow.” She laughed. “You’re mad about last night, aren’t you?”

“*Furious.*”

“Because I hung up?”

“Because I know you screamed yes when you came, and you hung up because you didn’t want me to hear it.”

She was silent, and I was about to say something else, but Jessica suddenly stepped into my office, smiling at me.

“Hold on one second.” I put my phone against my chest. “Yes, Jessica?”

“The final interviews are going to start in twenty minutes. They need you in the conference room now.”

“I’ll get there when I get there.” I acted as if the kiss she was now blowing me wasn’t happening, and waited until she closed the door. “I’ll have to call you back later, Alyssa. I have a meeting.”

“Must be bad timing for both of us. I have a meeting, too.”

“Your doomed gunshot client?”

“No, something much worse. An intern interview.”

“Must be in the air then.” I sighed as I slipped into my jacket. “I have to sit through a few of them myself, unfortunately.”

“Any advice you want to share?”

“Try to look like you’re actually paying attention while they answer the questions, and make sure your cell phone is fully charged so you can get on the internet.”

“Not for me.” She laughed. “For the interns. Something I should say if one of them is nervous.”

“Oh.” I shrugged. “Tell them my motto.”

“And what motto would that be?”

“It is what it is.”

“Why do I ever ask you anything?”

“Because I always tell you the truth.” I hung up.

“Mr. Hamilton?” Jessica stepped into my office again. “They want you to look over the files before they begin.”

“I’m right behind you.” I followed her into the conference room, where Will Greenwood and George Bach were waiting, and I sat next to them.

“Good to see you out of your office today, Andrew.” Will laughed.

“Yeah,” George added. “Thank you for bestowing your presence upon us this afternoon. We know how much you *love* being sociable.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why do the three of us need to conduct intern interviews? What’s the purpose of having an HR department if *the partners* do their job for them?”

“This is a *family*, Andrew.” Mr. Greenwood spoke sternly. “Whether it’s an intern, the secretary, or the young man who stays overnight and cleans this office, I want everyone to feel like they’re a part of a huge family. Don’t you?”

“I’m not answering that,” I said. “How many are we picking this year?”

“Not too many.” Will slid me a folder. “We have our top five picks. We just need to narrow it down to three. Two from law school, one from pre-law. We’ll add two more next semester.”

“Hmmm.” I pulled out the applications and pretended to pay attention as the two of them went over each applicant’s achievements.

“Okay, Jessica!” Will pressed the intercom button. “You can send in the first applicant!”

When the door opened, I expected to see the usual plainly dressed stiff with a wooden smile, but the woman who stepped inside was far from that. Dressed in a light grey dress that clung to her hips and a pair of nude high heels, she was one of the sexiest women I’d ever seen; I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

Her eyes were a deep ocean blue that matched the sapphire necklace hanging around her neck. Her hair was pulled into a low ponytail—the loose strands slightly grazed her breasts, and her lips—her bright pink, fuck-able lips, seemed to be mouthing words of some kind.

I have no idea what you’re saying...

As I was noticing the pink bra strap that had slipped from underneath her dress and onto her bare shoulder, her stunning eyes met mine. I raised my eyebrow and she blushed. Then she immediately turned away, looking at my partners.

“Welcome to GBH, Miss Everhart,” George said. “We’re happy that you’re here for an interview, but as you know we can only select *one* undergraduate intern for our program at this time.”

“I understand, sir.” Her eyes met mine again, and my cock twitched.

I tried to stop the images that were flooding my brain, images of me bending this woman over the table, fucking her against my office wall, and tying her hands above her head and torturing her with my tongue all night, but they wouldn’t stop. Each image dissolved into another one, and before I knew it, I’d visually undressed her and there was no one in this room but the two of us.

What the hell is wrong with me? Attracted to a prospective intern? An UNDERGRADUATE intern?

“Well, let’s get started then.” George interrupted my thoughts. “Mr. Hamilton, would you care to start with the first question?”

“Not particularly,” I said, trying to ignore the fact that Miss Everhart was smoothing her dress over her thighs.

He nudged me under the table and whispered under his breath, “Family, Andrew...*Family*.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why do you want to be a lawyer, Miss Everhart?”

“I enjoy screwing people over,” she said. “I figure I might as well get paid for it.”

My lips curved into a smile, and George and Will laughed.

“In all seriousness, gentlemen,” she continued, “I come from a large family of lawyers and judges; it’s what I’ve known my whole life. I know the justice system is far from perfect, but nothing makes me happier than seeing it at its best. There’s no greater feeling than working for the good of society.”

“Good answer,” Will said. “Now, we’re going to ask you a series of questions regarding the real-world case study packets that we mailed you. Were you able to complete everything?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Great. Question number one: Your client walks into a federal bank with a loaded gun in his pocket. Upon being brushed by a stranger, the gun fires—shooting him in the leg. Regarding the charges that the prosecution filed, how would you have your client plead?”

“*What?*” I looked over at him. “Could you repeat that question, Will?”

“The prompt?”

“Whatever you just asked.”

He nodded and happily repeated it, putting extra emphasis on the crime of walking into a bank with a loaded firearm.

My mind immediately flashed back to the conversation I’d had with Alyssa last night.

I smiled, thinking that maybe Alyssa’s “friend” was a headline story in the local news, that maybe I could figure out who she was without her telling me. I pulled out my phone and held it underneath the conference table, googling “Man shoots himself in federal bank. North Carolina.”

Nothing relevant appeared.

Hmmm...

“How would you make him plead, Miss Everhart?” Will asked again.

“No contest,” she said quickly.

“*No contest?*” He sounded slightly impressed. “Why so?”

“He doesn’t have a license to carry, so I’m sure the prosecution will try to make it seem like he carried that gun into the bank for a reason. Regardless of if he only hurt himself, he’s looking at a prison sentence, so we could bypass the trial and try to limit it to the lowest terms possible.”

I blinked, refusing to believe that her answer was anything more than a coincidence. As a matter of fact, as soon as she started to further explain her logic, I knew that it was; only a student would start talking about “emotional appeal” right after a no contest plea.

As Will and George continued to pepper her with questions, I googled variations of that federal gun case. “Man fires gun in bank.” “No contest plea in federal bank case.” “Man injures himself in bank shooting.”

Still, nothing.

“Miss Everhart, are there any lawyers that you wish to model your own career after?” Greg asked.

“Yes, actually,” she said. “I’ve always admired the career of Liam Henderson.”

“*Liam Henderson?*” I raised my eyebrow. “Who is that?” Usually, interviewees named a federal judge, a well-known prosecutor, or a familiar district attorney. But an unknown? Never.

“Well, he made history as the youngest lawyer to ever uncover a government conspiracy, and he—”

I tuned out her answer. I’d just thought of another phrase to google.

“Interesting choice, Miss Everhart,” Will said. “Do you have any current mentors in the law profession besides your family members?”

“I do.”

“Are you in close contact with this mentor? If so, how often?”

“We talk almost every day, so I’d like to think that we’re close.”

Why isn’t this case popping up? If it’s a “federal” bank shooting, it should be plastered all over the papers...

“Would your mentor be able to speak to us, or send a letter regarding your character?” Will was definitely impressed with this woman, and she had this job. The second set of questions he had yet to ask weren’t really necessary.

“I’m sure I could ask him to do that if need be,” she said just as I was starting a new web search.

“Great. So, tell us, what’s the last bit of advice that your mentor gave you?”

I looked at my watch. As soon as today's interviews were over, I was going to call Alyssa about this case. Maybe she'd fudged some of the details to continue shrouding her identity.

"When I told him I was nervous about my interview today," Miss Everhart said softly, "he told me, *it is what it is.*"

My head immediately shot up.

"Did he now?" George clutched his chest, laughing. "That sounds like something our Andrew would say!" He patted me on the shoulder. "Isn't that right, Andrew?"

"Yes." I narrowed my eyes at 'Miss Everhart.' "That sounds *exactly* like something I would say..."

She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "I'll be sure to tell my mentor that someone actually enjoys his odd sense of humor."

"*Please do.*" I watched as she answered the next questions with ease, as she barely blinked her big blue eyes when the questions became tougher. And the more I heard her talk, the more I heard the familiarities of her speech pattern, I had to force myself not to fucking lose it.

One coincidence was fine, but two? Damn near unfathomable.

As they asked her about her favorite inspirational quotes, I scrolled down to Alyssa's number and dialed. I knew for a fact that she *never* silenced her phone for some strange reason, and I had to know if what I was thinking was true, or if my mind was playing a cruel joke on me.

I could see the rings on my phone's screen, see the seconds as they passed, and when it rang three times, I let out a huge sigh of relief. But then the sound of bell chimes filled the room.

"I am so sorry." Miss Everhart's cheeks turned pink and she picked up her purse. "I have a weird thing about never putting this on silent...I really meant to leave it in my car." She pulled out her phone, slightly smiling once she looked at the screen, and then she hit ignore.

WHAT. THE. FUCK!

"Happens all the time." Will laughed. "We were going on and on anyway. It's a good thing it went off so we can close out with the final questions. Anything from you, Andrew?"

I glared at 'Alyssa'. I was confused, pissed, and unfortunately aroused all at once.

"Andrew?"

"No," I said, noticing that she was blushing again. "I have absolutely nothing to say."

Will and Greg both stood up and smiled, reaching out to shake her hand, but I remained seated.

I couldn't believe this shit.

She wasn't a green-eyed redhead like she'd said over the phone, *far* from being a licensed lawyer, and she was a *fucking liar*...

"Mr. Hamilton?" She was standing in front of me with her hand outstretched. "Thank you for interviewing me today. It was an absolute pleasure meeting you."

"The pleasure's all mine." I shook her hand, trying my best to ignore the smooth softness of her touch. "Good luck."

She nodded, said goodbye to the three of us once more, and then she left the room.

As Will and George discussed how impressed they were with her interview, I forced myself to look through her file.

Double major student at Duke: Pre-law and Ballet. Perfect 4.0 GPA. Recently cast as the lead of *Swan Lake*, recently listed in the top ten percent of her class. There were *ten* letters of recommendation in her folder—all from impeccable lawyers; there was even one from the newly appointed assistant district attorney.

As amazing as her personal accomplishments were, it was her birthdate that stood out to me the most. She was twenty two.

Twenty fucking two.

And, even though she was the most accomplished out of all the undergraduates, she wasn't even a senior.

She was a *junior*...



I ignored Alyssa's text tonight, the one that read, "*If you haven't found another unfortunate date for tonight, call me when you see this.*"

I was too angry to say anything to her. After all the hours we'd spent on the phone, all the times that I'd told her that I hated liars, she'd lied to me. Repeatedly.

I'd wanted to vote no for her employment, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Once we'd finished with the last interview of the day, the decision on the top pick was unanimous: Aubrey Everhart.

Yet, while they frenziedly weighed the pros and cons of the other applicants, I sat there in a daze—angry with myself for not seeing through all of Aubrey's lies earlier.

In the six months that we'd spoken, she'd always asked questions that were a little too simple, questions that sometimes made me wonder, but I never thought twice about it. She'd mentioned Duke University a few times, but she never talked about it for long and she always made it seem as if she'd graduated from there. But her constant talk of how she wanted her parents' approval and had conflicted feelings between choosing dance and the law should have been a dead ass giveaway.

At this point, I wasn't sure which lie to be more upset about: The fact that she wasn't a lawyer, the fact that she was still in college, or the fact that she'd lied about her physical appearance.

Pouring my sixth shot of the night, I realized that that last lie—although irrelevant in the grand scheme of things, was the one that hit me the hardest. She was definitely my 'type,' and the second she walked into that interview I wanted her, before I found out who she really was, before I found out her age.

Tossing back a shot, I heard my phone ringing. *Her.*

I rolled my eyes and let it sit on the table. I grabbed one of my last Cuban cigars and stepped out onto my balcony. I needed to think.

The sky was starless tonight—nearly pitch black, and the moon was hiding underneath a curtain of dark clouds. As much as I didn't want to admit it, tonight's sky bore a horrid resemblance to a certain night that occurred six years ago.

It was the night my life changed forever, the night that left me broken, shattered, and numb. All because of lies—a series of heartbreaking and inconceivable lies.

I tried hard to prevent myself from picturing the memories, but I could still hear that strained, ragged voice in my head: "*Andrew...You have to help me...You have to get me out of here... Please...Save me, Andrew...*"

I shook my head and blocked out the rest of that memory. Unlike six years ago, I was in control of this situation, and "Alyssa" lying to me meant that our friendship was over, done.

There was no justification for what she'd done, but before I cut her off, I needed to make her pay for lying to me, and I needed to figure out *how*.

Conviction (n.):

A judgment of guilt against a criminal defendant.

Andrew

“Mr. Hamilton?” Aubrey set my coffee down on my desk two weeks later. I’d *personally* insisted that she work as my intern, even though looking at her made me angry.

I’d made a point not to say too much around her, to refrain from staring at her too long, and I couldn’t help being crueler than ever—dismissive even. I made her responsible for my daily coffee, demanded that she re-do every assignment at least three times, and whenever she asked for my help, I answered her with a detached “Figure it out yourself.”

She never seemed upset or offended by my harshness, which made me even angrier. I’d thought that by having her work for me and seeing her crack under pressure that my attraction to her would fade, but it only intensified each time I saw her face.

Especially today.

As I pulled my coffee closer, I noticed that her nipples were poking through her thin, beige dress, and it was so tight that I could see the imprint of lace panties.

Fuck...

“Mr. Hamilton?” she asked again.

“Yes, Miss Everhart?”

“I have an important rehearsal for a ballet I’m a part of, so I was wondering..” She looked absolutely nervous. “Can I go home early today?”

“No.”

She sighed. “I really need to be at this rehearsal...It’s at the Grand Hall.”

“So?”

“So,” she said, clearing her throat, “with all due respect, *Mr. Hamilton*, this is a pretty big deal for me. The Grand Hall is usually reserved for performances, so for them to open it and let us use it for a rehearsal is—”

I wasn’t listening, and as much as I wanted to look at my work again and make it clear that she was being ignored, I couldn’t. I was too busy staring at the contours of her mouth.

“That’s a fact.” She was still talking for some reason. “I think I’ve made very valid points, and since I’m not asking for too much, you should agree to let me go.”

“Get back to work, Miss Everhart.”

“Mr. Hamilton, please—”

“Get. Back. To. Work.” I glared at her, daring her to let another word slip out of her seductive mouth. “I don’t care about your personal life. I pay you for twenty five hours a week, so you’ll work *twenty five hours a week*, and you’ll work them when I say you’ll work them. So, get back to your cubicle.”

She stared at me for a few seconds, and I couldn’t help but notice tears welling in her eyes.

“You can take that box of Kleenex with you on your way out,” I said.

Shaking her head, she stepped back and headed for the door. “I’m going to ask Mr. Bach if I can leave early. No disrespect to you.”

“Excuse me?” I stood up. “What did you just say?”

She continued to walk toward the door, the sound of her heels clicking faster and faster. Before she could turn the knob, I spun her around and slammed my hand against the door.

“I’m not a fan of insubordination, Miss Everhart.”

“You won’t have to worry about that anymore.” Her face was red, twisted in anger. ““I’m going to ask Mr. Bach to move me with someone else because I refuse to work with you anymore.”

“Good luck with that. No one else wanted you. *Only me.*”

“I highly doubt that.” She tried to move away, but I grabbed her hands and pinned them above her head.

“I was the best interviewee and you fucking know it.” She hissed. “And since we both know that’s a fact, I don’t have to put up with your shit anymore.” She looked as if she wanted to spit in my face. “You are a cruel, cold, and condescending asshole, and I haven’t learned shit from you; I doubt I ever will.”

“Watch your goddamn mouth. I’m still your boss.”

“You *were* my boss.”

I tightened my grasp around her wrists and looked directly into her eyes, pressing my chest against her breasts. “Let me tell you what’s about to happen, *Aubrey*. You’re going to go back to your cubicle and you’re going to stay there until you’re done for the day—only getting up to bring me a new cup of coffee. You will tell your ballet director that you’ll come after you get your work done, and you will not go to Mr. Bach and say anything, because we don’t reassign interns just because they cry.”

“Then I guess there’s a first time for everything.” She threw my glares right back at me, narrowing her eyes as her chest heaved up and down.

“Aubrey—”

“Let me go before I *scream*, Mr. Hamilton. I wasn’t listening to a thing you just said so I highly suggest—”

I crashed my lips against hers, effectively making her shut the hell up. I kept my hands tightly clamped around her wrists, pressing her body against the door with my hips.

She murmured as I slipped my tongue into her mouth, as I bit her bottom lip as hard as I could. Without thinking, I let her hands go and gripped her waist—pulling her taut against me as my hand found its way underneath her skirt.

I slid my hand across the crotch of her panties, tapping my fingers against the lace, and then I slowly pushed them to the side and plunged a finger deep into her pussy.

“Ahhh…” she moaned, making me bite her lip again, making me use two fingers instead of one.

She was wet—*soaking wet*, and as much as I wanted to fuck her senseless against my door and make her forget her name, I tore my mouth away from her.

“Get the hell out of my office.”

“*What?*” She asked breathlessly, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Go to your *important* rehearsal.”

“Mr. Ham—”

“Hurry up before I change my mind.” I reached around her and opened the door. “*Go.*”

She didn’t hesitate to walk past me, and as soon as she was gone I knew damn well this arrangement wasn’t going to work for too much longer. Either she was going to be reassigned or I was going to have to fire her, fast.

Hours later, when I was halfway through my work for the day, I noticed I’d received a new text from Alyssa. I rolled my eyes and changed her name to Aubrey before reading it.

“*Where have you been for the past two weeks?*” it said. “*Are you okay? I’ve called and texted you and you haven’t said anything. I’m really concerned...If you get this, say something, anything.* ”

I didn't want to respond, but with the taste of her mouth still lingering on my lips, I gave in. "*I'm fine. Just made a major discovery not too long ago and I've been trying to figure out how to deal with it.*"

"Is it something serious?"

"VERY serious."

"I'm sorry...Want to know something that will make you feel better?"

"I doubt anything you say can do that right now."

"Want to bet?"

"Try me."

"My boss just kissed the shit out of me. I think that's why he's so damn mean to me; he wants to fuck me..."

"I really don't think your 'boss' wants to fuck you..."

"He definitely does. His cock was rock hard when he was kissing me, and he was biting my lips and gripping me like he wanted to own me... I've never been so wet in my life..."

I hesitated. "*How exactly is this supposed to make me feel better?*"

"I was pretending he was you the whole time. I miss you."

I immediately turned off my phone. I didn't know what type of shit she was trying to pull, but I wasn't falling for it.

"I was pretending it was you? I miss you?" Bullshit.

I wasn't going to answer her calls or her messages for a long time. Sexy ass mouth or not.

Cross Examination (n.):

The interrogation of a witness called by one's opponent.

Aubrey

I couldn't stop thinking about the way Mr. Hamilton kissed me the other day, the way he pulled me against his chest and fucked my lips with his mouth.

Thoughts of him kissing me had been invading my mind all day, and even now, when I was setting down his latest cup of coffee, I was tempted to walk behind his desk and dare him to kiss me again. Ever since I'd become his intern, he'd been quite mean to me—reckless, but I thought it was a training technique, a way to see if I'd quit under pressure.

Until he kissed me that day.

There was something intangible in his kiss; unspoken words, a repressed desire. It made me think that the glances he often tossed my way, those looks of scorn that were laced with wanting, meant a little more.

I placed a plastic stirrer into his cup and cleared my throat. "Do you need anything else, Mr. Hamilton?"

No answer.

I stood my ground and waited for him to look up at me; I wanted to see his face.

The suit he was wearing today—a dark grey three piece with a silver silk tie, made him look even more devastatingly beautiful than he normally did.

"Is there a problem, Miss Everhart?" He clenched his fists above the desk, trying his best to act like my presence wasn't bothering him. But it was, I could tell.

I knew he would look up at any moment, so I stepped back, making sure the light blue dress I wore specifically for him would be in full view, but he kept his gaze lowered.

"No, sir."

"Then get out of my office. I'll need your Brownstein report with my next cup of coffee. Four o' clock."

"You just gave me that report yesterday. You said I could take all the time I needed."

"You must've misheard me. You can take all the time you need *today*. Things change instantly around here, and that's the exact reason why some of us never leave early. Four o' clock."

I stood there completely speechless. There was no way I'd be able to read and summarize a three hundred paged report by the end of the day.

"Did you lose some of your hearing between today and yesterday?" He finally looked up, his perfect face expressionless. "I need complete silence when I work and I can't focus with your heavy breathing." He narrowed his eyes at me. "Get out, finish the report, and bring it back to me with my coffee. If you don't, you're fired."

I quickly decided that he was bipolar, and that our seemingly connected kiss was just a mistake. I turned around and left his office, rushing straight to the break room.

There was no way I was going to get that Brownstein report done by the end of the day.

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through my messages—realizing that Thoreau hadn't responded to my morning texts. Sighing, I decided to call him. I needed someone to tell me that my life wouldn't end today when I was fired.

It rang once.

It rang twice.

It went to voicemail.

He hit ignore?!

I sent him a text. "*What the hell is wrong with you lately? Is your lack of sex forcing you to act like a jerk toward me? Is the withdrawal THAT BAD? Talk to me.*"

I waited for a response, but none came, so I slumped onto the couch. There was no point in even attempting to finish that report. I was just going to sit here, relax, and when it was five o' clock I was going to collect all of my things and leave.

I could find another internship in two weeks, or worst case, ask the department chair if I could shadow my mother and father around their stuffy firm for credit.

Ugh...God...

I shut my eyes and lay back against the cushion, wishing I could fall asleep.

"Aubrey?" Someone shook my shoulder just as I was drifting away.

"Yes?" I opened my eyes. It was Jessica.

"I've been looking for you forever. Mr. Hamilton wants to speak with you."

I raised my eyebrow. "More coffee?"

"Probably." She shrugged. "He's been a bit off lately. Just come on, you don't want to make him angry." She held the door open and I stood up, making my way past her.

I debated whether I should even go to his office. Then again, seeing the look on his face as I said, "Fuck you. I quit." was too good of an experience to pass up. I forced a smile and knocked on his door.

"Come in." His voice was stern.

I slipped inside, expecting to see him holding an empty coffee cup, but he was sitting at his desk—glaring at me.

"Have a seat," he said.

I sat in front of his desk, waiting for him to scold me about something, to unleash more of his seemingly bipolar tendencies, but he didn't. He just kept staring at me.

I hated the effect he was having on my body right now, and as much as I wanted to ask him what the hell he wanted, I couldn't get my mouth to say a thing.

Without addressing me, he suddenly stood up and walked around his desk, sitting on the edge of it, letting his knees touch mine.

"Lawyers are supposed to be people with integrity, are they not?" he whispered.

"Yes."

"Do you think *you* have integrity, *Miss Everhart*?" He emphasized every syllable of my name.

"Yes."

"Hmmm." He leaned forward. "So, would you ever willingly withhold the truth from someone you supposedly cared about?"

"It depends..." My breath hitched in my throat; my heart was racing a mile a minute.

"It *depends*?" He sat back a bit. "It depends on what?"

"If the truth would damage anything or hurt someone unnecessarily, then I believe I have a right to withhold it."

"But what if someone blatantly asked you for the truth, several times? What if he said, I want you to tell me the truth no matter how much it hurts, or how angry it may make me?"

Where is he going with this? “Are you referring to a potential witness changing his testimony on the stand, Mr. Hamilton?”

“No...” He trailed his fingers across my collarbone, setting my nerves on fire. “This is a *personal* inquiry. I’m just in need of an outside opinion. Answer the question.”

“Well, I think—” I sucked in a breath as he placed his hand on my thigh and strummed his fingers against my skirt. “I think certain lies have to be told, and certain truths have to be withheld. The ultimate conviction is up to those who can discern which is which.”

“So, you believe in reasonable doubt?”

“In certain cases, yes...”

“What about in *our* case?” His hand was slowly slipping underneath my skirt, traveling further and further up my thigh.

“*Our* case?”

“Yes,” he said. “I believe you and I are currently in an unfortunate web of deceit.”

“No...” I said, breathless and confused. “We’re not in a web of deceit...”

“We definitely are, *Alyssa*—” He pulled me forward by the strand of pearls around my neck. “It’s the case of a woman who befriended me online, but she turned out to be someone completely different than who she told me she was. So, in this case—*our case*, how do you feel about reasonable doubt?”

Gasping, I could feel all the color draining from my face. My heart wasn’t racing anymore; it was flailing around wildly—ready to jump out of my chest, and my eyes were as wide as they could go.

“You were very good at covering your tracks for such a long time, so I’ll give you that,” he said. “But I thought we thoroughly discussed how I felt about liars. Did we not?”

I murmured as he tightened his grip on my pearls, as he pulled me so close that we were lip to lip.

“Do you plan on answering me, *Aubrey*? Are you tired of this fucking charade?”

“I never thought that...” I was stuttering, trying to look away from him, but his grip prevented me from moving. “I am so sorry...”

He didn’t say anything further. He stared into my eyes, searching for something that wasn’t there. Then he lowered his voice, and leaned back. “Once someone lies to me they’re dead to me forever. Do you remember me saying that?”

“Yes...”

“So, you’ve always been willing to lose our friendship over lies?”

“I never wanted to meet you in person...”

“I can see that.” He hissed.

“If I had known who you really were...” I was breaking down in front of him. This was too much for one day. “I would’ve never—”

“Save it.” He cut me off. “I’ve heard enough about your thoughts on *lying*. Seeing as though we don’t share the same views, you’re not worthy of being my intern. You’ll be serving as my secretary’s assistant until further notice.”

“You’re *demoting* me?”

“It’s not a demotion. It’s a way to keep you out of my sight.”

My heart dropped.

“Our online relationship—whatever the hell that was anyway,” he said, “is over. I don’t want to hear from you outside of these walls again.”

“*Thoreau*...”

“It’s Mr. Hamilton, *Miss Everhart*.” He glared at me. “Mr. fucking Hamilton.”

“You have to believe that I’m sorry...I never thought that this would happen.”

“Take however much time you need on the Brownstein account.” He disregarded my apology and released his hold on my necklace. “You have until the end of next week. And from now on, you can just

set my coffee on my bookcase. I don't need you coming anywhere near my desk."

"Andrew—"

"We are definitely *not* on a first name basis. Do not ever call me that."

"Just let me explain..."

"There's nothing *to* explain. You lied to me and you no longer exist. Get out. Now."

I felt tears welling in my eyes. "I was serious about you being my only friend...Friends are supposed to give each other a chance to make things right. Just let me tell you why I had to lie to you..."

"I don't deal with liars. *Ever*. And seeing that that's exactly what you are, I don't care why you felt the need to deceive me. Get out of my office, stay out of my sight as much as possible, and do your damn job."

I stood up and looked into his eyes, pleading for him to simply hear me out, to let me explain, but he turned away from me. Then he picked up his phone.

"Jessica?" he said. "Could you help Miss Everhart find her way out of my office? And could you please have the janitor check my floors for fucking superglue?"



I stood underneath the scalding hot streams of my shower, crying. Right after I'd left Andrew's office, I'd told HR that I wasn't feeling well and needed to leave for the rest of the day.

I'd driven straight for the dance hall—locking myself into a private room and dancing until I couldn't feel my feet anymore. I knew I must've looked crazy to my classmates, sobbing in between every twirl, but I didn't care; I needed to clear my mind of all thoughts of Andrew, Thoreau, and Alyssa.

As the water continued to lash against my skin, I shut my eyes and murmured, "How long has he known?" I thought about the past couple weeks, how "Thoreau" had been less talkative than normal, how he'd ignored me, and then it hit me.

My interview...

I still remembered it because seeing Andrew in person made me realize that no picture could ever accurately capture how sexy he really looked, and I'd blushed the second his eyes met mine. He didn't seem to act any differently throughout the questioning, but then I remembered that random phone call...

I wasn't sure why I was just remembering it now, but while Mr. Bach and Mr. Greenwood had simply laughed that intrusive phone call away, Andrew had stared at me. As if he was in complete and utter shock. And at the end of the interview, when I'd reached for his hand, his gaze wasn't intrigued anymore, it was heated.

Wiping away my tears, I turned off the water and stepped out. I wrapped myself in a towel and did what I always did when I felt sad: ordered a sandwich and made myself a couple of stiff martinis.

Just as I was downing the first one, there was a knock on my door. I noticed the pink Barbie keys on the counter—courtesy of my forgetful and "never here" roommate and knew it was her.

She always leaves something...

"Would it kill you to double check for these before you—" I stopped when I opened the door.

It was Andrew, and the look on his face was one of pure anger. He wasn't dressed in a suit anymore, just a simple, thin white T-shirt that slightly clung to his chiseled abs and a pair of faded blue jeans.

I tried to slam the door in his face, but he held it open and forced himself inside my apartment. I started to step backwards and he matched me step for step, backing me against my living room wall.

"We need to talk." His voice was flat, emotionless.

"No, we don't. You said plenty earlier." I looked down at the floor. "Don't worry, I'll be resigning in the morning. Please leave."

He tilted my chin up and looked into my eyes. "You're not quitting."

“*Watch me.*” I swallowed. “I want you to leave...”

“I would believe that, but you say things you don’t mean all the time.”

The tension between us was damn near palpable, and I could feel my blood heating every second he stood there staring at me. I tried to move away, but he gripped my hips.

“You told me you were a lawyer, Aubrey...” he said, his voice dripping with malice. “You told me you were twenty seven years old.”

“I never *said* I was twenty seven. You assumed.”

“It was on your fucking profile!” He pushed my back against the wall. “You never thought to correct me whenever I said I was only five years older than you...I’m *ten years* older than you.”

“I didn’t think I would ever meet you in person,” I barely managed to say as he pressed his chest against mine.

“That excuses your *lies*?”

“I said I was sorry, and it was clearly a huge mistake to ever befriend you. You didn’t even give me a chance to completely explain.”

“Do you not understand how *fucked up* this situation is?”

“No...” I murmured as our lips touched.

“I’ve been looking forward to fucking the woman who teased me every night for nearly six months,” he whispered, sliding his fingers underneath my towel. “I wanted her to ride me.” He trailed his hand up my thigh and rubbed his thumb against my clit. “On my cock and my mouth. And I wanted to teach her how to taste me...Don’t you think this woman fucked all of that up?”

I shook my head in response; I couldn’t handle the way he was looking at me.

“You said you weren’t my type when I asked what you looked like.” He pulled away from my mouth, but he kept his thumb against my clit. “But you clearly *are*. Why did you lie about something as simple as that?”

“You didn’t tell me what you looked like, so—”

“Stop *deflecting*.” He hissed, and took a step back. “Tell me the reasoning. I’ve already figured out your reasoning for the other bullshit lies. By the way, no self-respecting lawyer would *ever* let another lawyer do their work for them.”

“Only a self-absorbed asshole who wants to seem deeper than he really is would call himself *Thoreau*.”

“Good to finally see the version of you that I remember.” He took another step back and crossed his arms. “Answer my question.”

“*Fuck you.*” I scoffed. “I told you I was sorry, begged you to listen to me, and now when *you* feel like talking, you think you can barge into my apartment and *make me*?”

“I haven’t *made you* do anything.” He smirked. “*Yet.*”

Silence.

He leaned against the wall, waiting for me to speak, but I couldn’t get a word out.

Look away from him...Look away from him..

As if he knew the power his gaze was having on me, he grinned and picked up one of my makeshift martinis.

Lifting one of the cherries from the liquor, he placed it against his lips. “Do you plan on standing there all night and looking at me, or are you going to answer my question?”

“No,” I said, finally looking away from him. “After the way you treated me in your office today, I don’t owe you a goddamn thing. You can stand there all night for all I care.” I walked towards my room. “There’s even a sandwich delivery coming if you decide to—”

My breath caught in my throat as he grabbed me from behind and pulled me against his chest. He quickly spun me around so we were face to face, and then he ripped my towel from around my body,

letting it fall to the floor.

The cherry he'd picked up was in his mouth, and he was pressing it on my lips—silently commanding me to open up and eat it.

I stuck out my tongue to take it, but before sliding it to me, he whispered, “Don't chew...I want to see how capable you are of *swallowing*.”

My gasping did all the swallowing for me.

“Good girl,” he said, loosening his grip around my waist. “Now, step back and hold the wall.”

“*What?*”

He pushed me against the wall before I could take another breath, grabbing my hands and lifting them above my head. “*Hold the wall...*”

I nodded, pressing my hands against the cool surface.

With a ‘don't-fuck-with-me’ look on his face, he sucked my bottom lip into his mouth, and spoke softly, “I'll make you regret it if you let go.”

“Yes...”

“That wasn't a question.” The look on his face softened, and I was sure he could hear the loud beating in my chest.

I shut my eyes as he ran his hands up and down my sides.

I could feel his cock hardening through his pants as he lowered his kisses to my breasts and swirled his tongue around my nipples.

His mouth trailed down my stomach, and his hands caressed every inch of me as he made his way down.

“*Thoreau...*” I gasped as his tongue skimmed the inside of my thighs.

“My name is *Andrew*.” He got down on his knees. “We're done playing that game.” He trapped my legs with his hands and pressed his mouth against my pussy. Licking me gently, he massaged my clit with his thumb.

I tried not to moan too loudly, tried to keep it all in, but each time he swirled his tongue, my mouth let another sound escape.

“You're so fucking wet...” He groaned. “*So fucking wet...*” He slipped two thick fingers inside of me, pushing them as far as they could go.

My eyes fluttered open as he added a third finger, as he whispered, “*So tight...*”

“*Ahhh...Andrew...*” I gave up trying to be quiet.

“*Yes?*” He slowly pulled his fingers out of me and looked up, waiting for me to say something, but I couldn't focus when he looked at me liked that.

With no lead-in kisses whatsoever, he buried his head in my pussy and fucking devoured me.

“*Ohhh...*” I cried out in indescribable pleasure. “*Ohhh godddd, Andrewww....Waitttt...Slow down...*”

He ignored me, plunging his tongue deeper and deeper.

I couldn't help but let go of the wall. I dropped my hands to his head, grabbing fistfuls of his hair to keep my balance. The harder I pulled his hair, the more his tongue lashed against me with no mercy.

Suddenly, there was a loud knock at the door, but Andrew didn't bother stopping. Instead, he lifted my right leg up and draped it over his shoulder. He grasped my thigh so I couldn't move, and then he slid his tongue into me a little deeper—licking every corner of my walls.

On the verge of coming, I grabbed his shoulders as my pussy throbbed against his mouth. But he stopped abruptly.

He moved my leg and kissed his way back up my body, stopping when he reached my breasts. He palmed them with one hand and roughly twisted my nipples.

“I told you not to let go of that wall,” he said, looking down at me as he unzipped his pants.

I stared back into his eyes, nearly breathless.

“I did tell you that, *didn't I?*” He clasped my hand and pressed it against his chest, slowly moving it lower and lower.

When my hand finally reached his dick, I looked down in utter shock. He was huge, massively thick, and my jaw was hanging wide open.

“You don't like it?” He tilted my chin up and smirked.

I was utterly speechless, but I couldn't deny how horny I felt right now. Remembering what he'd said on the phone, I lowered my head to taste him, but he stopped me.

“*Not tonight.*” He pulled a condom out of his pocket, and kept his eyes on me as he put it on.

Leading me to the couch, he sat down and pulled me into his lap.

I leaned forward to kiss his lips, but he quickly repositioned me so I was facing away from him. Then he teased me with the head of his cock—rubbing it against my slit. Again and again.

“Remember how you said you wanted to ride me until I came inside of you?” he whispered into my ear. “How you wanted to grind on me until I begged you to stop?”

“Yes...” I moaned.

He pushed me down by my shoulders and sank me onto his cock, burying himself to the hilt inch by inch. The further I slipped onto him, the more he groaned. The more he said my name.

When he was completely inside of me, he held me still and pressed his lips against the back of my neck, letting me adjust to his length.

The feel of him was like nothing I'd ever felt before. It was intense, powerful, *addictive*.

“*Ride me, Aubrey...*” He pushed me forward. “Fucking ride me...”

I took a deep breath and rocked against him, slowly stretching my insides further and further. I could barely maintain a rhythm; the fullness of him was almost too much, and he was rubbing my clit with his thumb—driving me insane.

“You feel so fucking good right now...” He yanked me back by my hair. “Don't fucking stop.”

I held onto his legs to steady myself, slightly lifting my body up and down. I tried to finally establish a tempo, to finally take control.

“*Andrewww...*” I couldn't handle his cock anymore. “I'm...I'm about to cum...”

“No.” He gripped my hips harder than ever. “*Not yet.*”

He suddenly stood up, with me still impaled on his cock, and bent me over. “Grab that table and don't let go.”

My fingers clutched the edge of the coffee table and he pounded into me again and again, smacking my ass each time I cried out.

“I told you I was going to *own* your pussy,” he whispered harshly. “Don't cum until I tell you to fucking cum...” His cock was throbbing inside of me, and my muscles were clenching with his every stroke.

“Fuck...Fuckkkk!” My legs were starting to give out as an intense pressure built inside of me, as he fucked me relentlessly. “*Andrewwwww...*”

“*Don't let go.*” He warned, but I couldn't help it.

My orgasm took ahold of me in a rush and I collapsed, falling forward. Before I could land face first onto the coffee table, he pulled me back and continued pounding into me until he reached his own release.

I shut my eyes and leaned back against him, panting heavily as we both tried to catch our breath. Several minutes later, Andrew gently lifted my hips and pulled out of me.

He stood up, and I watched him as he walked into the kitchen and threw the condom away. He picked my fallen towel up from the floor and walked back over to me.

I made no move to get up, but I re-wrapped the towel around myself.

“Is there anything you *didn't* lie to me about?” His voice was a whisper.

“Yes...”

“And what would that be?”

“I did miss you...”

He raised his eyebrow, keeping the rest of his face stoic. Expressionless. He started to buckle his pants, not taking his eyes off mine.

I was hoping that he would say something, *anything*, but he didn't.

He smoothed his shirt with his hands and walked to the door. All of a sudden, he stopped and glanced over his shoulder. Then he walked over to me and lightly kissed my lips—brushing his thumb against my cheek.

I wanted to speak, to ask what he was thinking, but he pulled away and left.

This time he was gone.

Recess (n.):

Temporary withdrawal or cessation from the usual work or activity.

Andrew

I'd broken a lot of rules in my life, but sleeping with an intern was probably one of the worst ones. There was no precedent for this, and that terrified me.

The second I left Aubrey's apartment, I did what I normally did after fucking someone I met online: I went home, showered, poured a glass of my favorite scotch, and pulled out my laptop—preparing to search for the next.

Except this time, I didn't want to search for a next. I wanted to fuck Aubrey, again and again. I wanted to hear her scream a little louder, feel her body wrapped against mine, and see her face as I buried myself deep inside of her.

Damn...

I couldn't believe this. I could count on one hand the number of women I'd thought about after I left a hotel, and it wasn't because any of them were memorable in a *good* way. And the ones that *were* good, were just "good"—never amazing, like Aubrey.

A part of me felt bad for leaving her right after we finished, for not saying a word, but I *had* to leave.

I didn't do pillow talk conversations after sex. Ever.

Even though I was more than tempted to drive back over there right now and claim her again, I had to make myself accept a very harsh fact: I was never going to sleep with her again. It was against my rules.



"Where is my coffee, Jessica?" I called her desk. "Why hasn't Miss Everhart brought it to me yet? Is she late today?"

"No, sir." She sounded confused. "It's only seven thirty..."

I looked at the clock on my wall and sighed before ending the call. I was on edge for some reason, and I didn't like it.

I'd failed to get any sleep the night before and I'd purposely ignored Aubrey's midnight text. It'd read, "*Can't sleep...Can we talk about what just happened between us?*"

The answer was *no*.

Our conversations were long over. There was nothing more we had to discuss.

We talked. We fucked. That was the end of us.

I pulled up the Dating-Match website, determined to get her out of my mind. All I needed to do was find someone else, and she would become a drop in the sea of other endless women—a fleeting memory that I would halfway remember whenever I saw her gorgeous face.

There were hundreds of new women on the site now, but very few of them caught my eye. The ones that did seemed too good to be true, so I didn't bother clicking on their full profiles.

Just as I was reading about a math professor, a cup of coffee was set on my desk.

"Good morning," Aubrey whispered.

I didn't answer. I continued to scroll through online profiles; she'd get the point eventually.

She sighed. "Andrew—"

"It's *Mr. Hamilton*." I looked up, immediately wishing that I hadn't. She looked even more stunning today than she did yesterday. She was wearing the same grey dress she'd worn to her interview, and it was tighter today than it was on that day. Her hair was falling in soft curls that fell past her shoulders, and her blue eyes were bright, hopeful.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" she asked.

"Is it about your work?"

"No..."

"Is it about *my* work?"

"No..."

"Then no. Get out."

"It's about yesterday." She stood still, making my cock stiffen as she bit her lip.

"Yesterday was a *mistake*, a regrettable moment in both of our careers, and I assure you that it won't be happening again."

"That's not what I was going to say."

"Miss Everhart," I said, standing up from my desk and walking over to her, "you and I work together professionally. If I had known the truth behind all of your ridiculous lies earlier, I would've immediately stopped talking to you. And then I would've reported you for stealing someone else's information and using it as your own. The fact that you are a *liar* remains, and unfortunately—given those circumstances and the fact that I've already fucked you, there's nothing more that needs to be said between us."

She opened her mouth to say something, but I pressed my finger against her lips.

"Nothing more," I whispered, bringing my face close to hers. "Understood?"

"You are..." Her bottom lip quivered as she jerked away from me. "You are such an *asshole*! I can't believe that I slept with you!"

"Believe it. I'm sure it'll be a very good memory for you since you hardly ever have sex."

She shook her head. "Were you pretending on the phone, too? You're nothing like the man I talked to at night, nothing like—"

"Please spare me the emotional appeal bullshit, Miss Everhart. I'll have my next cup of coffee at noon. Thanks."

"You'll be waiting." She rolled her eyes. "I'll get it when I *feel* like it."

"You're going to make me fire you over a cup of coffee?"

"To be honest, you might not want me to make your coffee, *Mr. Hamilton*." She narrowed her eyes at me. "There's no telling what I'll put in it."

"I fucking *dare* you..." I stepped closer.

"Is that a threat?" She shrugged.

"It's a fucking *promise*." I pushed her against the wall and pressed my lips against hers, lifting her leg around my waist.

My cock had been hard ever since she set down my coffee, and she was rubbing her hand against it through my pants right now, murmuring.

I pulled a condom out of my pocket and pressed it into her hand as I devoured her mouth—biting her soft lips, teasing her tongue with mine. If I could, I would fuck her mouth all day.

As she unzipped my pants, I slipped a hand underneath her dress and pushed her panties to the side, groaning once I felt how wet she was.

"*Andrew...*" She was taking too long with the condom, so I did it myself. The second I had it on, I slid into her deeply, biting her lips so she wouldn't scream.

I grabbed her hands and placed them around my neck. “*Always wet...*” I felt her trying to move her leg from around my waist but I held it still. “Say my name again...”

“Yes...” She gasped as I pounded into her, over and over and over. “Yes...”

“Say it.” I squeezed her ass.

Her murmurs were becoming louder and louder.

“My name, Aubrey...” I kissed her mouth. “Say my name...”

Her pussy was gripping my cock tighter and tighter, and her nails were clawing my neck. “I...I’m about to...”

I immediately stopped mid thrust and whispered harshly into her ear. “Say my fucking name, Aubrey...”

Her nails dug into my skin. “*Andrew...*”

At the sound of my name on her lips, I slid into her again and she came, so perfectly. I felt my own release seconds later, and could feel her burying her head in my chest to stifle her moans, but I tilted her head up.

“Stop that...”

Panting, she kept her eyes on mine. “Stop, what?”

“Hiding your voice from me...” I kissed her lips again, making no move to slide out of her, and we stood there entwined in each other for what felt like forever.

As much as I wanted to tell her to leave and get the hell out of my office, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Instead, I kissed her forehead and slowly pulled out, readjusting her dress.

After throwing away the condom, I picked up one of her heels that had fallen off and held it out for her.

Her curls were tousled all over her head, so I smoothed them back into place. As if she was returning the favor, she refastened my zipper and fixed the collar of my shirt.

Then the two of us stood staring at one another. I had no idea what the fuck just happened, and only a part of me liked it. The other half loved it.

“You need to get back to work.” I tugged at the ballet slipper charm around her neck. “You still owe me that Brownstein report, demotion or not.”

“You told me it wasn’t a demotion.”

“I took a page out of your book and *lied*.” I rolled my eyes and stepped back. “Get back to work.”

“Fine, *Mr. Hamilton*.” She smiled and headed for the door.

“And when you come back,” I added, “just leave my afternoon coffee on that bookshelf and walk out. Don’t come anywhere near my desk and don’t say anything to me.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll fuck you again if you do.”

She blushed and stepped out of the room.

The second she was gone, I fell back into my chair and shook my head.

Twice in less than twenty four hours? Jesus...

I pulled up my latest case file, but I couldn’t bring myself to read it. All I could think about was Aubrey.

I’d felt something like this before, and I knew it would lead to nothing but despair. What I felt was nothing deep, nothing all-encompassing—*yet*, but it was real, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

I’d built the last six years of my life detaching myself from any chance of having feelings for someone else, *refusing* to build any friendships, but Aubrey had snuck by my impenetrable doors somehow. And not only had she snuck by, she’d done it with lies, something I would never allow from anyone else. Something that would make me immediately discard her and never think of her again.

I had absolutely no idea how to handle this. This was uncharted territory and I had no idea where to sail next.

Sighing, I picked up my case file and forced myself to read the first few pages so I could get a grip on myself. Before I knew it, I was lost in my work, and the only thing on my mind was how I was going to convince a jury to believe my latest client's bullshit.

Before I could call the lead prosecutor and ask what he was offering in exchange for a plea deal, I felt something hot splashing into my lap.

My goddamn coffee.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I dropped my papers to the desk, glaring at a red-faced Aubrey. "Did you just throw that into my lap *on purpose*?"

"I did." She nodded, and I realized there were tears in her eyes. "Bringing you your coffee is my job, right?"

"Are you fucking bipolar?"

"No, I'm just a *liar* like you said. I'm actually just like you, but at least I can admit when I haven't told you the truth, at least I have a *reason*."

"*Excuse me?*"

Tears fell down her cheeks. "You have a visitor at the front desk."

"Is it your replacement?" I asked dryly. "Because I swear to God, if these stains don't come out of my pants—"

"It's *your wife*."

REASONABLE DOUBT
(VOLUME TWO)

reasonable
doubt
VOLUME
TWO
WHITNEY G.

Prologue

New York City

Six years ago...

Andrew

For the third week in a row, I woke up to a relentless rain falling over this repulsive city. The clouds above were coated in an ugly hue of grey, and the streaks of lightning that flashed across the sky every few seconds were no longer marvels; they were predictable.

Holding up my umbrella, I walked to a newspaper stand and picked up *The New York Times*—bracing myself for what lay between its pages.

“How many women do you think a man could possibly screw in his lifetime?” The vendor asked as he handed me my change.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve stopped counting.”

“Stopped counting, eh? What did you do, get to ten and decide that was enough before settling down?” He pointed to the gold band on my left hand.

“No. I settled down first, then I started fucking.”

He raised his eyebrow—looking stunned, and then he turned around to organize his cigar display.

A couple of months ago, I would’ve entertained his attempt to make conversation, would’ve answered his question with a lighthearted laugh and a “More than we’ll ever admit to,” but I didn’t have the ability to laugh anymore.

My life was now a depressing reel of repeated frames—hotel nights, cold sweats, marred memories, and rain.

Goddamn rain.

I tucked the newspaper underneath my arm and turned away, glancing at the ring on my hand.

I hadn’t worn it in a long time, and I had no idea what possessed me to put it on today. Twisting it off my finger, I looked at it one last time—shaking my head at its uselessness.

For a split second, I considered keeping it, maybe locking it away as a reminder of the man I used to be. But that version of me was pathetic—*gullible*, and I wanted to forget him as fast as I could.

I crossed the street as the light turned green, and as I stepped onto the sidewalk, I tossed the band where I should’ve thrown it months ago.

Down the drain.

Exculpatory Evidence (n.):

Evidence indicating that a defendant did not commit the crime.

Present Day

Andrew

The hot coffee that was currently seeping through my pants and stinging my skin was the exact reason why I never fucked the same woman twice.

Wincing, I took a deep breath. “Aubrey...”

“You’re fucking *married*.”

I ignored her comment and leaned back in my chair. “In the interest of your future short-lived and mediocre law career, I’m going to do two huge favors for you: One, I’m going to apologize for fucking you a second time and let you know that it will *never* happen again. Two, I’m going to pretend like you didn’t just assault me with some goddamn coffee.”

“*Don’t*.” She threw my coffee mug onto the floor, shattering it to pieces. “I definitely did, and I’m tempted to do it again.”

“Miss Everhart—”

“*Fuck you*.” She narrowed her eyes at me, adding, “I hope your dick falls off” as she stormed out of my office.

“Jessica!” I stood up and grabbed a roll of paper towels. “*Jessica?*”

No answer.

I picked up my phone to call her desk, but she suddenly stepped into my office. “Yes, Mr. Hamilton?”

“Call Luxury Dry Cleaning and have them deliver one of my suits to the office. I also need a new cup of coffee, Miss Everhart’s file from HR, and you need to tell Mr. Bach that I’ll be late to that four o’clock meeting today.”

I waited to hear her usual “Right away, sir” or “I’m on it, Mr. Hamilton,” but she said nothing. She was silent—blushing, and her eyes were glued to the crotch of my pants.

“Don’t you need some help cleaning that up?” Her lips curved into a smile. “I have a really thick towel in my desk drawer. It’s very soft...and *gentle*.”

“Jessica...”

“It *is* huge, isn’t it?” Her eyes finally met mine. “I really wouldn’t tell a soul. It would be our little secret.”

“My fucking dry cleaning, a new cup of coffee, Miss Everhart’s file, and a message to Mr. Bach about me being late. *Now*.”

“I really love the way you resist...” She stole another glance of my pants before leaving the room.

I sighed and started to soak up as much of the coffee as I could. I should’ve known that Aubrey was the emotional type, should’ve known that she was unstable and incapable of behaving normally the second I realized she’d made up a fake identity just for LawyerChat.

I regretted ever telling her that I wanted to own her pussy, and I was cursing myself for driving to her apartment yesterday.

Never again..

Just as I was tearing off a new paper towel, a familiar voice cleared the air.

“Why, hello...It’s good to see you again,” she said.

I lifted my head up, hoping that this was a hallucination—that the woman at my door wasn’t really standing there smiling. That she wasn’t stepping forward with her hand outstretched as if she wasn’t the very reason that my life was heartlessly altered six years ago.

“Are you going to shake my hand, *Mr. Hamilton*?” She raised her eyebrow. “That is the name you’re going by these days, isn’t it?”

I stared at her long and hard—noticing that her once silky black hair was now cut short into a bob. Her light green eyes were still as soft and alluring as I remembered them, but they weren’t having the same effect.

All the memories I’d tried to suppress were suddenly playing right in front of me, and my blood was starting to boil.

“*Mr. Hamilton*?” she asked again.

I picked up my phone. “Security?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” She slammed the phone down. “You’re not going to ask why I’m here? Why I came to see you?”

“Doing so would imply that I *care*.”

“Did you know that when most people get sentenced to prison, they get care packages, money orders, even a phone call on their first day?” She clenched her jaw. “I got divorce papers.”

“I told you I’d write.”

“You told me you’d *stay*. You told me you forgave me, you said that we could start over when I got out, that you would be right there—”

“You fucking ruined me, Ava.” I glared at her. “*Ruined me*, and the only reason I said those dumb ass things to you was because my lawyer told me to.”

“So, you don’t love me anymore?”

“I don’t answer rhetorical questions,” I said. “And I’m not a geography expert, but I know damn well that North Carolina is outside of New York and a direct violation of your parole. What do you think will happen when they find out you’re here? Do you think they’ll make you serve out the sentence that you more than fucking deserve?”

She gasped. “You would snitch on me?”

“I would *run my car* over you.”

She opened her mouth to say something else, but the door opened and the security team walked in.

“Miss?” The lead guard, Paul, cleared his throat. “We’re going to need you to vacate the premises now.”

Ava scowled at me. “Really? You’re really going to let them haul me off like I’m some kind of animal?”

“Once again, *rhetorical*.” I sat down in my chair, signaling for Paul to get rid of her.

She said something else, but I tuned it out. She didn’t mean shit to me, and I needed to find someone online tonight so I could fuck her random and unwanted appearance out of my mind.

Evasion (n.):

A subtle device to set aside the truth, or escape the punishment of the law.

Aubrey

Andrew was the epitome of what it meant to be an asshole, a shining example of what that word stood for, but no matter how pissed I was, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about him.

In the six months that we'd spoken, he'd never mentioned a wife. And the one time I'd asked if he'd ever done anything more than "One dinner. One night. No repeats." –he'd said "Once," and quickly changed the subject.

I'd been replaying that conversation in my mind all night, telling myself to accept that he was a liar, and that I needed to move on.

"Ladies and gentlemen of La Monte Art Gallery..." My ballet instructor spoke into a mic, cutting through my thoughts. "May I have your attention, please?"

I shook my head and looked out into the full audience. Tonight was supposed to be one of the highlights of my dance career. It was an exhibition for the city's college dancers. All of the leading performers for spring productions were supposed to dance a two minute solo in honor of their school, in celebration of what was to come months later.

"This next performer you're about to see is Miss Aubrey Everhart." There was pride in his voice. "She is playing the role of Odette/Odile in Duke's production of *Swan Lake*, and when I tell you that she is one of the most talented dancers I've ever seen..." He paused as the crowd's chatter dissolved into silence. "I need you to take my word for it."

One of the photographers in the front row snapped a picture of me, temporarily rendering me blind by the flash.

"As most of you know," he continued, "I've worked with the best of the best, spent countless years in Russia studying under the greats, and after a long and illustrious career with the New York Ballet Company, I've retired to teach those with untapped potential."

There was a loud applause. Everyone in the room knew who Paul Petrova was, and even though most in the field were confused as to why he'd ever want to teach in Durham, no one dared to question his decision.

"I hope you'll come out and see the first transformation of the Duke ballet program in the spring," he said as he slowly walked to the other side of the stage. "But for now, Miss Everhart will perform a short duet from Balanchine's *Serenade*, with her partner Eric Lofton!"

The audience clapped again, and the lights above them dimmed. A soft spotlight shone on me and Eric, and the violinists began to play.

Short, soft notes filled the room, and I stood on my toes—trying to dance as delicately as the music demanded. Yet, with each step, all I could picture was Andrew kissing me, fucking me, and ultimately *lying* to me.

"I've never lied to you, Aubrey. I trust you for some strange reason..."

I pushed Eric away when he held out his hands, and twirled across the stage until he came after me. He held my face in his hands—as if he was begging me to stay, but I spun away again, launching myself into a full set of nonstop pirouettes.

I was angry, I was hurt, and I wasn't holding anything back as I showed off just how well I could dance en pointe.

The second the violinists struck the last note, the audience let out a collective gasp and applauded the loudest they had all night.

“Wow...” Eric whispered as he took a bow next to me. “I don't think anyone will talk shit about you getting the swan role after that...”

“People have been talking shit about me?” I raised my eyebrow, but I already knew the answer to that. A junior landing the top role over all the seniors was unheard of.

“Bravo, Miss Everhart.” Mr. Petrova walked over to me. “She's going to blow you all away in the spring, I'm sure of it!”

Another round of applause began to build and he moved the mic away from his mouth. “Where are your parents? I'd like for them to come up for a picture.”

“They're out of town.” I lied. I hadn't wasted my time even attempting to invite them to this.

“Well, that's too bad,” he said. “I'm sure they're very proud of you. You can exit the stage now.”

“Thank you.” I headed into the dressing room and changed into a short white silk dress and a grey feathered headband. As I looked myself over in the mirror, I smiled. There was no way anyone could tell that I was an emotional wreck inside.

I pulled out my phone and noticed a new voicemail from GBH. I knew it was about me missing my internship for the fourth day in a row, so I deleted it. Then something came over me and I googled “Andrew Hamilton” for the umpteenth time this week—hoping something would pop up.

Nothing. Again.

With the exception of his perfectly poised photo on GBH's website and that less than telling bio, there was no information about him anywhere.

I'd even tried “Andrew Hamilton: New York, lawyer,” but the results were just as dismal. It was as if he hadn't come into existence until starting at GBH.

“Great performance, Aubrey...” Jennifer, one of Duke's top seniors, suddenly stepped into the bathroom. “It really is an honor watching someone so young and underdeveloped get unnecessary credit.”

I rolled my eyes and zipped my purse.

“Tell me something,” she said. “Do you honestly think you're going to last until the spring performance?”

“Do you honestly think I'm going to stand here and continue this dumbass conversation?”

“You should.” She smirked. “Because between you and me, four years ago—back before your time...There was a certain dancer picked to be the lead in *Sleeping Beauty*, a double major. She was quite talented—a natural really, but she caved under pressure because she couldn't devote as many hours to the craft as the dancers who only wanted to dance.”

“Is there a point to this story?”

“I took her spot and I was only a freshman.” She smiled. “Now I'm a senior, and a certain someone is dancing in the role that belongs to me. So, just like back then, I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure I get what's rightfully mine.”

I shook my head and moved past her, ignoring the fact that she'd whispered “stupid bitch” under her breath. I was supposed to return to the gallery room and watch the other performers, but I needed a break.

I slipped past the sliding doors on the other side of the room and stepped into the gallery's bistro. It was much quieter on this side, and the people sitting at the tables seemed to be preoccupied with conversations not centered on ballet.

“Miss?” A tuxedoed waiter stepped in front of me with a tray. “Would you be interested in a complimentary glass of champagne?”

“Two, please.”

He raised his eyebrow, but handed me two glasses anyway.

With no grace whatsoever, I tossed one back, then the other—licking the rims to make sure I didn’t miss a drop.

“Where’s your bar?” I asked.

“Our *bar*? I don’t think the patrons of the art gallery are permitted to—”

“Please don’t make me ask again.”

He pointed to the other side of the room where a few smokers were sitting, and I walked toward them.

“What can I get for you tonight, Miss?” The bartender smiled as I approached. “Would you like to try one of our house specials?”

“Can any of those help me forget about sleeping with a married man?”

The smile on his face faded and he set out three shot glasses, filling them with what I could only hope was the strongest liquor in the house.

I slid my credit card across the counter and downed the first one in seconds—shutting my eyes as the burning sensation crawled down my throat. I held the next one against my lips, and I suddenly heard a familiar laugh.

It was low and gravelly, and I’d heard it a million times before.

I turned around and spotted Andrew sitting at a table with a woman who was *not* his wife. I didn’t want to admit it, but she was pretty. Very, very pretty: Auburn hair with blond highlights, deep green eyes, and perky breasts that were too perfect to be natural.

She was rubbing him on his shoulder and giggling every ten seconds.

Andrew seemed undaunted by her affection, and as he signaled for the check, I could only assume how their night would end.

I tried to turn away—to act like seeing him with someone else wasn’t affecting me, but I couldn’t help it.

His date was now leaning over the table—purposely putting more of her cleavage on display, and whispering words that were hard to read. As she playfully licked her lips and stroked his chin with her fingertips, I realized I couldn’t take it anymore.

Subject: SERIOUSLY?!

Are you really on a date right now with someone who isn’t your wife?! It’s bad enough that you’re a cheating and lying philanderer, but are you really that much of a sex addict?

—Aubrey

His response came within seconds.

Subject: Re: SERIOUSLY?!

I’m really on a date right now with someone who’s not going to leave third degree burns on my dick. And I’m not a sex addict, I’m a pussy addict. There’s a difference.

—Andrew

Subject: Re: Re: SERIOUSLY?!

You are a disgusting and vile asshole, and I honestly regret ever sleeping with you.

—Aubrey

No response.

I watched as he looked down at his phone and raised his eyebrow. He turned around in his chair—slowly scanning the room until he found me.

His eyes widened the second they met mine, and his lips slowly parted. His gaze traveled up and down my body, and I could feel him undressing me.

There was suddenly no one else in the room but the two of us and I could tell that he wanted me to come to him—right here, right now. I felt my body responding to his stares, felt my nipples hardening as he dragged his tongue against his lips.

I swallowed as I looked him over, realizing that I'd pictured his hair entirely wrong in my dreams this week. I'd finger fucked myself for hours on end last night—using his face and the memories of his voice for inspiration, and seeing him in person only made me want to feel his cock inside of me again.

I leaned forward, wanting to go to him, but my tunnel vision quickly cleared and I saw that we weren't alone in this room.

Far from it.

His date's perfectly manicured hand found its way to his chin, and turned his head away.

I followed suit and asked for two more drinks. I downed them both and when I looked over my shoulder, I saw that Andrew was staring in my direction with undeniable want in his eyes.

I forced a smile and opened my mouth very slowly, mouthing, "Fuck. You." before leaving. I snatched a handful of mints from a random waiter's tray and rushed back toward the gallery.

I was halfway there when I felt my phone vibrating. An email.

Subject: Meet me in the bathroom.

NOW.

—Andrew

I turned off my phone and continued walking toward the gallery doors—damn near running. I reached the lobby, but someone grabbed my arm and pulled me across the room.

Andrew.

I tried to jerk away, but he tightened his hold and looked back at me—giving me a 'Don't Fuck with Me' look as the people around us whispered.

He pulled me into a bathroom and locked the door, narrowing his eyes at me. "You think I'm disgusting?"

"Extremely." I stepped back. "I've lost what little respect I had for you and if you even *try* to put your hands on me, I'll scream."

"I don't doubt that." A trace of a smile grazed his lips, but it didn't stay. "You haven't shown up to work for four straight days. You think just because I fucked you that I won't fire you?"

"I don't give a fuck whether you fire me or not! Have you ever thought about why I haven't shown up to work?"

"Incompetence?"

"You're fucking married! *Married!* How could you—" I shook my head as he closed the gap between us. "How could you leave that part out?"

"I didn't," he said. "And for the record...I'm not technically married, Aubrey."

"I'm not technically *stupid*, Andrew."

"You're making it very difficult to talk to you right now..." His lips were brushing against mine.

"That's because you're not making any fucking sense." I freed myself from his grasp and headed for the door, but he grabbed me and slammed me against the wall.

"It's a *contested divorce*," he hissed. "If you were a *real* lawyer I'm sure I wouldn't have to explain what the hell that term means, but since you're not—"

“It means that you’re still legally married. It means that if you die before the papers go through, that your wife—which is what she is, will still be entitled to everything you ever owned. It means that you’re a LIAR! A *fucking liar*, who is apparently exempt from his own stupid and ineffectual rules!”

“I filed.” He gritted through his teeth. “She refused to sign, and there’s a lot of complicated shit that I’ll never feel like discussing, but we’ve been separated and out of touch for over six years. Six. Years.”

I shrugged and tried to put on my best poker face, ignoring the fact that my heart was skipping every other beat as he wiped my tears away with his thumb.

“I’ve never lied to you, Aubrey,” he said sternly. “You asked me before if I’d ever lied to you and that answer is still the same. I don’t talk about my life before Durham with anyone, but yes, I did once have a wife and she showed up to my office on her own. I didn’t call her, I never will, and I haven’t called her since I left New York. Our case is extremely complicated and I prefer not to think about it.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “You’re still *wrong*. You still neglected to tell me about her for six months. Six. Months!”

“At what point was I supposed to bring that shit up?” His face turned red. “In between fucking you over the phone? When I was begging your lying ass to meet me in person? When I was unknowingly helping you with your fucking *homework*?”

“How about before you fucked me?” I hated that being around him pulled emotions out of me. I couldn’t pretend to act unaffected if I tried. “How about then?”

He clenched his jaw, but he didn’t say a word.

“That’s what I thought,” I said, knowing that I’d won this. “Now, I’m sure you and your lovely D-cup date have a room reserved across the street, so if you don’t mind—”

“There’s nothing going on between me and my soon to be *ex-wife*,” he said harshly. “Nothing. And I *do* have a room reserved across the street. I’ve had the same one reserved for the past four nights with four different women, but I’ve been unable to fuck any of them because I can’t seem to stop thinking about my incompetent-ass-intern and how I only want to fuck her.”

Silence.

“Do you...” I shook my head. “Do you honestly think saying shit like that is a turn-on?”

“Yes...” He trailed his fingers underneath my dress, slightly brushing his thumb against the crotch of my soaked panties. “And apparently you do, too...”

“Me being wet just means that I can’t control my body’s reaction to you. It doesn’t mean that I want to have sex with you. I *hate* you.”

“I’m pretty sure that you don’t.” He slipped his hand around my waist and pulled me close—making my breathing slow.

“Get your hands off me...”

“Say it more convincingly and I will.” He waited for my request, raising his eyebrow, but I couldn’t bring myself to say those words.

We stood staring at each other for several minutes, letting that raw, palpable tension build between us before I finally broke the silence.

“I think you should get back to your date...” My voice was a whisper. “You’ve said all you had to say so...What more could you possibly want from me?”

“In this moment?” He trailed his finger against my collarbone.

“In general.” I turned my cheek before he could kiss me. “I’m never sleeping with you again, I’ll be formally resigning by the end of the week, and I think we need to end our so-called friendship for good.”

“You mean that?” he whispered.

“Yes, I mean that.” I ignored the feel of his hand squeezing my ass. “I want to be friends with someone who’s interested in more than my pussy.”

“I’m interested in *your mouth*, too.”

I had no response for that, and he must've sensed it because he tightened his grip on my waist.

"I know how hard it is for you to tell the truth," he said softly, "so I need you to be completely honest when I ask you these next few questions. Can you do that?"

I nodded, breathlessly, and he leaned closer to my lips. "You don't enjoy fucking me?"

"That's not the issue."

"That's not the *answer*. Tell me."

I ignored the loud beating in my chest. "I do enjoy it..."

"Are you really resigning?" He kissed me.

"No...I just—" I sucked in a breath as his hand cupped my right breast, as he squeezed it. Hard.

"You just *what*?"

"I want to be reassigned to another lawyer, and I don't want to see you any more than I have to."

He stared into my eyes for a long time, not saying a word as he let me go. "That's how you truly feel?"

"Seeing as I'm the only one between us who actually *feels* anything, yes. Yes, that is how I really feel about you."

He blinked. Then he suddenly pulled me back into his arms and crushed his lips onto mine.

"Why are you such a fucking liar, Aubrey?" He hissed. Pushing me against the vanity, he bit down on my bottom lip and snatched the feathered headband out of my hair.

Keeping his lips on mine, he pushed my dress above my waist—ripping off my panties with one pull.

"Andrew..." I tried to catch my breath as he picked me up and set me on the sink. "Andrew, wait..."

"For what?" He grabbed my hand and placed it over his belt, telling me to unbuckle it.

I didn't answer him. I slipped my fingers underneath the metal clip and unclasped it as he pressed his mouth against my neck.

Trailing his tongue against my skin, he whispered, "You haven't missed me fucking you?"

"It was only twice." I sucked in a breath as his hands caressed my thighs. "Not enough to miss anything..."

He bit me harshly and leaned back, glaring at me.

My breath caught in my throat as he slipped two fingers inside my pussy and teasingly moved them in and out.

"It *feels* like you've missed fucking me..." He pushed his fingers as deep as they could go, making me moan.

I arched my back as he stroked my clit with his thumb.

He suddenly pulled his fingers out of me and brought them up to his lips, slowly licking them. "It *tastes* like you've missed fucking me, too." He pressed another finger against my throbbing wet clit and then he brought it up to my face—placing it against my lips. "Open your mouth."

I slowly parted my lips, and he narrowed his eyes as he slid his finger against my tongue. I felt his cock rub against my thigh, felt him using his other hand to wrap my leg around his waist.

"Tell me that you don't want to fuck me," he said. "That you don't want me to bury my cock deep inside of you *right now*."

He grabbed my face and pressed his lips against mine, drawing my bottom lip into his mouth with his teeth.

I was sliding off the edge of the counter, about to fall, but he pressed me back against the mirror.

I kept my eyes locked on his as he unwrapped a condom, as he put it on and stared at me with that same angry expression he'd been wearing all night.

He grabbed me by my ankles and pulled me forward, sliding his cock into me as my legs gripped his waist.

My hands clawed at his neck as he pounded into me again and again.

“I’ve missed fucking you,” he rasped, threading his fingers into my hair and pulling my head back. “But you haven’t thought about me at all?”

“Ahhh!” I screamed as he sped up his thrusts. I squeezed my legs around him even tighter, trying my best not to give in.

I shut my eyes and heard him saying my name—panting, “Fuck, Aubrey...Fuck...”

“Put your hands on the counter...” he commanded, but I ignored him and tightened my grip around his neck.

“Aubrey...” He bit my shoulder again, still fucking me harder than ever. “Put your hands on the counter. Now.”

I slowly unclasped my hands from around him and lowered them to my sides—gripping onto the cold counter. The next thing I felt was his tongue swirling around my nipples, roughly sucking my breasts.

I gripped the tile harder as his kisses became more ravenous—more possessive, and as he fucked me harder and harder, I felt myself on the verge of losing control.

“Andrew...” I moaned. “Andrew...”

He released my nipple from his mouth and slid his hands underneath my thighs, picking me up and pinning my back against the wall.

“I know you love the way I fuck you, Aubrey...” He looked into my eyes, forcing his cock even deeper into my pussy. “And I know you’ve touched yourself every night this week, wishing it was my cock inside of you instead of your fingers.”

My clit throbbed with his every word, and I was wetter than I’d ever been in my life.

“Tell me it’s true...” He pressed his lips against mine and slipped his tongue into my mouth—muffling my moans with an angry, unrelenting kiss. “Finally tell me something that’s fucking true...”

Tremors traveled up and down my spine, and I was seconds away from coming, but he wouldn’t let my mouth go.

He was still kissing me—glaring at me, begging me to tell him the truth.

I nodded, hoping that he could read my eyes and see that I needed him to let go of me, I needed to be able to breathe.

He slammed into me one last time—hitting my spot, and I managed to tear my mouth away from his.

“Yessssss!” My head fell forward into his shoulder and I gasped for air.

“Aubrey...” He gripped my waist until he stopped shaking.

As we both came back down, there were a few random knocks at the door, a few “Is anybody in there?” taps, but both of us remained silent and breathless.

Minutes later, when his breathing seemed to be under control, he pulled out of me—staring into my eyes. He tossed the condom away in the trashcan behind him and pulled up his pants.

I watched as he fixed himself in the mirror, as he smoothed everything so well that no one would ever know that he’d just fucked the shit out of me.

I slid off the sink and looked at my own face—flushed cheeks, wild hair, runny mascara—and pulled my bra straps back over my shoulder. Before I could pull up my dress straps, Andrew moved my hand away and pulled them up for me.

Our eyes met in the mirror as he smoothed my hair, and for a split second he turned away—to pick up my headband. He gently held it over my head and slid it into place, and then he walked away.

“You know, it’s rude to just leave someone after sex without saying anything,” I muttered.

“What?” His hand was on the doorknob.

“Nothing.”

“What did you say?” He cocked his head to the side. “I’m not a mind reader.”

“I said it’s rude to just leave after you fuck me. You could at least say something, *anything*.”

“I don’t do pillow talk.”

“It’s not pillow talk.” I scoffed. “It’s part of being a gentleman.”

“I never said I was a gentleman.”

I sighed and turned around. I waited to hear the door close, but his hands were suddenly on my waist and he was spinning me around to face him.

“What am I supposed to say after I fuck you, Aubrey?”

“You could ask if it was good for me or not...”

“I don’t believe in asking pointless questions.” He looked at his watch. “How long do you have to stay here?”

“Another hour or so.”

“Hmmm.” He was quiet. “And while you were stalking me and my date how many shots did you have?”

“I wasn’t stalking you and your date. I’ve been avoiding you all week, or haven’t you noticed?”

“*How many?*”

“Five.”

“Okay.” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “I’ll take you home whenever you’re ready and have someone deliver your car to your apartment tomorrow.” He planted a kiss on my forehead before heading to the door. “Just call me.”

“Wait,” I said as he opened it. “What about your date?”

“What about her?”



An hour later, I slipped inside of Andrew’s car—a sleek black Jaguar. He held the door open until I was comfortable, and waited until I put on my seatbelt before shutting it.

On his dashboard, I spotted a red folder with a New York State seal on its center. I picked it up, but he immediately took it from me and locked it inside his glove box.

He looked offended that I’d touched it, but he quickly turned away from me and revved up the car.

“Can I ask you something, Andrew?”

“Depends on what it is.”

“I googled you this week and nothing came up...”

“That’s not a question.”

“Why didn’t anything come up?” I looked over at him.

“Because I’m thirty-two years old and I don’t waste my time on Facebook and Twitter.”

I sighed. “And you really haven’t spoken to her in six years?”

“Excuse me?” He looked over at me as we approached a red light. “I thought we just sorted this out in the bathroom.”

“We did, but—” I cleared my throat. “You filed for a divorce, and it couldn’t go through?”

“It takes two people to complete a divorce, Aubrey. Surely you know that.”

“Yes, but...” I ignored the fact that he was clenching his jaw. “Wouldn’t it be easier for someone like you to make it happen? Six years is a pretty long time to stay married to someone you claim you don’t love anymore, so—”

“You’d be surprised at how well some people can spin a fucking lie to get what they want,” he said, his voice cold. “My past isn’t up for discussion.”

“Ever?”

“Ever. It has nothing to do with you.”

I leaned back in my seat, crossing my arms. “Are you ever going to tell me the reason why you left New York and moved to Durham?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t have to.” He steered the car into my apartment complex. “Because like I told you an hour ago, that part of my life never happened.”

“I’m not going to tell anyone. I just—”

“Stop it.” He faced me as he stopped the car, and I could see a world of hurt in his eyes. It was the most vulnerable I’d ever seen him.

“I lost something very special in New York six years ago.” There was regret in his voice. “Something I’ll never fucking get back, something I’ve spent the last six years trying to forget, and if it’s okay with you I’d like to make it to year seven.”

I opened my mouth to say sorry, but he continued talking.

“I’m not sure if I’ve made this apparent over the past six months or not,” he said, “but I’m not the ‘sit up and talk about my feelings’ type. I’m not interested in deep conversations and just because I’ve fucked you more than once and can’t seem to get you or your mouth off my mind, that doesn’t entitle you to things I haven’t told anyone else.”

I immediately unbuckled my seatbelt and flung the door open, but he grabbed my wrist before I could get out.

“I meant what I said a few months ago, Aubrey...” He cupped my chin and tilted my head toward him. “You are my only friend in this city, but you have to understand that I’m not used to having friends. I’m not used to talking about personal shit, and I’m not going to start now.”

Silence.

“If you’re not going to open up to me, what incentive do I have to continue being your so-called friend?”

He said nothing for a few seconds, but then he smirked. “Get in my lap and let me show you.”

“Is this a joke?”

“Am I laughing?”

“Do you really think you can just demand for me to have sex with you whenever you want?” I raised my eyebrow. “Especially since you just said you’ll never be that open about your personal life?”

“Yes.” He unbuckled his seat belt. “Get in my lap.”

“You know...” I looked down, noticing his cock slowly stiffening through his pants. “I’ve let a few things slide the past few times we’ve had sex, but I have to tell you...” I bit my lip as I slipped out of the car. “I’m really not into the possessive caveman shit.”

He narrowed his eyes at me as I grabbed my purse and stepped back.

“I think we need to give your cock a rest, don’t you think?” I crossed my arms. “You have a pretty big hearing coming up next week. Don’t you need to save all your energy so you can be better prepared?”

“Get back in the damn car, Aubrey...” His voice was strained.

“Are you begging me?”

“I’m commanding you.”

“Did you not hear what I just said?”

He didn’t answer. He reached for my hand, but I shut the door.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Mr. Hamilton.” I smiled and walked away.

Liability (n.):

Legal responsibilities for one's acts or omissions.

A week later...

Andrew

There was only one thing in Durham that held no comparison to New York: Court. The lawyers in New York actually took their jobs seriously. They pored over their research all night, polished their defenses to perfection, and presented their cases with pride.

In Durham, “lawyers” didn’t do shit, and in a moment like this—when I was listening to a young and inexperienced prosecutor embarrass herself, I almost missed those days.

Then again, I wasn’t paying too much attention to the proceedings today. I was too busy thinking about Aubrey and how many times we’d fucked in my office this morning.

We’d said our usual, “Good morning Mr. Hamilton,” “Hello, Miss Everhart” greetings and locked eyes as she set my coffee down. She’d opened her mouth to say something else, but the next thing I knew, my hands were in her hair and I was pulling her against my desk.

I was ruthlessly pounding into her from behind as I massaged her clit, and when she collapsed on my carpet, I’d spread her legs and devoured her pussy.

I was completely insatiable when it came to Aubrey, and being around her for more than five seconds was enough to send me over the edge.

There’s no point in even counting how many times we’ve fucked anymore...

“As you can see...” The prosecutor’s voice cut through my thoughts. “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, all of the evidence that I’ve presented will prove—”

“Objection!” I’d had enough of this. “Your Honor, last time I checked, this was an *evidentiary hearing*, not a trial. Why is Ms. Kline being allowed to address a nonexistent jury?”

The judge took off her glasses. “Ms. Kline, as hesitant as I am to agree with Mr. Hamilton, he does have a point. Have you concluded with your presentation of evidence? Barring a closing statement to the jury?”

“I have, Your Honor,” she said, puffing out her chest as if she’d just presented the case of the century.

“Mr. Hamilton...” The judge looked my way. “Do you care to surprise me today by refuting any of the evidence presented?”

“No, Your Honor.” This hearing was a waste of time, and she knew it as well as I did.

“I see.” She put on her glasses again. “Let the record show that while the prosecution has presented a compelling and rather large collection of evidence, it’s this court’s ruling that it is not enough to warrant a trial.” She banged her gavel and stood up.

Ms. Kline walked over to me and held out her hand. “So, I’ll file an appeal, get more evidence, and see you on this matter again soon, right?”

“Are you *asking* me or are you *telling* me?”

“Your client committed the highest degree of fraud, Mr. Hamilton.” She crossed her arms. “Someone has to pay for that.”

“No one ever will if you remain on top of it, will they?” I put my files in my briefcase. “I’ll be waiting for your next move. And yes, you should get more evidence since the judge clearly ruled that what you had was not enough.”

“So, that means I should appeal? Do you think I could win this thing?”

“I think you could go back to law school and fucking pay attention.” I scoffed. “Either that, or do your clients a favor and find them a better lawyer.”

“You mean someone like you?”

“There’s *no one* like me.” I slid a pair of shades over my eyes. “But anyone would be better than you.”

“Are you always this rude to your opponents, Mr. Hamilton?” She cracked a smile. “I mean, I’ve heard stories, but you are really—”

“Really, what?”

“Intriguing.” She stepped closer. “You are really intriguing.”

I blinked and looked her over. If I’d met her on Date-Match she might’ve been worthy of one night, but I never mixed business with pleasure.

At least, I didn’t used to.

“I’m not sure if you’re seeing anyone or not,” she said, lowering her voice, “but I think you and I have a lot in common.”

“What exactly do we have in common, Miss Kline?”

“Well...” She stepped even closer and rubbed my shoulder. “We were both staring at each other during the hearing, we both have high profile careers, and we both have a passion for the law—a passion that could be transferred to *other things*.” She licked her lips. “Right?”

I stepped back. “Miss Kline, I was staring at you during the hearing because I was trying to comprehend how someone could show up to court and be so unprepared, unprofessional, and utterly annoying. We do both have high profile careers, but if you continue presenting cases like the one you presented today, I’ll be interviewing you for a secretary position at my firm within the next six months.” I ignored her gasp. “And if your passion for the law is *anything* like the way you fuck, then you and I have absolutely nothing in common.”

“Did you...” She shook her head, stepping back as her face reddened. “Did you really just say that to me?”

“Did you really just proposition me for sex?”

“I was simply *probing*—seeing if you were interested in going out.”

“I’m not,” I said—noticing that I wasn’t even the slightest bit aroused. “Am I free to leave the courtroom now or would you like to probe me for something else?”

“You are an asshole!” She spun around and grabbed her briefcase off the floor. “You know, for your clients’ sake, I hope you’re a lot nicer,” she spat out as she left the room.

I wanted to tell her that I actually wasn’t nicer to my clients. I didn’t put up with bullshit from anyone, and since I hadn’t lost a single case since moving to Durham, I didn’t have to.

Looking at my watch, I figured I’d wait a few minutes before leaving. I didn’t want to run into her in the parking lot, and since the remaining courts were adjourning for lunch, I figured I’d wait a while.

I stuffed my hands into my pocket and smiled at the feel of the lacy fabric that grazed my left hand. Pulling it out, I smiled at Aubrey’s black thong from this morning.

I took my phone out of my briefcase to text her about it, but she’d emailed me first.

Subject: Wet Panty Fetish

I’m not sure if you’ve realized that I left my thong in your pocket yet, but I want you to know that I did it for your own good, and that your secret is safe with me.

Ever since you fucked me in the bathroom at the art gallery, I've noticed that you have a tendency to stare at my panties before taking them off.

You run your fingers across them, pull them off with your teeth, and then you stare at them again. I have no problem continuing to appease your panty fetish. I'm sure you place them over your face at night, so if you ever need more, feel free to let me know.

—Aubrey

Subject: Re: Wet Panty Fetish

I did realize that you slipped your thong into my pocket this morning. I've noticed that you've done this all week.

Contrary to your unfounded and silly assumptions, I do not have a panty fetish and I do not sleep with them over my face at night. I do, however, have a new fetish for your pussy, and if you're interested in letting me sleep with THAT over my face at night, feel free to let me know.

—Andrew

I waited for a response—watched my screen for several minutes, but then I realized it was Wednesday and she wouldn't see my email until later.

I made my way outside and slipped into my car. I didn't feel like going back to the firm—my case files were all up to date, and it was too early to go home.

Revvng up my engine, I coasted down the street in search of a decent bar. As I was turning past the law school, I noticed Duke's dance hall across the street.

I wasn't sure what came over me, but I made a right turn and pulled into the parking lot. I followed the signs that read "Dance Studio" and parked in front.

There was a sign on the double doors of the auditorium that read "Private Rehearsals: Dancers Only," but I ignored it. I followed the faint sound of piano keys and opened the door to a colossal theater.

Bright lights shone directly on the stage, and dancers dressed in all white were spinning. Before I could come to my senses and make myself leave, I spotted Aubrey in the front.

Wearing the same feathered headband she'd worn at the art gallery, she was smiling wider than I'd ever seen her smile before—dancing as if no one else was in the room. There was a gleam in her eyes that I never saw while she was at GBH, and although I didn't know shit about ballet, it was clear that she was the best dancer onstage.

"Extend, Miss Everhart! *Extend!*" A grey haired man walked onto the stage, yelling. "More! More!" She continued dancing—stretching her arms out further, extending her hands.

"No! No! NO!" The man stomped his foot. "Stop the music!"

The pianist immediately stopped and the director stepped in front of Aubrey.

"Do you know what the characteristics of the *white swan* are, Miss Everhart?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Yes?" He looked offended.

"Yes, Mr. Petrova." She stood still.

"If that's so, why don't you enlighten us all as to what those special characteristics are?"

"Light, airy, elegant—"

"Elegant!" He stomped his foot again. "The white swan is all about smooth, gentle movements... Her arms are well poised, graceful." He grabbed her elbow and pulled her forward. "Your arms are erratic, rough, and you're dancing like a pigeon on crack!"

Her cheeks reddened, but he continued.

"I want a swan, Miss Everhart, and if you're not up to the part—if your heart is elsewhere, like that other major you have, do me a favor and let me know so I can groom someone else for the role."

Silence.

"Let's try this again!" He stepped back. "On my count, start the song from the second stanza..."

I leaned back against the wall, watching Aubrey effortlessly dance again, as she made everyone else look like amateurs. I watched until I couldn't anymore, until her old director spotted my shadow and yelled at "the goddamn intruder" to leave.



Later that night, I walked into the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of bourbon—pouring myself a shot. It was two in the morning and I was beyond restless.

I hadn't been able to sleep since I came home and spotted a note from Ava on my door: "I'm not leaving until we talk—Ava."

I'd crumpled it and thrown it into the trash, wondering which person at GBH had been stupid enough to give out my address.

As I tossed back a shot, my phone rang.

"It's two in the morning," I hissed, holding it up to my ear.

"Um..." There was a slight pause. "May I speak to a...A Mr. Hamilton, please?"

"This is he. Did you not hear me say what time it is?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hamilton." She cleared her throat. "I'm Gloria Matter from the parole board in New York City. I'm sorry to call you so late, but I didn't want to turn in until I returned your inquiry from last week," she said. "The inmate you called about is no longer an inmate. She was released recently and is now on parole."

"I'm aware that she's on parole." I poured another drink. "However, I'm pretty sure leaving the state is a direct violation of those terms. Is New York soft on crime now? Do you let previous offenders roam the world as they please?"

"No sir, but she checked in with her officer this morning. We also checked her monitor the second we received your phone call so she's still in the state. I must warn you that we don't take too kindly to false reporting, Mr. Hamilton. If this was some type of—"

"I know what the fuck I saw." I seethed. "She was here." I hung up. I didn't care enough to think about Ava right now.

I headed into my bedroom and lay against the sheets, hoping this second round of alcohol would work better than the first.

I lay there for an hour, watching the seconds on my clock tick by, yet no sleep came and thoughts of Aubrey began to fill my mind. I was thinking about the things she'd told me when we we'd first met, things she'd told me about her sex life, and I had the sudden urge to hear her voice.

I rolled over and scrolled down to her name.

"Hello?" She answered on the first ring. "Andrew?"

"Why haven't you sucked a cock before?"

"What?" She gasped. "How about 'Good morning, Aubrey'? Are you awake?' How about asking those things first?"

"Hello, Aubrey." I rolled my eyes. "You're clearly awake, so I'll bypass that unnecessary question. Why haven't you sucked a cock before?"

She was silent.

"Do I need to drive to your apartment and make you answer the question in person?"

"Are you really in need of this information at three in the morning?"

"Desperately," I said. "Answer the question."

"It's just something I ever wanted to do." There were papers shuffling in the background. "One of the guys I used to date would ask me to do it to him from time to time—to reciprocate, but I just...I didn't like him enough to do it."

“Hmmm.”

Silence.

We hadn't had an actual phone conversation since the last time we had phone sex, right before I found out her real name was Aubrey and not Alyssa.

“Were you thinking about me?” she asked.

“What?”

“Were you thinking about me?” she repeated. “You've never called me this late before. Are you lonely?”

“I'm horny.”

She let out a soft laugh. “Would you like me to tell you what I'm wearing?”

“I already know what you're wearing.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really.” I put a hand behind my head. “It's Wednesday, which means you had practice until midnight, which means you went home and showered and immediately put your feet in an ice tub without putting on any pajamas.”

She sucked in a breath.

“And from the way you're breathing right now I take it you're still naked, and the reason you picked up my call on the first ring is because you want to touch yourself to the sound of my voice.”

Another gap of silence.

“Am I wrong?” I asked.

“No...” Her voice was low. “I don't think you're horny right now though.”

“Trust me. I am.”

“Maybe, but I think you called me because you like me—because you want to hear my voice since we haven't talked on the phone in a while.”

“I called you because my dick is hard and I want to make you cum over the phone.”

She laughed again. “So, you don't like me?”

“I like your pussy.”

“So, the white roses and the “He's just yelling at you because he knows you're the best. Don't let him get to you,” note that was on the hood of my car today wasn't from you?”

I hung up.

Retraction (n.):

The legal withdrawal of a promise or offer of contract.

Andrew

“How do you think we should proceed with the client, Harriet?” I leaned back in my chair the next night, dreading my “Let the Interns Help with One Case per Month” required hours.

“Um, Mr. Hamilton...” She twirled a strand of hair around her finger. “My name is Hannah.”

“Same thing,” I said. “How do you think we should proceed with this case?”

“We could put his ex-wife on the stand. She could vouch for his character.”

“They were married for thirty days.” I rolled my eyes and looked at the intern sitting next to her. “And that was ten years ago. Bob, what do you have?”

“It’s...It’s actually Bryan.”

“It’s whatever I say it is. What. Do. You. Have?”

“I was doing some research on his background and he apparently was reprimanded for breaking his university’s firewall his senior year. We could start there and build a case around his past of anarchy...”

I sighed. “He’s our client, Bryan. Why would we intentionally make him look bad?”

He blinked.

I turned toward the last intern in the room, a petite brunette. “What do you suggest?”

“You’re not going to try and guess my name?” She smiled.

“I just realized that you weren’t my janitor today. What do you have?”

“This.” She slid a folder across the table. “If we’re trying to prove that he wasn’t in breach of his company’s policies when he took out his initial shares, we could use this case as a reference.”

I opened the folder, reading the first line of a case that was not only over a hundred years old, but it had been overturned by the Supreme Court decades ago.

“Did you all smoke the same drugs before your interviews?” I shook my head. “You’re in *law school*. A few years away from potentially having someone’s future in your hands and this is the type of shit you come up with?”

“With all due respect, Mr. Hamilton...” Bryan spoke up. “Is there even a right answer to this question? I mean...Is this one of those ‘Ha-ha this was just a test to see how our minds work’ things? Is there really an answer?”

“Yes.” I stood up.

“Really? What is it?”

“It’s go the fuck home.” I started stacking my papers. “All of you. Right now.”

“But—”

“Now.” I glared at them, waiting until they all left the room.

The second I was alone I let out a sigh and sat down again. I was better off letting Jessica help me on this case. She didn’t know shit about the law but I was sure that she would at least try.

“Mr. Hamilton, I—” Aubrey stepped into the room with a cup of coffee. “Where did everyone go?”

“Home.” I took the cup from her, frustrated. “You’re free to go, too.”

“Are you ever going to formally give me my intern position back or am I forever stuck being your coffee and file organizer?”

“You’re also in charge of taking phone calls. That’s a responsibility you shouldn’t take lightly.”

“I’m serious...” She rolled her eyes. “As much as I enjoy having sex with you every morning with your coffee, I would like to go back to feeling like I actually have a purpose here.”

“Fine.” I took a sip from my cup. “Have you been keeping up with my current case?”

She nodded.

“Great,” I said dryly. “How do you think I should proceed?”

“I think you need to first find the man who erased your client’s identity.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

She took a folder from her purse and set it in front of me. “My parents taught me how to research someone’s background very, very well. That’s the one thing I can credit them for.” She flipped a few pages. “Your client has school records from his childhood—test scores, address changes, et cetera. There’s a record of where he attended college, grad school—even a record of the time he broke into his school’s firewall and got suspended for an entire semester. After that, there’s a short failed marriage to some woman he met in Cabo, and a few founding records for his company. But after that—with the exception of these recent allegations, there’s nothing.”

I glanced at the pages.

“Don’t you think that’s odd?” She looked at me. “How you can google someone and nothing about them pops up? How you can search several databases for information and find entire decades are missing?”

I shut the folder. “It’s slightly odd.”

“Slightly?”

“Yes. Slightly. Is this all the evidence you have?”

“It’s all the evidence you need.” She stared into my eyes. “Find the guy who erased him, or find the guy who erased *you* and you might have yourself another win under your belt. If not—”

“Aubrey...”

“People don’t just come out of nowhere, Andrew,” she said. “You know that, I know that, and I’m pretty sure your client knows that.”

“Now we’re talking about *the client*?”

“There is no record of Andrew Hamilton in any of the state’s registered lawyer databases.”

“I’m not facing a trial.”

“I called every law school in the state and pretended to be an alumna searching for a fellow alum and there was no record of an Andrew Hamilton getting his degree from any of them.”

“Are you that obsessed with me?” He smirked.

“I did the same thing for the law schools in New York. That was a bit trickier, but the results were just the same. There was no record of you going to school during the years you would’ve been in attendance.”

“And this affects you *how*?”

“You humiliated me when you found out I lied to you.”

“I apologize.”

“Don’t.” She shook her head. “You made me cry because you told me that I was a liar for hiding the truth and pretending to be someone I wasn’t.”

“I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t be the only person to classify you as *a liar* after what you did.”

“Yet, every day that I see you, every night that I talk to you on the phone, I’m no closer to getting to know anything about you.” There was concern in her eyes. “It’s always me talking about me, or you talking about abstract things that make up a blurry picture.”

“It doesn’t matter. I told you that I—”

“That you’ve never lied to me,” she said. “I believe that, and for a moment I thought that you were always completely honest with me, but when I look back, you’re only honest about what *you* want to talk about. Hence, the random appearance of *Mrs. Hamilton*, and—”

“I’ve told you about that already.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her close to me. “So, I’m not going to waste my time rehashing shit I’ve already gone over with you.”

“Just...”

“Look.” I pressed my finger against her lips. “You’re the only woman I’ve fucked regularly in six years.”

“Am I supposed to be proud of that?”

I pulled her into my lap. “You’re the only woman—only person actually, that I talk to outside of my hours at this office, the only woman I’ve ever fucked over the phone, the only woman who’s been in my car, and the only woman who’s lied to me and still gotten me to stay...”

She sighed, staring back at me.

“Now,” I said, “if you don’t mind, I’m going to fuck you in this chair. And when we’re done, I’ll kindly show you how to research someone the right way, because contrary to what you think, my client does have a background.”

“No, I double checked everything and I—”

I pressed my lips against hers. “*After* I fuck you.”

Consent (n.):

A voluntary agreement to another's proposition.

Aubrey

Subject: New York /Your Panties

For the record, I did go to law school in NYC. I was the valedictorian of my class.

—Andrew

PS—If you stash one more pair of your wet panties/“For your fetish” notes in my desk drawer, I’m going to assume that you *do* want me to sleep with your pussy over my face. My tongue has been aching to do that since I first “met” you so there’s no need for unnecessary hints...

“Aubrey?” My mother’s voice took the smile right off of my face. “Aubrey, were you listening to your father just now?”

“No, I’m sorry.” I sighed, dreading that I was still sitting at a dinner with them.

They’d called me the second my rehearsal was over and demanded that I drive home so we could all ride to our “favorite” restaurant together. It was where all their country club friends ate regularly, and I knew they just wanted to come here to assert our seemingly perfect family image.

“Are you listening now?” My father raised his eyebrow.

“Yes...”

“We brought you here so we could tell you that I’m running for governor in the next election,” he said.

“Do you want my vote?”

“Ugh, Aubrey.” My mother huffed and snapped her fingers for the waiter. “This is one of the happiest moments of your life.”

“No...” I shook my head. “I’m pretty sure it *isn’t*.”

“All those years of hard work, building our firm to be one of the most impeccable in the city,” she said as she looked into my father’s eyes, “it’s about to payoff in a huge way. We already have a few verbal commitments for the campaign’s budget, and since we’re going in on the same side as the incumbent—”

“You have a really good chance of being governor.” I cut her off. “Congratulations, Dad.”

He reached over the table and squeezed my hand.

My mother couldn’t seem to shut up. “We’ll have to take new family photos—stocks, you know? Photos we can give to the press for their write-ups, so you’ll have to wear your hair in something other than that ballerina thing.”

“It’s a *bun*.”

“It’s an eyesore.”

“*Margaret...*” My father chided. “It’s not an eyesore. It’s just—”

“It’s just *what*?” I looked back and forth between them.

“It’s important for us to look like a cohesive All-American unit on the campaign trail.” My mother took a glass of wine from the waiter and waited for him to step away. “We may have to make some stops

together as a family.”

“You’re running for *governor*, not President, and what twenty-something do you know travels with her parents during a campaign just for photo-ops?”

“Our opponent has twenty year old twins who are homeschooled,” she said. “They travel to third world countries every summer to help the poor and I’m pretty sure they’re going to be at every stop on the campaign trail.”

I snorted. “Why are you trying to compete with genuine people? Don’t you think they’re the type that deserve to win?”

“Aubrey, this is serious.” My dad looked upset. “This has been a dream of mine for a very long time and we want to make sure that nothing stands in the way.”

The two of them exchanged glances and I raised my eyebrow.

“Nothing like *what*?” I asked.

“Okay…” My mother lowered her voice and looked over her shoulder before speaking. “We need to know if there are any skeletons in your closet—any pictures on social media that make you look like a party girl, any ex-boyfriends or sexual partners that you may have dealt with, or *anything* that would make us look like bad parents.”

“You *are* bad parents.”

“Stop it, Aubrey.” My father gripped my hand and squeezed it hard. “The two of us have given you everything you could’ve ever wanted growing up and all we’re asking for is a small sacrifice from you.”

“I don’t have any skeletons in my closet.” I gritted my teeth.

“Good.” My mother put on her fake smile. “Then, when you pull out of school for your senior year to help us on the trail, it won’t look suspicious. We’ve already spoken to your department chair about online classes and they are, in fact offered. For the ones that aren’t, you’ll have to show up to campus to take those, but they make special considerations for students with circumstances such as yours so—”

“No.” I cut her off. “No, thank you.”

“This isn’t up for discussion, Aubrey. This is for the benefit of—”

“Dad’s *dream*, right?” I tried not to lose it. “Because he’s the only person in this family who has a dream?”

“Yes,” my mother said through smiling teeth. “We’re talking about *real* dreams, Aubrey. Not ‘no-chance-in-hell’ and failed ones.”

“Excuse me?!” I stood up. “You want to talk about *failed dreams* when the two of you have failed more than anyone I know at the expense of your own daughter?” There were tears in my eyes.

“Aubrey, sit back down.” She grabbed my hand. “Let’s not make a scene.”

“*Let’s!*” I snatched my hand away. “Let’s discuss how I’m twenty fucking two and I’m *a junior* in college when I should already be a graduate! Shall we? Can you explain why that is?”

My father’s face reddened and he motioned for me to sit down, but I stood my ground.

My mother clutched her pearls. “Aubrey..We did what was best at the time, and even though switching school systems twice in two years was unfortunate, it made you who you are today. Now, the campaign won’t start until—”

“I don’t care when the hell it starts. I’m not going on a pointless campaign trail, and I’m not taking any of my classes online because guess what?” I could feel my blood boiling. “You can’t learn fucking ballet *online!*”

The restaurant was now silent.

“You two are beyond selfish and you don’t even know it.” I shook my head. “I’m voting for the other guy.” I stormed off amidst gasps and whispers from the other tables—slightly content that my parents’ picture perfect image had been publicly scratched a bit.

“Your number, Miss?” The valet said to me as I stepped outside.

“My what?”

“Your number?” He tilted his head to the side. “For your car?”

Shit... I sighed and looked over my shoulder.

Patrons were pointing in my direction and I couldn't bear to go back inside just because I didn't have a ride home.

I considered calling a cab, but I knew that was pointless. It would take forever to get here, and I could probably walk to my apartment faster than they would arrive.

There was a bus stop a mile or so down, but I only had a credit card. I doubted Andrew would come get me, but I decided to give it a try.

Subject: A Ride.

I really need a favor...

—Aubrey

Subject: Re: A Ride

Wanting to take a ride on my cock in the middle of the day shouldn't be considered a “favor” at this point.

—Andrew

Subject: Re: Re: A Ride

I'm not talking about your dick. I'm talking about your car...Would you be able to pick me up right now? I was at a dinner with my parents but it didn't end well...and I don't have my car.

If you can't, I'll understand.

—Aubrey

Subject: Re: Re: Re: A Ride

Where are you?

—Andrew

Half an hour later, he pulled into the country club's driveway.

I slipped into his car before he could even park—not looking back at the snooty members who were probably whispering and wondering about what had happened between me and my parents.

“I'm taking you home, right?” he asked as he pulled off.

“No...”

He looked over at me. “Am I taking you to GBH?”

“If you want. Just not to my apartment.” I paused. “I'm sure my parents will stop by there after dinner and try to talk to me so...”

“Have you eaten?”

“Lost my appetite...” I said softly, then I smiled. “But if you're interested in taking me on a date right now, I'm not opposed to that.”

“Why would I take you on a *date*?”

“Because you owe me one.”

“Since when?”

“You once said that you would take me out if we ever met in person, and you haven't done it yet.”

We approached a stoplight and he turned to face me.

“If I was even vaguely interested in taking you out right now—which *I’m not*, where the hell would I take you if you’ve already eaten dinner?”

“Surprise me.” I shrugged and leaned against the glass—shutting my eyes. I could picture him staring at me, giving me that “You’re out of your damn mind” look, and as he steered the car back onto the street, I smiled—hoping that this would be the start of us going out regularly.

I was dreaming of him kissing me in the gallery room again when I felt him gently shaking my shoulder.

“Aubrey...” he whispered. “Aubrey, wake up.”

I lifted my head and looked outside my window. There were lush plants and a massive glass paned building—an executive condo. My heart skipped a beat because I knew he’d never taken a woman to his place before, and I was happy that I would be the first.

I looked over at him, ready to say something, but then I saw him fiddling with a green parking pass and I looked out the front window—seeing where we really were.

Outside of a Hilton hotel.

“Your idea of taking me on a date is bringing me to *a hotel*?”

“It’s more about fucking you in the hotel.”

“Andrew, this is where you take all your other dates...”

“And?”

My heart sank. “Do you not see why bringing me here would hurt my feelings?”

“Would you prefer the *Marriott*?”

I blinked.

“They don’t have the same standard of room service,” he said, “but if that’s what you prefer—”

“Just take me home—*right now*.” My voice cracked and I leaned against the window, shutting my eyes again. “I’ll deal with my parents...”



I woke up on a plush leather couch, tucked underneath a soft black blanket.

Sitting up, I saw that my shoes had been taken off and placed in a rack on the other side of the room. A tray of fresh fruit and chocolates were sitting on the small table in front of me, and there was a bottle of wine sitting next to two stemmed glasses.

The room looked as if it’d been plucked from a magazine: silk white draperies, taupe walls, and portraits framed in silver. One of those portraits was of a fucking hotel, making it clear exactly where I was.

I immediately tossed the blanket off—ready to find Andrew and yell at him for bringing me here against my wishes. I walked down the hallway, slowly noticing that the pictures hanging on the wall were of him.

In one picture, he was standing on a beach, looking off into the distance. In another he was standing in front of a NYC cab, and in another he was lying against a city park bench.

He was young in all of these photos—his eyes held a more boyish charm, and if I wasn’t mistaken, he looked happy. Extremely happy.

In between all of the larger photos, were small wooden blocks in the shape of an entwined “E” and “H.” At first I thought that the “A” for Andrew’s first name was simply missing, that one of the pieces would bear it, but that wasn’t the case: In the last frame at the end of the hall there was a photo of a huge “E” and “H” that were solely compiled of pictures of New York.

“E” and “H”?

I continued walking down the hallway, smiling at the more “esteemed” photos he’d hung of himself. I stopped when I heard the sound of running water and followed it into a massive bedroom.

Everything was cloaked in black—the sheets that covered the king sized bed, the long silk curtains that hung over the balcony’s French doors, and the plush rug that sat atop his polished wooden floors.

I walked over to his armoire and pulled out the first drawer.

“What are you doing?” Andrew was standing right behind me.

“I was...” I stalled as he wrapped an arm around my waist. “I was looking through your stuff.”

“Looking for anything *particular*?” He kissed the shell of my ear from behind.

“I’m looking for where you keep all my panties.”

He let out a low laugh. “They’re all next to my bed.” He slid his hand underneath my skirt and stalled once his fingers reached my bare pussy. “Since you’re not wearing any, do I need to give them back to you?”

I rolled my eyes and he let me go.

“Is this better than a hotel room?” he asked.

“Depends.” I turned around. “How many other women have you had here?”

“None.”

“None?” I couldn’t believe that. “In *six years*?”

“I like to keep my fucking life separate from my home life.” He clasped my hand.

“So, I’m the exception to the rule?”

He didn’t answer. He simply led me across the bedroom and into an all-white en-suite where the water from the shower was still running.

“I’ve been waiting for you to wake up...” He looked down at me.

“Because you want to watch movies together?”

“Because I want to fuck you in the shower.” He pushed my back against the wall and looked into my eyes. “Because I want to fuck you all night.”

I moaned as he wedged his knee between my thighs and pulled my shirt over my head. He slipped his hand behind my back to unclasp my bra, and as it fell to the floor he trailed his tongue across my nipples.

“Take off your skirt...” He backed away from me.

My hands went to my zipper, but my eyes stayed glued on him as he started to undress himself.

I’d fucked him numerous times in his office, recklessly rode his cock time and time again, but I’d never seen him completely naked.

He pulled his white V-neck shirt over his head and tossed it into the corner—exposing a set of chiseled abs and a small cursive tattoo that was etched onto his chest.

I tried to read what the words said, but then he unfastened the drawstring of his black lounge pants and let them fall to the floor.

I could see that his cock was hard through his briefs, and I waited for him to take them off, but he walked back over to me.

Grabbing my hand, he placed it against his waistline. “Take them off of me.”

I slipped my thumb underneath the elastic, but he stopped me.

“With *your mouth*.”

My eyes widened as I looked up at him, seeing the sexy smirk on his face.

I bent down slightly and trailed kisses across his waist—hearing him take in a sharp breath as his hands slipped into my hair.

I gripped his thighs for balance and tugged at the hem of his briefs with my teeth. Pulling the fabric down a few inches, I used my fingers to move them further, but he pulled me back by my hair.

“Only your mouth.” He warned.

I gave him a look of understanding and he let me go. I once again grabbed the briefs with my teeth and slowly slid them down his legs.

I looked up and saw that his cock was standing at attention, rock hard and ready for my pussy like always, and from the look in his eyes, I knew he was going to pull me up and fuck me against the wall.

Before he could get the chance, I sat up on my knees and gripped his cock with my hand. I pressed my lips against it—trailing my tongue across every thick inch. I wrapped my mouth around his tip and slowly massaged it with my tongue.

“Aubrey...” He threaded his fingers through my hair and looked down at me. “What are you doing?”

“I’m...” I felt my cheeks heating. “I’m sucking your cock.”

He blinked, letting a slow smile spread across his face. “You’re not sucking my cock...You’re *kissing* it.”

“I was getting to that part. I was trying to do it like...” I shook my head and stood up, completely embarrassed. “Never mind.”

“You were trying to do it like *what?*” he whispered against my lips.

I shook my head again and he looked into my eyes. “You don’t need to watch anybody else to learn. *I’ll* teach you...”

Still smiling, he grabbed my hand and pulled me into the shower. He pressed his chest against mine and slipped a finger into my mouth as the water ran over us. “Is this as wide as you can open for me?”

I blinked, nodding.

“You’re going to have to open a lot wider than that if my cock is going to fit into your mouth...” He sat down on the small wet bench behind him and motioned for me to bend low.

The water streams from above lashed against my back as I got down on my knees.

“Lick your lips,” he commanded, and I obliged—feeling completely out of my zone.

I leaned forward, assuming that I was supposed to take him into my mouth now, but he stopped me.

“Make it wet.”

“What?”

“Put your mouth on my cock and *wet it.*”

Hesitant, I pressed my lips against his dick and slid my tongue across his shaft. I was swirling it against him slowly, but then he pulled my head up.

“You’re being too gentle,” he said. “I don’t need you to be a fucking lady right now...”

“I—”

“I need you to be aggressive, greedy, and *sloppy* because I’m not going to be gentle when I’m devouring you.” He gently pushed my head down and spread his legs a little further. “Massage my balls with your hand...”

I immediately cupped them, rubbing them against each other.

“A little harder...” His breathing slowed and I picked up the pace of my fingers.

“Now,” he whispered. “Open your mouth as wide as it can go, and take my cock as deep as you can...”

I opened my mouth and took in the first few inches easily as he threaded a few fingers through my hair.

“*Keep your eyes on me.*” He looked somewhat impressed. “You don’t have to take all of it right now...” He used my shoulders to push me back and then forward. “Keep easing it in and out of your mouth just like this...”

Groaning, he stared at me with pure lust in his eyes, and then he whispered. “Suck me deeper...”

I followed his command and he groaned even louder. I could see the muscles in his legs tensing as my mouth covered over half of his cock. I was starting to feel a little bolder, slightly more confident, so I took in a little bit more of him.

“*Fuck...*” He breathed.

I used my free hand to cover the part of his cock that wasn't in my mouth, and massaged it the same way I was massaging his balls—soft but aggressive.

He started to tug at my hair, begging me to take more of him into my mouth. “Take all of it..”

Feeling as if I was now in control, I denied his request, and sped up my rhythm—bobbing my head up and down.

“Aubrey...” His words were strained.

I took him a little deeper—wrapping my lips around him a little tighter, but I didn't go all the way.

“Aubrey...” he said again, sounding desperate.

I wasn't paying his words any attention. I was loving the way his cock felt inside my mouth, loving the way my tongue was commanding him and making him react.

“Stop.” He yanked me back by my hair and glared at me. “Take all of my cock into your fucking mouth right now.”

I slid my mouth over him and leaned forward all the way—not stopping until it touched the back of my throat.

Andrew briefly shut his eyes and sighed. Then he opened them again and spoke firmly. “I need you to let me cum in your mouth...” His voice was raspy. “And I need you to swallow every fucking drop...”

I gripped his knees and sucked him faster and faster, and his cock began to throb in my mouth. I could feel it pulsating, constricting, and as he leaned back and finally let go I felt spurts of warmth slipping down my throat.

His cum was salty and thick, and I honestly loved the taste of it. As the last drop landed into my mouth, I looked into his eyes and he looked back at me. The expression on his face was one of pure satisfaction and awe, and I was more turned on than I'd ever been in my life.

He stood—pulling me with him, and pressed his lips against mine. “That was fucking perfect.” He turned off the water and led me out of the shower and back into his bedroom—not bothering to dry me off.

He grabbed me by my waist and tossed me onto the bed. “Spread your legs.”

I let my legs fall apart and he climbed on top of me. Crashing his lips against mine, he sucked my bottom lip into his mouth.

I could feel the tip of his cock rubbing against my pussy and I lifted my hips—encouraging him to fuck me.

After being with him in the shower, I didn't want to do much foreplay and I didn't want to talk.

I just wanted to be fucked. Now.

His hands caressed my breasts and I pushed them away. “Fuck me, Andrew.”

“I am.”

“Now.”

He smiled at me, looking as if he wanted to say something smart, but he leaned over and reached into his nightstand for a condom.

He quickly slipped it on and entered me in one full stroke, causing me to moan in pleasure.

“Ahhhh...” I reached up and grabbed his hair as his cock pounded into me relentlessly. I was sure I'd never get tired of him fucking me, each time was better than the last.

I shut my eyes as he buried his head in my neck, as he whispered how “fucking good” I felt. Small tremors started building inside of me, and as much as I wanted this to last a little longer, I wouldn't be able to hold on.

“Andrewww...” I said his name as my hips started to jerk and my orgasm took over me. I screamed, falling back onto the pillows, and he collapsed on top of me seconds later.

We both lay there, entwined in each other for a long time—not saying a word. When I finally found the energy to speak, I cleared my throat. “Are you going to sleep inside of me all night?”

“Of course not.” He pulled out of me, immediately making me miss the feel of him. He walked over to his closet, tossing the condom away.

“What are you doing?” I sat up.

“Getting dressed.”

“For what?”

“So I can take you home.” He slipped into a pair of pants. “And so I can go to sleep.” He put on a shirt, and then he looked over at me. “How long do you think it’ll take you to get ready?”

“I don’t need you to take me home.” I shook my head. “I want to stay here.”

“Here?” he looked utterly confused.

“Yes, *here*.”

“As in *overnight*?”

I nodded, and he stood there staring at me as if I’d just asked him to do the unthinkable. The look he was giving me was one of anguish, regret, and for a second I almost felt bad about suggesting it.

“Aubrey, I don’t…” He sighed. “I’ve never let someone spend the night.”

“Then let me be your first…”

He continued staring at me, tapping his chin, and then he walked over to his closet and grabbed a set of white pajamas.

“You can sleep in these…” He held them out for me.

I reached out to take them but he shook his head.

“Stand up.”

I slid off the bed and stood in front of him.

He took his time helping me into the button up shirt—kissing every inch of my exposed skin until he reached the top button, and when he was finished he kissed my lips.

I expected him to hold out the pants next, but he tossed them across the room. “Get in the bed.”

Smiling, I slipped underneath the sheets as he hit the lights.

He joined me in bed seconds later, pulling me against his chest.

“Are you happy?” he whispered.

“Yes…”

“Are you sure? Is there anything else outside of my comfort zone that you’d like me to do for you tonight?”

“Not tonight, but you could make me breakfast in the morning.”

“You’re pushing it…”

“Just in case you change your mind, I would like Belgian waffles, bacon, sliced strawberries, and orange juice.”

“Unless you want to eat all of those things off of my cock, it’s not happening.” He pinched my ass. “Go to sleep, Aubrey.”



In the morning, I opened my eyes and realized I was alone in Andrew’s bed. I looked over at where he’d been sleeping and spotted a note on GBH stationery:

Had to run to the office to meet a new client. I’ll be back to take you home.

PS—Feel free to take your panty collection home with you.

—Andrew

I slipped out of bed, ready to explore more of his condo, but there was a sudden loud knock at the door. I rushed over and twisted the knob, expecting to see Andrew, but it was a man dressed in all black.

“Um hello?” I tried not to look too confused.

“Are you Aubrey Everhart?”

“Yes...”

“Great.” He handed me a white bag. “Gourmet waffles, bacon, sliced strawberries, and orange juice, right?”

Denial (n.):

A statement in the defendant's answer to a complaint in a lawsuit that an allegation (claim of fact) is not true.

A few days later...

Andrew

I was officially out of my damn mind.

I was in my bathtub, and Aubrey was sitting on top of me—panting as she came down from another orgasm.

She was spending the night at my condo for the third time this week, and it was pointless to even pretend like I minded.

I wasn't sure what the hell was happening, but she'd definitely gotten to me. She was infiltrating my every thought, and no matter what I did to try and come back to my senses—to remind myself that this could only be temporary, she slipped deeper into my life.

“Why are you so quiet tonight?” she asked.

“I'm not allowed to think?”

“Not when a naked woman is in your lap.”

“I was giving her a chance to relax.” I slid my hands underneath her thighs. “What unnecessary bullshit do you want to talk about today?”

“It's not *unnecessary*,” she said. “It's about your family.”

“What about my family?”

“Are they still in New York?”

I prevented myself from clenching my jaw. “I don't know.”

“You *don't know*?” She raised her eyebrow. “What do you mean you don't know? Are you estranged from them?”

“No...” I sighed. “I just don't have any parents.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Then why do I remember you telling me a story about your mom the first month that we met?”

“What *story*?”

“The story about Central Park and ice cream.” She looked into my eyes, as if she were expecting me to say something. “You said she took you to some children's fair, I think? It was something that happened every Saturday. But the one you remembered most happened when it was raining and she still took you, and you stood in line for an hour just to get a scoop of vanilla.”

I blinked.

“Is that story not right? Am I mixing it up with something else?”

“No,” I said. “That's right...But I haven't seen her since.”

“Oh...” She looked down. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't be.” I trailed a finger across her lips. “I turned out just fine.”

“Can I ask you a few more things?”

“You have a daily question quota starting today.”

She rolled her eyes. “What do all the “E” and “H” pictures in your hallway stand for?”

I felt a sudden ache in my chest. “*Nothing.*”

“If you hate New York so much and you don’t like talking about your past or *what you lost* six years ago, why do you have so many mementos hanging on your walls?”

“Aubrey...”

“Okay, forget that question. And the Latin quote across your heart? What does it mean?”

“Lie about one thing, lie about it all.” I kissed her lips before she could ask me anything else. I was starting to wonder why she hadn’t wanted to be a damn journalist instead of a ballerina.

“It’s your turn,” she said softly. “You can ask *me* questions now.”

“I’d rather fuck you again.” I lifted her with me as I stood up and helped her out of the bath tub.

We both dried off and went into my bedroom. Just as I was pulling her against me, my doorbell rang.

I sighed. “Dinner’s early.” I slipped into a pair of lounge pants and a T-shirt and headed to the door with my credit card.

The second I opened it, I was confronted with the sight of the last person on earth I wanted to see. *Ava.*

“Don’t you dare fucking slam it on me this time,” she hissed. “We need to talk.”

“We don’t need to talk about shit.” I stepped outside and shut the door behind me. “How many times do I have to tell you that you’re not wanted here?”

“As many times as it’ll take you to actually believe it, which you don’t.” She scoffed. “Ask me why I came to Durham to see you, *Mr. Hamilton*. Appease me and I’ll finally go the hell away.”

“You’re going the hell away regardless,” I said flatly. “I really don’t give a fuck why you came here.”

“Not even if it’s to sign the divorce papers?”

“You could’ve sent that shit in the mail.” I gritted my teeth. “And since I’m sure you’re running out of loopholes for contesting it, I’m willing to wait until all your options run out. I’m sure your lawyers will drop you as soon as they find out what *type* of client you are.”

“All I’m asking for is ten thousand a month.”

“Go ask the man who was fucking you in our bedroom while I was at work.” I glared at her, livid. “Or better yet, ask the judge you only “fucked for a favor,” or hey, if you’re up to it, fuck my former best friend. Sleeping with him always seemed to make you feel better, right?”

“You weren’t *Mr. Perfect* either.”

“I never fucking *cheated* on you, and I never *lied* to you.”

Silence.

“Five thousand a month,” she said.

“Go fuck yourself, *Ava.*”

“You know I *never* give up,” she said, her eyes widened as I stepped back inside my apartment. “I *always* get what I want.”

“*So do I.*” I slammed the door in her face, feeling my heart palpitating, feeling the onset of ugly memories all over again.

Rain. New York. Heartbreak.

Complete and utter heartbreak.

Seeing *Ava* in person again—hearing her manipulative voice and feeling those familiar pangs in my chest, immediately made me realize that I couldn’t make the same mistake again.

Aubrey was already asking questions, trying to dig her way into my life as much as she could—thinking that if she stayed around long enough that we would work out together. But I knew that would never happen, not after seeing *Ava* and knowing just how far she would go to ruin me all over again.

I was officially done with this monogamous game we'd been playing for the past couple weeks. It was quite fun—*different*, but since Aubrey could never be mine and I could never be hers, it was quite fucking pointless, too.

I headed back into my bedroom and saw Aubrey smiling as she settled into the bed.

"Where's the dinner?" she asked tilting her head to the side. "Did you leave it at the door?"

"No." I shook my head and started packing up her things, stuffing them all into her purse.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"You can't stay the night."

"Okay..." She stood up. "Did something just happen? Do you want to talk about—"

"I don't want to talk about anything else with you." I hissed. "I just want to take you the hell home."

"What?" She looked confused. "What's wrong with you? Why are you—"

"Make sure you get all of your shit out of my bathroom. You won't be coming back here again."

"Why not?"

"Because I need to start fucking someone else." I picked up her headband. "I think I've spent more than enough time with you, don't you think?"

"Andrew..." Her face fell. "Where is all of this coming from?"

"The same place it was always coming from. You lied to me once, you'll lie again."

"I thought we were over that."

"Maybe *you* were, but I wasn't."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you need to get all of your things so I can take you home, and from here on out, you are my intern and I am your boss. You will forever be Miss Everhart to me, and to you I'll be Mr. Hamilton."

"Andrew..."

"Mr. Fucking. Hamilton."

She rushed over to me and snatched her things, letting a few tears escape her eyes. "Fuck you. FUCK. YOU. This is the last time you'll ever pull this hot and cold shit on me." She stormed out of my apartment, slamming the door behind her.

I sighed and felt an immediate pang of guilt in my chest, but I knew it was the right thing to do. It was either cut this bullshit off now, or be responsible for breaking her heart later.

I stepped onto the balcony and lit a cigar—looking up at the moonless sky. Even though I felt bad for ending things so abruptly, for putting her out with no explanation, I needed to get back to who the hell I was and fast before I fucked up and put my heart on the line again...

Closing Argument (n.):

The final argument by an attorney on behalf of his/her client after all evidence has been produced for both sides.

Six years ago

New York

Andrew (Well... Back then, you would've called me

"Liam A. Henderson")

There's something about this city that makes me believe again. It's the hopefulness in the air, the flashing lights that shine brighter than anywhere else, and the dreamers who fill the streets day after day—unwilling to give up on their failures until they finally win. There's no other city like it, and there's nothing more alluring outside these state lines—nothing that will ever make me leave.

As the sun sets in the distance, I wrap my arm around my wife's waist. We're standing against the railing of the Brooklyn Bridge—smiling because I just added another high profile client to my firm.

"You think one day the papers will actually tell the truth about your first case?" She looked up at me with her light green eyes. "Or do you think they'll keep brushing it under the rug?"

"Brushing it under the rug." I sigh. "I highly doubt the government wants people knowing that a kid straight out of law school uncovered a conspiracy. It's an insult to their organization."

"So, you're fine being reduced to a random Jeopardy question that'll happen ten years from now? 'I'll take lawyers who never got credit for two hundred, Alex.' You're fine with that?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" I kiss her forehead. "I didn't need the papers to print my name to get clients. People knew, that's how they found me."

"You should be so much bigger than what you are..." She shakes her head, whispering, "Your name should be plastered across every billboard in the city. Fucking assholes..."

Smiling, I tighten my grip around her waist and start the walk back to our car. Out of all the people that have come in and out of my life, Ava Sanchez has been the one constant.

She's the only woman I've ever loved, and ever since the day I made her mine at our wedding three years ago, I swore that would never change.

"I was also thinking," she says as she slips into the passenger seat, "that maybe me, you, and your partner Kevin could go out to a singles' mixer next weekend."

"Why would we go to a singles mixer?"

"It's more so for Kevin...He needs to get his own life. I'm tired of him hanging around us all the time. It's bad enough that we all work at your firm together, but do we *have* to spend our every waking moment together, too?"

Laughing, I drive down the city streets and home to the colossal brownstone we share. (It was the first purchase I'd made after winning the "case that never was," and Ava had insisted that I buy the most expensive one.)

"Because you fucking deserve it," she'd said. "And you never treat yourself to anything nice...That's what I don't understand about you, Liam. You're such a nice guy to everyone but yourself..."

I park our car in front of our home and immediately step out to open her door. As usual, Ava whispers, “I bet she’ll scream for you first,” as I walk her up the steps.

The second we walk inside, that familiar sweet voice rings out across the room.

“Daddyyyyy!”

I let go of Ava’s hand and stoop low so my daughter—*Emma Henderson*, can run into my arms. She’s the best part of my day, the best part of my life, and seeing her always brings an unbreakable smile to my face.

I kiss her forehead as she incoherently babbles about her day with the babysitter, and I smile as her blue eyes stare into mine.

I’m unaware of it now—I’m too blind and happy to see it, but in the months to come, my life will unravel so rapidly and unexpectedly that I’ll wish I never existed. The lies that come to the light will be so devastating and crushing that my entire life will crumble around me. But the worst part, the part that will break me, is not knowing that this present moment with my ‘daughter’ will be the last good memory of New York I’ll ever have...

REASONABLE DOUBT
(VOLUME THREE)

reasonable
doubt
VOLUME
THREE
WHITNEY G.

Prologue

Several months ago...

Andrew

It was all there in black and white, front and center, no filler.

Although the facts were skewed and *The New York Times* had once again neglected to post my photo, the damage to my firm—Henderson & Hart, was now done. And I knew exactly what was about to occur, step by step.

I'd seen it happen in this city too many times before.

First, the top clients who'd sworn to always stay by my side would call and say that they "suddenly" found new representation. Then the employees would file letters of resignation—knowing that having a tainted firm on their resumes would hinder their careers. Next, the investors would call—pretending to sympathize as they publicly denounced me in the media and promptly pulled all funding.

Last, and most unfortunately, I was sure to become another hotshot lawyer who ruined his career before it could even begin.

"How much longer do you think you'll be able to get away with stalking Emma?" The private investigator I hired stepped beside me.

"She's my fucking daughter. I'm not stalking her."

"Five hundred feet." He lit a cigarette. "That's how far you're supposed to be."

"Are they treating her right during the week?"

He sighed and handed me a stack of photos. "Private preschool, early tap-dance lessons, and weekends at the park as you can clearly see. She's fine."

"Does she still cry at night?"

"Sometimes."

"Does she still beg to see me? Does she—"

I stopped talking once Emma's blue eyes met mine from the swings. Squealing, she jumped off her seat and ran towards me.

"Daddyyyy! Dadddyyy!" She shouted, but she was picked up before she made it any closer. She was taken away and put inside a car just as she started to cry.

Fuck..

I immediately sat up in bed, realizing that I wasn't in New York City's Central Park. I was in Durham, North Carolina, and I was having another nightmare.

Glancing at the clock on my wall, I saw that it was just past one o'clock. The calendar hanging directly above it only confirmed that I'd been living here for far too long.

All the research I'd done six years ago—weighing the pros and cons, checking the records of all the top firms, and scouring the make-up of women on Date-Match, was now seemingly invalid: The condo I purchased was a mere remnant of what had been advertised, there was only one firm worthy of my time, and the pool of fuck-worthy women was dwindling by the day.

Just hours ago, I'd gone on a date with a woman who told me she was a kindergarten teacher with a penchant for the color red and history books. In reality, she was twice my age, color blind, and she just

wanted to “remember what some good cock felt like.”

Frustrated, I slipped out of bed and walked down the hallway—straightening the “E” and “H” frames that hung on the wall while trying not to look too hard.

I was going to need more than my usual few shots to get through tonight, and I was starting to become extremely annoyed that I hadn’t fucked someone in what felt like forever.

I poured two shots of bourbon and tossed them down back to back. Before I could pour another, my phone vibrated. An email.

Alyssa.

Subject: Performance Quality.

Dear Thoreau,

I’m sure that right now you’re in the middle of fucking yet another conquest, and are seconds away from giving her your infamous “One dinner. One night. No repeats.” line, but I was just thinking about something and HAD to email you...

If you enjoy sex as much as you claim you do, why do you only insist on one night? Why not a strictly friends with benefits relationship so you won’t have so many dry spells? (I mean, this is day thirty of “Operation: Still No Pussy” for you, correct?)

I’m actually starting to wonder if the only reason you give one night is because you already know that your performance won’t be good enough to warrant another...

Having a subpar dick isn’t the end of the world.

—Alyssa.

I shook my head and typed a response.

Subject: Re: Performance Quality.

Dear Alyssa,

Unfortunately, I am not in the middle of fucking another conquest. Instead I’m busy typing a response to your latest ridiculous email.

This is indeed day thirty of your appropriately named, “Operation: Still No Pussy,” but since I’ve fucked you over the phone and made you cum, it hasn’t been a complete failure...

I do in fact enjoy sex—my cock has an insatiable appetite for it, but I’ve told you countless times that I don’t do relationships. Ever.

I refuse to even address your last paragraph, as I’ve never received a single complaint about my “performance” and my cock is *far* from being subpar.

You are quite correct in your closing statement though: Having a subpar dick really isn’t the end of the world.

Having an un-fucked pussy is.

—Thoreau.

My phone rang immediately.

“Seriously?” Alyssa blurted out when I answered. “Does your message really say what I think it says?”

“Have you suddenly forgotten how to read?”

“You are *ridiculous!*” She laughed. “What happened to your date tonight?”

“It was another fucking liar...”

“Aww. Poor Thoreau. I was really hoping the thirtieth day would be the charm.”

I rolled my eyes and made another drink. “Is living vicariously through my sex life your newfound hobby?”

“Of course not.” Her light laughter drifted over the line, and I could hear the sound of papers shuffling in the background. “I’ve been meaning to ask you: Where are you from?”

“What do you mean, *where am I from?*”

“Exactly what I asked,” she said. “You can’t be from the South. There’s no drawl or even a hint of an accent in your voice.”

I hesitated. “I’m from New York City.”

“New York?” Her voice rose an octave. “Why would you ever leave there to come to Durham?”

“It’s personal.”

“I can’t imagine ever wanting to leave New York. It seems so perfect. And there’s just something about the lights and the lives of people who stay there, how they all must have these huge dreams and...”

I tuned her out and tossed back my shot. Her poetical waxing about that desolate place needed to be put to a stop. Fast.

“And wouldn’t the law firms in New York be far more alluring than the ones here?” She was still talking. “Like, one of my favorite—”

“What’s the name of that ballet you’re auditioning for this year?” I cut her off.

“*Swan Lake*.” She always dropped the subject if I said anything about ballet. “Why?”

“Just wondering. When is the audition?”

“A few months from now. I’m trying as hard as I can to balance my classes—” She cleared her throat. “I mean, I’m trying really hard to balance my case loads with my practice time.”

“Why don’t you just ask your boss if you can work weekends in exchange for a couple weekdays off?”

“I’m pretty sure that won’t work.”

“Of course it would work,” I said. “There’s a lawyer at my firm who works Saturdays through Wednesdays so he can pursue music. If the firm you work for is worth a damn, they’ll be flexible with you.”

“Yeah, um, I guess I’ll have to look into that...”

Silence.

“What firm do you work for?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you that.”

“What’s one of the partners’ names?”

“I can’t tell you that either.”

“But you can tell me how deep you want my cock to be buried inside of you later tonight?”

She sucked in a short breath, a sexy sound that drove me insane the more I heard it.

“How much longer do you think I’m going to put up with just talking to you on the phone, Alyssa?”

“For as long as I want you to.” Her voice sounded more confident now.

“You think I’m going to talk to you for another month without being able to fuck you? Without being able to see you in person?”

“I think you’ll talk to me for several months without fucking me. As a matter of fact, I think you’ll talk to me for *years* without fucking me because I’m your friend, and friends—”

“If I haven’t fucked you within the next month or two, we won’t be *friends* anymore.”

“You want to bet?”

“I don’t have to.” I hung up and grabbed my laptop, ready to give Date-Match another try. The second I clicked the prettiest woman on the page, an email from Alyssa popped onto my screen.

Subject: Trust Me.

You and I will still be friends a few months from now, and you’ll be completely okay with not seeing my face.

Watch.

—Alyssa.

Subject: Re: Trust Me.

You and I will be *fucking* a few months from now, and the only reason I'll be okay with not seeing your face is because you'll be riding my cock as I bend your ass over a table.

Watch.

—Thoreau.

Testimony (n.):

Oral evidence given under oath by a witness in answer to questions posed by attorneys at trial or at a deposition.

Andrew

“Miss Everhart, you can take the floor and question Mr. Hamilton now,” Mr. Greenwood said from across the courtroom.

It was the last day of the month, which meant that we were finally getting use out of the million dollar courtroom that sat on the top floor of GBH. There was no need for this room, but since the firm had more money than it knew what to do with, the space was being used for the interns’ mock cases.

Today’s “trial” was about some idiot who defrauded his own company’s employees—leaving them without insurance and health care, and unfortunately, I was playing the accused.

Standing up from the defense table, Aubrey grabbed her notebook and took the floor. She and I hadn’t spoken since I kicked her out of my condo two weeks ago, but from what I could tell, she seemed unfazed.

She’d been smiling quite often, being extremely nice, and each time she delivered my coffee she did it with a smirk and an, “I really hope you enjoy this coffee, *Mr. Hamilton.*”

I’d been stopping at the coffee shop up the street ever since...

“Mr. Hamilton,” she said, smoothing her tight blue dress, “is it true that you previously cheated on your wife?”

“I’ve *never* cheated.”

“Stick to the character, Andrew.” Mr. Bach whispered from the judge’s seat.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes. There was a time when I cheated on my wife.”

“Why?”

“Objection!” One of the interns shouted. “Your Honor, do we really need to know the specifics about my client’s love life? This mock trial is about his involvement in a conspiracy.”

“If I may, Your Honor,” Aubrey spoke before the “judge” could say anything. “I think assessing how Mr. Hamilton behaved in his previous affairs is a good assessment of his character. If we were trying a client who abandoned his company due to incompetence, it wouldn’t be out of line for me to ask about his previous personal relationships—especially if our mock client is a high profile one.”

“Overruled.”

Aubrey smiled and looked at her notebook. “Do you have commitment problems, Mr. Hamilton?”

“How can I have a problem with something I don’t believe in?”

“So, you believe in engaging in one night stands for the rest of your life?”

“*Your Honor...*” The opposing intern stood up, but I raised my hand.

“No need,” I said, narrowing my eyes at Aubrey. “I’ll entertain Miss Everhart’s inappropriate line of questioning...I believe in living my life however the hell I want and dealing with women whenever I want to deal with them. I’m not sure how who I sleep with has anything to do with this mock conspiracy case, but since we’re discussing my sex life, you should know that I’m happy and satisfied. I have a date later tonight actually. Would you like me to report the details to you and the jury tomorrow?”

The interns in the jury box laughed as Aubrey's smile faded. Even as she forced it again, I could see a hint of hurt in her eyes.

"So..." She took a deep breath. "Regarding the case—"

"So happy you're finally getting on topic."

The jurors laughed again.

"Do you believe in morals, Mr. Hamilton?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Do you think you possess them?"

"I think everyone does to a certain extent."

"Permission to approach the witness?" She looked at Mr. Bach and he nodded.

"Mr. Hamilton, can you read the highlighted portion of this document please?" She placed a sheet of paper in front of me, and I noticed a small handwritten note at the very top of the page:

I fucking hate you and I wish I'd never met you.

"Yes," I said, taking a pen out of my pocket. "It says that my company was unaware of insurance policy changes at the time."

As she handed a copy of the document to the jury panel, I wrote a response to her note:

Sorry to see that you regret meeting me, as I don't regret meeting you—only that I fucked you more than once.

She asked me to read another section to the court, and then she took the paper away—glaring at me once she read my words.

I tried to look away from her, to focus on something else, but the way she looked today prevented that from happening. Her hair wasn't up in her signature bun—it was falling past her shoulders in long curls that grazed her breasts. And the dress she was wearing, a highly inappropriate one that hugged her thighs a little too tightly, rose up an inch every time she took a step.

"I have three more questions for Mr. Hamilton, Your Honor," she said.

"There's no limit, Miss Everhart." He smiled.

"Right..." She stepped forward and looked into my eyes. "Mr. Hamilton, you and your company led your employees to believe that you cared about them, that you had their best interests at heart, and that you would literally communicate the actual changes you would make before termination. Are those promises not directly from your company's brochure?"

"They are."

"So, do you believe that you deserve to be fined or punished for giving your employees false hope? For dragging them into a situation you knew you would end all along?"

"I think I did what was in my *company's* best interest," I said—ignoring the fact that my heart was pounding against my chest. "And in the future, as those *employees* move on like they should, they'll perhaps realize that my company wasn't the best fit for them anyway."

"Don't you think you owe them a simple apology? Don't you think you should at least give them that?"

"An apology implies that I did something *wrong*." I gritted my teeth. "Just because they don't agree with what I did, doesn't mean that I wasn't right."

"Do you believe in reasonable doubt, Mr. Hamilton?"

"You said you only had three questions left. Has elementary mathematics changed recently?"

"Do you believe in reasonable doubt, *Mr. Hamilton*?" Her face reddened. "Yes or no?"

“Yes.” I clenched my jaw. “Yes, I believe that’s a common requirement for every single lawyer in this country.”

“So, given the current case that we’re discussing...Do you think that someone like you, someone who treated his employees so terribly, could ever change in the future, now that you know how badly you’ve hurt others’ livelihood?”

“Reasonable doubt is not about *feelings*, Miss Everhart, and I suggest you consult the closest legal dictionary you can find because I’m pretty sure we’ve had this discussion once before...”

“I don’t recall that, Mr. Hamilton, but—”

“In your own ill-fated yet correct words, didn’t you once tell me—post your first interview here at GBH, that certain lies have to be told and certain truths have to be withheld? And that the ultimate conviction is up to those who can discern which is which?” I looked her up and down. “Is that not the exact definition that you provided for reasonable doubt?”

She stared at me a long time—giving me that same look of hurt she had when I kicked her out of my place.

“No further questions, Your Honor.” She mumbled.

Mr. Greenwood clapped loudly from the back of the room. Mr. Bach and the other interns followed suit.

“Very good job, Miss Everhart!” Mr. Bach shouted. “That was a very direct yet compelling line of questioning.”

“Thank you sir.” She avoided looking at me.

“You are officially the first intern to get our Andrew all riled up.” He smiled, seemingly impressed. “We definitely need to keep you around. Hell, we may call you in when we need to be reminded that he’s capable of showing emotion.”

More laughter.

“Great job today, everyone!” He leaned back in the judge’s chair. “We’ll go over your presentations later this week and email you the scores next Thursday.” He banged his gavel. “Court adjourned.”

The interns filed out of the room and Aubrey looked over her shoulder one last time, shooting me an angry look.

I shot one right back, grateful that I had a date tonight so I could fuck her and her stupid questions out of my mind.

Seven o’clock can’t get here soon enough...

I waited a few minutes before heading to the elevator and attempted to remember my schedule for the rest of the day. I had two consultations with small business owners this afternoon, and I needed to make a Starbucks run before Aubrey could bring me my next cup of coffee.

I unlocked the door to my office and hit the lights, prepared to call for Jessica, but Ava was standing in front of my bookshelf.

“Is the homeless shelter not open today?” I asked.

“I came here to finally give you what you asked for.”

“It’s a little too early to jump off a bridge.”

“I’m being serious.”

“As am I.” I walked past her and sent a quick text on my phone. “If you jump before noon, the news crew won’t be able to run the story during primetime.”

She stepped in front of my desk and set down a manila folder. “I won’t drag your name through the courts anymore, I won’t file anymore stays or injunctions, and I won’t make any false claims about your character either...I’m done lying now.”

“I’m sure.” I picked up the papers. “In other words, there’s a new guy you’re anxious to fuck over. Does he know the real you?”

“Seriously? You’re getting your precious divorce. Why do you even care?”

“I don’t.” I put on my reading glasses and looked over the documents. “No alimony requests, abuse claims, or demands for property? Am I missing a page?”

“I’m telling you. I’m done lying.”

I didn’t believe her for one second, but I picked up my phone and called the notary, telling her it was an emergency.

“You know...” Ava leaned against my desk. “I remember the cake you bought me for our wedding anniversary. It was white and light blue, and it had all these pretty little NYC decorations on it. It had flavored layers, too. One for every year that we were together. Do you remember that?”

“I remember you fucking my best friend.”

“We can’t have one nice moment before we end things for good?”

“You and I ended a long time ago, Ava.” I tried to keep my voice flat, monotonous. “When something is over, the final words—good or bad, don’t make much of a fucking difference.”

She sighed and I noticed how terrible she looked today. Her eyes were bloodshot, her hair was frizzy and tied into a loose ponytail, and even though the blue dress she was wearing fit perfectly, she hadn’t made an attempt to iron it.

“What’s this so called emergency you have, Mr. Hamilton?” The notary walked into the room, smiling. “Are you requesting that we purchase another thousand dollar coffee maker?” She stopped talking once she saw Ava.

“Miss Kannan, this is Ava Sanchez, my soon to be ex-wife. I need you to witness the signing of the divorce papers and make three copies—sealing one of them for mailing purposes.”

She nodded and pulled a stamper out of her pocket.

“Did you notice that I willingly gave up our condo on the West End to you?” Ava asked.

“The condo that *I* bought?” I signed my name. “How generous.”

“We made a lot of memories in that house.”

“Signing papers doesn’t require conversation,” I said.

She snatched the pen away from me and placed her signature above mine—taking extra time to add a double swirl to the last letter.

“I’ll be right back with your copies.” Miss Kannan avoided looking at either of us as she shuffled out of the room.

“So, that’s it, I guess,” Ava said. “I’m officially out of your life.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Unfortunately, you’re still in my sight.”

“Would it kill you to wish me the best? To at least tell me good luck?”

“Seeing as though you’re going back to prison, I guess that would be appropriate.” I shrugged. “Good luck. The authorities are outside waiting for you, so take all the time you need. There’s even a vending machine down the hall if you want to taste freedom one last time...Although, since you’ll be locked up with plenty of women, I’m sure eating pussy after the lights go out will taste just as good.”

“You fucking snitched on me?” Her face went white as I held up my phone, showing her the text I sent the second I saw her in my office. “How could you do that to me?”

“How could I *not*?”

“Did I really hurt you that badly, Liam? Did I—”

“Don’t you ever fucking call me that.”

“Did I hurt you that badly?” She repeated, shaking her head.

I didn’t answer.

“This is...This is about *Emma* isn’t it?” She hissed. “Is that what this is? You’re still holding that shit over my head?”

“Get the fuck out. *Now*.”

“It’s been six years, Liam. Six. Fucking. Years. You need to let that go.” She opened the door and a sly smile spread across her face. “Things like that happen all the time...As unfortunate as it was, it helped make you the man you are today, didn’t it?”

It took everything in me to stay seated, to not lunge after her.

Seething, I waited for her to leave and walked over to my window—watching as she stepped into the parking lot, as she raised her hands in the air as the officers shouted at her.

Then, just like six years ago, she smiled through the handcuffing process, and laughed when they tossed her into the back of the car.

The black fleet slowly drove away, and a familiar pang hit my chest.

Grabbing my keys, I rushed to the parking lot and slipped into my car—subconsciously telling myself to go home, consciously driving toward the nearest beach.

I put my phone on silent as I hit the highway, and as the seconds dissolved into hours, the city disappeared in the rearview mirror. The buildings appeared farther and farther apart, and eventually the only thing outside my window were trees and sand.

When I finally reached a secluded bay, I parked my car in front of a rock. I opened my glove compartment and took out the red folder Aubrey once tried to open. Then I stepped out and sat on the closest bench.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled out the photos and promised myself that this would be the last time I looked at them: Me and my daughter walking along the shore of New Jersey’s beach as the sun set. Her smiling as I picked up a seashell and held it against her ear. Me carrying her on my shoulders and pointing to a starry night sky.

Even though I knew doing this would lead to cold sweats and an inevitable nightmare later, I continued flipping through the photos.

Even the ones without me: The ones of her looking sad and lonely at the park, the ones of her looking off into the distance for something—or *someone*, that wasn’t there.

Emma...

My heart clenched at the final frame in the set. It was a shot of her fiddling with her umbrella, crying. She was upset because they were forcing her to go inside, because they didn’t understand that although she liked being at the park in broad sunlight, she preferred to play outside in the rain.

Emotional Distress (n.):

A negative emotional reaction—which may include fear, anger, anxiety, and suffering for which monetary damages may be awarded

Aubrey

I looked terrible. Absolutely terrible.

Today was the first full costume rehearsal for *Swan Lake* and I didn't look fit for the part at all. My eyes were swollen and puffy—ruined from randomly crying about Andrew, my lips were dry and cracked, and my skin was so pale that Mr. Petrova walked by and asked, “Are you playing a white swan or are you playing a *white ghost*?”

As much as I tried to force myself to smile through my heartache, I was crying every moment I was alone, eating an exorbitant amount of ice cream and chocolate each night, and I couldn't sleep for shit.

I still couldn't believe Andrew kicked me out of his condo so cruelly. One minute he was holding me against his chest and kissing me, and the next he was telling me that he and I had fucked enough—that he didn't want me anymore, and that he was going to fuck someone else.

What was worse, was that when we returned to work that following Monday, he'd been twice as rude to me. He reassigned me to a case that would take me months to sort, scolded me in front of everyone for being ten seconds late, and then he had the audacity to complain about me smiling as I brought him his daily coffee.

At least I spit in it...

“Are you crying right now?” The make-up assistant tilted my chin up. “Do you know how expensive this stage mascara is?”

“I'm sorry.” I froze my eyeballs to their sockets and held back tears.

“I didn't see your parents' names on the guest list for today. Are they coming to the second run through on Saturday?”

“No.”

“I guess they just want to see the full on show with no stops then, huh?” She laughed. “My parents are the same way. I told them about the number of run-throughs we have to do and they said they'll see it when it's finished. They're all about perfection.”

“Unfortunately, I can relate...”

She laughed and blabbered on and on, making me silently count the seconds until she was done.

When she pressed my face with the last puff of powder, she spun me around to face the mirror on the other side of the room.

“Wow...” I whispered. “Seriously, wow...”

I didn't look like I'd been crying at all. Although my eyelids were covered in dark eye shadow, and she'd dabbed a fake tear trail past my right eye, I looked as if I was the happiest woman on earth.

“Miss Everhart?” Mr. Petrova asked, stepping behind me. “May I borrow you for a second?”

“Yes, sir.” I followed him through the backstage doors and outside to the empty stretching area.

“Have a seat on the bench, Miss Everhart.” He took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it.

The smoke unfurled in spirals between us and he looked me up and down. For some odd reason, he looked more upset than usual, like he was about to yell at me.

“Mr. Petrova...” I said softly. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I brought you out here alone because I want you to know that you looked fat during practice yesterday. *Too fat.*”

“What?”

“Even though you danced the part of the black swan beautifully, capturing the right degree of anger and sadness, you failed—*fucking failed*, with the white swan.” He coughed. “You looked like your mind was elsewhere. Like it was killing you to be happy for five minutes, and to top it off, you’ve gotten fat.”

I rolled my eyes and tuned him out, focusing on the cars whirring down the street. I wasn’t disturbed by his insults anymore. Him calling me fat was nothing compared to the things he said to me last week.

“*Miss Everhart?*” His voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

“Yes?”

“I need you to open that later,” he said, patting me on my shoulder. “It’s very important.”

“Open what?”

“Do you not see the envelope I just placed on your lap?” He put out his cigarette. “Do I need to tell your understudy that she needs to get ready to dance?”

“No.” I picked up the envelope, running my fingers along the crease. “You don’t need to do that, sir.”

“Good.” He walked toward the building and held the door open. “Now, make me believe that I picked the right girl to be my swan.”



“The Walters will be over for dinner next Sunday at six and we need you to make an appearance,” my mother said to me over the phone that night. “I think they’re going to write us a very nice check for the campaign.”

“How exciting.”

“It is exciting, isn’t it?” She practically squealed. “Everything is happening so fast and falling into place quite perfectly. We’re gathering funding, planning the advertising, and...”

I set my phone on the table and made myself a bucket of ice water, wincing with every step I took. I was sure that I would have a new set of blisters at the end of this week, but after the way I danced at today’s run-through, they would be well-worth it.

I completed every jump with ease, matched my peers step for step, and at the end—when the final number called for ten pirouettes, I did fifteen. Everyone in the audience gave me a standing ovation, but Mr. Petrova sat silently rubbing his chin.

He stared at me, tilted his head to the side, and simply said, “Today’s practice is over.” That was the biggest compliment he’d ever given.

Smiling at the memory, I carried the ice bucket over to the couch and set it down. I slipped my feet inside and held the phone up to my ear again.

“Oh, and the Yarboroughs...” My mother was still talking. “They’re considering throwing a small benefit in your father’s honor next month at the country club. You’ll need to be present for that and it won’t be casual, so I’d really prefer if you wore your hair in curls please. There will be a photographer from the local paper there.”

“Are you going to ask how my day went?”

“In a minute. Did you receive the dress I sent yesterday?”

I looked at the plastic bag draped over my door. “There was a rough run through of *Swan Lake* today. It was for the costume designers, to see if everything looked right under the new lights. It was the best run through we’ve had so far.”

“Have you tried on that dress yet? Do you think you’ll be able to do it tonight?”

“Mom...”

“I need to have it tailored for Sunday’s dinner ASAP if it doesn’t fit.”

“Could you just say, I honestly don’t give a fuck about your life, Aubrey?” I groaned as my toes finally felt the effect of the ice. “That would make me feel ten times better right now.”

“*Aubrey Nicole Everhart...*” She enunciated every syllable of my name. “Have you lost your mind?”

“No, but I’m starting to lose my tolerance for talking to you on the phone. Why bother calling if you only want to hear yourself talk?”

She didn’t get a chance to answer.

There was a call on my other line, so I clicked over without mentioning it.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Is this Aubrey Everhart?” It was a male’s voice.

“Yes. This is she.”

“Great! This is Greg Houston. I’m the student enrollment chair, and I was just calling to let you know that your withdrawal from the university has been approved! It’ll be official once you come in and personally sign off on the forms. I personally think it’s great that you’re taking time off to help out with your father’s campaign.”

“WHAT?!”

“That’s a very selfless thing of you to do, Miss Everhart,” he said. “I’m sure whenever you decide to come back, the academic committee will offer you credit for your real world experience. Anyway, I noticed you filled out the electronic forms, but since you live within a fifty mile radius of the school, its policy that you have to sign them manually as well. Also, regarding the credits you’ve earned at the university thus far...”

Everything around me went black.

I couldn’t believe this shit.

I wanted to click over and shout at my mother, to ask how dare she and my father pull me out of college without even telling me, but I couldn’t. I simply hung up and sat still—stone-faced and lost.

There were tears falling down my face, but I couldn’t feel them. I couldn’t feel a damn thing.

I pressed the power button on my phone to prevent anyone else from calling me and pulled out the envelope Mr. Petrova gave me earlier. I assumed it was a long list of insults, or a new diet, but it was a letter:

Miss Everhart,

I just received notice that you were leaving the university at the end of this term. While I am disappointed in your failure to alert me to this news in advance, I am impressed with the growth you have shown while being in my program.

You are still an average dancer, but considering the fact that your peers are all terrible dancers, I guess you can be somewhat proud of that status.

Behind this letter is a recommendation for the New York City Ballet Company. Due to a few unfortunate circumstances, several spots have opened for their current class. This does not happen often, and you would be quite stupid not to audition.

However, if you do audition and are not accepted, it will only mean that you didn’t dance your best. (Or that you gained another unfortunate pound.)

—Petrova.

I flipped to the attached page and noticed that the deadline to audition was in three weeks, that if I auditioned and was accepted, I would be leaving my current leading role behind and would have to start all over again.

Dancing for the NYC Ballet Company had once been a dream of mine, but after I broke my foot at sixteen, I readjusted my version of a dream career; the competition at such a place would be far too fierce for someone who sat out a complete year, full recovery or not.

Nonetheless, I couldn't fathom going away to New York City, not alone anyway. And I didn't think I could leave Andrew without at least getting a much deserved apology.

Sighing, I turned on my laptop and logged into my email, shocked to see his name at the very top of my inbox.

Subject: Mock Trials.

Miss Everhart,

For the third time this week, you've alluded to our former affairs in the court room. Although I am not surprised by this, I am quite disappointed.

You may regret the aftermath of fucking me, but I know damn well that you loved every single second that my cock was inside of you. (And before you lie and say that you didn't, think about the numerous times you screamed my name as my mouth devoured your pussy.)

Maybe if you thought about those things instead of your uncontrollable and erratic "feelings," your defenses in court wouldn't be so laughable.

—Andrew

I deleted his email and read Petrova's letter again.

I needed to research the New York City Ballet auditions *tonight*.

Malfeasance (n.):

Intentionally doing something either legally or morally wrong which one had no right to do.

Andrew

I opened my left drawer, searching for a bottle of aspirin. I hadn't slept well in over a week, and I was certain that most of that had to do with the half-assed reports the interns were giving me. That, or Aubrey was poisoning my lunch.

I flipped through her most recent report and groaned as I read her handwritten remarks:

I find it very ironic that you can give us an assignment on the importance of trust and relationships, when you have no idea what either of those words mean.

PS—You did not “devour” my pussy.

I tore off her note and tossed it into the trash, reading the next one:

A case that deals with a boss fucking his employee? At least this boss had the balls to come clean and admit that he actually liked her, instead of tossing her away like trash.

PS—Yesterday's extra ingredient in your coffee was flakes of melted super glue. I hope you enjoyed it.”

“Mr. Hamilton?” Jessica stepped into my office.

“Yes?”

“Would you like me to send your Armani suit to another dry cleaning company?” she asked. “This is the third time you've sent them those pants. I don't think that brown stain is coming out.”

“No, thank you.” I sighed. “Just order me some new ones please.”

“Will do!” She batted her eyes at me as she left, and I immediately emailed Aubrey.

Subject: Super Glue.

I no longer drink your fucking coffee, but since you've once again proven how much of a novice you are when it comes to the law, I'll be saving your handwritten note so my friends will know who to charge with my murder.

Grow up.

—Andrew

Subject: Re: Super Glue.

You don't have any friends. I was your only one. And I don't care if you save my handwritten note because I've saved all of your EMAILS—especially the ones that say, “Come to my office so I can eat your pussy on my lunch break,” or “I love the way your mouth looks when you wrap it around my cock.”

You first.

I started typing my response—not willing to give her the last word, but I heard Jessica clearing her throat.

“Something else I can help you with today?” I looked up. “I could’ve sworn you just left my office.”

“Word around the firm is that today is your birthday.”

“Today is *not* my birthday.”

“That’s not what HR said.”

“HR is full of shit.” I looked at the coffee mug on the edge of my desk, noticing that the coffee wasn’t even brown. It was orange. “But speaking of HR, could you have them ban Miss Everhart from touching the coffee machines?”

“Doubt it.” She stepped closer. “Between you and me, we’re throwing you a surprise party in the break room. Like, right now. We’ve been waiting for you to take a break but you haven’t, so...Can you step in for a second?”

“Did you just tell me no about my coffee machine request?”

“I’ll handle it after you come to your party.” She smiled and reached for my hand, but I stood on my own.

“I’ve told your grandfather on multiple occasions that I don’t appreciate his employee birthday parties.”

She shrugged and led me down the hall. “Make sure you look surprised. I put a lot of work into this...I always go the extra mile for you.”

I ignored the way she was licking her lips.

She pushed the door open, and all of the staff tossed confetti into the air and shouted, “Happy Birthday, Mr. Hamilton!” Then they began to sing the birthday song—out of tune and terribly off key.

I walked over to the windows where they’d placed a small white cake with blue candles, and blew them out before the song ended.

“Happy Birthday, Andrew!” Mr. Greenwood handed me a blue envelope. “How old are you today?”

“Seeing as though today is not my birthday, I’m the same age as I was yesterday.”

He laughed, still incapable of catching when I was being short with him. Holding his stomach in jest, he motioned for one of the interns to take our photo.

As the camera flashed, I spotted Aubrey standing in a corner with her arms crossed. She was shaking her head at everyone, and when her eyes finally met mine, she scowled.

“I got you something...” Jessica pressed a small black box into my hand. “But I think you need to open it behind closed doors, when you’re alone and thinking about me.” She blushed and walked away.

I made a mental note to toss whatever it was into the trash. And instead of immediately leaving the party, I walked around the room and said thank you to everyone—reminding each intern that “birthday” or not, the assignments were still due at the end of the day.

I approached Aubrey with my hand outstretched, but she recoiled and walked into the adjoining ante-room.

“Are you seriously this immature, Miss Everhart?” I followed her, spinning her around to face me as the door shut.

“Are you seriously this cruel?” She glared at me. “You gave me more work than anyone else this morning just so you could berate me in front of them later, just because you think I embarrassed you in court again.”

“You’d actually have to know what the fuck you were doing if you wanted to embarrass me in court.” I unintentionally grabbed her hands, rubbing my fingers against her skin. “And I gave you more work so you wouldn’t have time to make my coffee, which up until this morning, I only *assumed* you were poisoning.”

“Since when is ‘spit’ poison?”

“You owe me another fucking suit...” I lowered my voice. “Do you have any idea how much—”

“No.” She cut me off. “Do you have any idea how much you’ve changed? I actually miss when I was Alyssa and you were Thoreau.”

“Back when you were a *fucking liar*?”

“Back when you treated me better...” She stared into my eyes—giving a look of longing, and my hands went around her waist, pulling her against me.

My mouth was on hers in seconds and we were kissing like we hadn’t seen each other in years—fighting each other for control. I trailed my fingers against the zipper at the back of her dress, feeling my cock hardening against her thigh.

She pressed herself against my chest and let me slip my tongue deeper into her mouth, but she eventually tore away and pushed me.

Looking absolutely disgusted, she turned away and stormed out of the room.

I straightened my tie before following her into the party room, but she was no longer there.

“Are you going to cut the cake, Andrew?” Mr. Bach called out. “Or do you want Jessica to do it for another year in a row?”

Jessica held up the knife and winked at me.

“Jessica can cut it,” I said. “I’ll be right back.” I stepped out and headed for the interns’ offices—walking straight toward Aubrey’s cubicle.

Her face was beet red and she was stuffing folders into her bag.

“I didn’t give you permission to leave early.” I stepped in front of her.

“I didn’t give you permission to treat me like shit, but you’ve done one hell of a job, haven’t you?”

“You just said that I wasn’t treating you like shit when I thought your name was *Alyssa*, when I thought you were a fucking lawyer.”

“That makes your current treatment of me acceptable?”

“It makes it *justifiable*.”

Silence.

“I can’t do this anymore, Andrew...” She shook her head.

“Does that mean you’ll stop acting like a child in court? Does it mean—”

“Here.” She cut me off and pressed a silver box against my chest. “I bought this for you a few weeks ago, back when Jessica was planning your birthday party.”

“Did you spit in it?”

“I should have.” She picked up her bag and rushed past me, heading for the exit.

A part of me actually wanted to go after her and make her explain what the hell she meant about “not doing this anymore,” but I knew doing so would be pointless. Talking to her for less than three minutes aroused me, and I needed to remember why I ended “us” in the first place.

I returned to the break-room and said thank you to the last of the interns, glancing at the photo HR had pinned on the wall. It was a collage of my professional photos with a birthday hat sticker attached to my head. And they’d written “Happy Birthday, Andrew! GBH Loves You!” in bright blue.

In all actuality, my birthday was months from now—in December, a day I hadn’t celebrated in a very long time. And even though I’d never publicly admit it, I somewhat liked the fact that the people at GBH were willing to celebrate my birthday—real or not.

“How many slices of cake would you like me to wrap up for you, Mr. Hamilton?” Jessica tapped my shoulder.

“Three,” I said. “And I’ll take a cup of lemonade, too.”

“You’re not going to stay for the “Who Knows Mr. Hamilton the Best” game?”

“None of you know me.” I returned to my office and locked the door, setting the new birthday gifts on top of my bookshelf.

The envelope from Mr. Greenwood contained a note that said he appreciated my hard work and dedication to the firm. Beneath his written words was a gift card to his family’s other multimillion dollar entity: A golf course.

The gifts from the interns were all “I.O.U.” letters that begged for extra time on their assignments. I held all of those over my shredder.

Jessica’s black box was next, and as much as I wanted to throw it away and never think of it again, I couldn’t resist knowing what she bought me. I took the top off and removed the paper, pulling out a soft piece of silk and a note:

I overheard that you like to keep these in your pocket... Here are mine.

*PS—I took them off in the bathroom five minutes ago
:-)*

Jesus...

I buried her panties at the bottom of my trashcan and crumpled that note.

I stared at Aubrey’s silver box for a while, wondering if I should wait until later to unwrap it, but I couldn’t help peeling off the paper.

Inside of the box was a small black photo frame. It was handcrafted—bordered with iron pressed images of pointe slippers, law scales, and the words “Alyssa” and “Thoreau” in smooth white letters.

The picture in it was one of us, one of her laying against my chest in my bed and smiling at the camera. Her cheeks were flushed red—like they always were after sex, and she was dressed in one of my T-shirts.

I remembered her forcing me to take that photo—insisting that she “wouldn’t share it with anyone” and only wanted it for herself. She even forced me to smile...

I set the frame down and took out the other object in the box—a sparkling silver watch with an inscription etched across its back:

Subject: You.

I liked you as “Thoreau,” but I love you as Andrew.

—Aubrey (Alyssa)



My glass of wine sat untouched at Arbors Restaurant, and the candles in the centerpiece were shedding sheets of their wax onto the table.

I was expecting a date any moment now, but I couldn’t stop staring at the watch Aubrey gave me. She’d clearly thought about each and every part of the design; no element was by mistake.

I noticed two interlocking A’s in the corner of its screen, and earlier, in the sunlight, I’d noticed that my name was etched on the edge of its frame.

“Are you Thoreau?” A woman’s voice interrupted my thoughts, making me look up.

“I am.”

She smiled and took the seat across from me. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m a regular here and the waitress asked if I’d be having my usual when I arrived. I told her you would have the same.”

“I don’t mind at all.” A small feeling of guilt welled inside my chest, but it wasn’t enough to distract me from pursuing what I needed tonight: Pussy. ASAP.

The waitress placed two steamed dishes in front of us, and I checked the time. I was only giving this woman one hour.

“So, what type of cases do you normally handle?” she asked.

“Corporate for the most part, but I’ve done government and tax as well.”

“Interesting. Have you lived in Durham long?”

“Too long.”

“And is this your normal M.O.?” She leaned back in her chair, dragging her nails against her see-through top. “One night stands?”

“Is that a problem for you?”

“It never is.”

I raised my eyebrow and looked her over. She was actually quite appealing—long blond hair, curvy figure, and perky breasts.

Physical attributes aside, we seemed to have a lot in common. She was a real lawyer in the next county over, she read most of the same books, and from what she’d told me over the phone, we shared a comparable sexual appetite.

Our entrees came and went, the conversation plodded along, but Aubrey’s watch still had a part of my attention.

“Is something bothering you?” My date waved her hand in front of my face. “I remember you being a lot more talkative over the phone.”

“I’m fine.” I waved the waiter over for the check. “Just tired.”

“Too tired to fuck?”

“I’m *never* too tired to fuck.”

Blushing, she crossed her legs and leaned over the table. “I’ve been looking forward to this all week.”

I didn’t respond. I simply signed the check and stood up, holding out my hand for her.

We walked through the hotel lobby and straight for the elevators.

The second the doors closed, she pressed her lips against mine and threaded her fingers through my hair.

“Fuck...” I groaned as one of her hands slid down to my belt.

She moved her mouth down my neck as we ascended to the top floor, grazing her teeth against my skin. Moaning, she gasped as I gripped her waist and kissed her back—controlling her tongue with mine.

I pulled the band away from her ponytail and tossed it to the floor. I closed my eyes and deepened our kiss—torturously biting her lip as she tried to pull away.

Sliding her knee between my legs, she unfastened my belt and tugged at my zipper. “How long are we going to fuck tonight?”

“As long as you want.” I palmed her breasts through her shirt, slipping a hand underneath her bra.

“Ahhhh...” She murmured as I caressed her nipple.

The elevator doors slid open quickly, but our bodies remained entwined as we found our way to the suite. Her lips latched onto mine again as we stumbled into the room—bumping into the lamps and the dressers.

She was moaning louder now, barely controlling herself as I unzipped her dress and unclasped her bra.

I felt her hands at my waist—pushing my pants to the floor, and when my back hit the wall, I realized she was on her knees in front of me.

Leaning forward, she rubbed her hands up and down my cock, asking me to tell her how badly I wanted her mouth on me.

“I don’t...” I shook my head as I realized I had been fantasizing about Aubrey the entire time.

“You’re not even going to beg for it?” She smiled, bringing her head closer.

“Stop.” I grabbed her by her hair and gently pushed her away.

“Is something wrong, Thoreau? Did you want to do me first instead? Should I get on the bed or the chair?”

I couldn’t make out the rest of her questions; images of Aubrey were clouding my brain, invading all my senses. And the more I stared at this woman, a woman who was nowhere near as beautiful as Aubrey, the more I felt my cock softening.

Fuck...

I pulled my pants up and zipped the fly. “I no longer feel like fucking you. You can leave.”

“*Excuse me?*” She sucked in a breath and crossed her arms. “What did you just say?”

“I said that I don’t feel like fucking you.” I spoke slowly. “And that you can leave. Enjoy the rest of your night.”

“You’re going to put me out? Just like that?”

“Would you like me to reserve another room for you?”

“What happened to the man I met online?” She stood up. “Was that all a front? Is this some type of game where you take out women, say sexy things you’ve probably read off the internet, and then make them get naked knowing damn well that you don’t know how to fuck?”

“I definitely know how to fuck.” I narrowed my eyes at her. “I just don’t feel like fucking *you*.”

“I can’t...I can’t believe...” Her jaw dropped. “You’re a fucking asshole!”

“Asshole? Yes. Fucking? Unfortunately not. Can you make sure that the door is completely closed on your way out?”

She pulled her dress over her body and picked up her purse. “I’m putting a flag next to your profile on Date-Match. And you know what else? I’m going to leave a review of our encounter, too. I’m going to make sure—”

“Do you normally talk as you get dressed?” I cut her off and took a seat on the bed. “I’m pretty sure it’s something that doesn’t require conversation.”

Fuming, she slipped into her shoes and rushed out of the room—slamming the door behind her.

I waited until I heard the ping of the elevator and lay across the mattress. I tried my best to think of something or someone other than Aubrey, but she was all that came to mind.

What the fuck is happening?

I stared at the ceiling for another hour, unable to take my mind off of how her mouth felt against mine at the office earlier today. Even if it was only for a few seconds.

Needing to get to the bottom of this, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and called her.

“Hello?” She answered on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Why did you buy me that watch, Aubrey?”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t, but I read the inscription on the back.”

Silence.

“I need to ask you something,” I said.

“Only if I can ask you a few things first...”

“Go ahead.”

“How can you possibly be so adamant about honesty when you haven’t been completely honest with me?”

“I *have* been completely honest with you.”

“I’m starting to believe that your name isn’t really Andrew Hamilton...”

“So you’re still stalking me and my past online? Do you not have any other hobbies?”

“Who is *EH*?” Her voice cracked. “Why are those two letters hanging on all your walls? Why are they engraved in all of your cufflinks?”

“Aubrey...”

“What’s going on with you and Ava? I saw her walk out of your office last week, and she smirked at me.”

“Is this a bad time to talk?”

“Yes.” She was breathing hard. “This is a very bad time. Why don’t you just hang up and go to the Marriott so you can fuck someone else?”

“I *am* at the Marriott, and I was actually about to fuck someone else.”

She was silent for several seconds. “I don’t... I don’t want to hear from you anymore, Andrew.”

“What did you just say?”

“I said I don’t want to hear from you anymore. Don’t you ever fucking call me again.” She hung up.

Impasse (n.):

The inability of two parties to reach a negotiated settlement.

A few days later...

Aubrey

My heart was still aching—reeling, and although I'd told Andrew never to call me again, and that I didn't want to hear from him, I couldn't move on until I received an apology.

I needed it...

I felt sick to my stomach after giving him that watch, and I'd foolishly expected for him to call and say, "I love you, too," but he acted as if it meant nothing.

Without knocking, I opened the door to his office and shut it behind me.

He raised his eyebrow as I stepped over to his desk, but he didn't hang up his phone.

"Yes, that will be fine," he spoke into the receiver.

"I need to talk to you." I blurted out. "*Now.*"

He motioned for me to take a seat, but he continued talking. "Yes. That will work as well."

I sat and crossed my arms, trying not to stare at him too hard. He was utter perfection today—looking more fuck-able than usual with a fresh hair-cut and a brand new grey suit. His eyes regarded me intensely as usual, and I noticed he was actually wearing the watch I gave him. He'd even paired it with matching cufflinks.

Maybe I'm overreacting after all...

"Right..." He leaned back in his chair and typed a few things onto his keyboard. "I'll see you at eight o'clock tonight, Sandra. Room 225."

My stomach dropped.

"Something I can help you with, Miss Everhart?" He hung up the phone. "Is there any reason why you barged into my office without knocking?"

"You've fucked someone else already?"

"Is that a serious question?"

"Did you fuck someone else already? Did you?"

"Would it matter?"

"Yes, it would fucking matter..." My blood boiled as I stood up. "*Did you sleep with someone else?*"

"Not yet." He narrowed his eyes at me and stood up too, walking over to me. "However, I really don't see how that's any of your concern."

I looked at his wrist. "Why are you wearing that watch if you don't feel the same way I do?"

"It's the only watch that matches my new cufflinks."

"Are you seriously this blind?" There were tears welling in my eyes. "Are you—"

"I told you a long time ago that I don't do feelings—that if we ever did fuck, that would be the end of us." He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "However, I do realize that by crossing the line with you, personally and professionally, that a percentage of the blame is mine."

"A percentage?"

“Would you like me to bring in the firm’s accountant? I’m sure he can work out the exact figure.”

“Andrew...” I was on the verge of losing it.

“Since we did break the boundaries, and we were in fact friends before, I’m willing to revert to that arrangement.”

I shook my head as he tilted my chin up and looked into my eyes.

“We can still talk on the phone at night,” he said. “You can tell me about your ballet, your parents, your life...And, to be sensitive to your feelings, I’ll tell you about my life but I’ll leave out my one night stands until you’re completely over whatever the hell you think we had.”

“I told you that I loved you...” The words rushed out of my mouth.

“I told you that you shouldn’t have.”

“You can’t really be this callous and cold of a person, Andrew...”

“What do you want me to say, Aubrey?” His tone changed. “Your pussy was so magical that it opened my eyes and made me want to change all my ways for you? That I can’t live or breathe without knowing that you’re by my side? Is that what you’re expecting me to say?”

“No.” I tried not to cry. “A simple apology for—”

“Kicking your inquisitive ass out of my apartment?” He was glaring at me. “For trying to prevent you from feeling like you do right now? *Fine*. I’m sorry I didn’t do it sooner.”

I resisted the urge to spit in his face and stepped back. I officially despised him. “You are so not the man I thought you were.”

“Good, because I’m sure that man is quite pathetic.” He briefly shut his eyes and sighed. “Look, Aubrey...”

“It’s *Miss Everhart*.” I hissed as I walked toward the door. “Miss. Fucking. Everhart. But not to worry, you’ll never have to worry about using it because you won’t be seeing me again.”

I slammed the door so hard it rattled the windows on the other side of the hall. I ignored the suspicious look from Jessica as I stormed to the parking lot, and sped all the way to the bank.

I withdrew every dollar out of my savings account, and called the bus depot downtown—asking what the fare was for a one-way ticket to New York City.

“That would be seventy nine eighty six,” the operator said. “It’s ten dollars cheaper if you buy a roundtrip ticket.”

“I won’t be needing a round trip ticket.” I steered my car into my apartment’s lot. “Can you tell me when the next bus leaves?”

“Tonight. Would you like me to book that for you now?”

“Absolutely.” I recited my credit card info from memory, and listened as she told me about how I needed to take a walk on the Brooklyn Bridge whenever I had the chance.

The second I hung up, I arranged for a cab and sent a quick text to my roommate:

Something has come up and I have to move out ASAP...I’ll be wiring my half of the remaining rent to our landlord, and I’ll find a way to have my belongings shipped to me. I’m leaving my keys under that rose plant in the laundry room

—Aubrey.

Grabbing two large suitcases from my closet, I stuffed them with whatever I could find, and placed Mr. Petrova’s recommendation letter into my purse.

As I was writing myself a reminder (“*That asshole still has my panties...Need to shop for more.*”), my mother called.

“Yes?” I answered.

“Excuse me, Aubrey?” she said.

I rolled my eyes. “Hello?”

“Much better.” There was a smile in her voice. “What time should I expect you at The Grove tonight?”

“Never. I’m not coming.”

“Save me your tantrums, Aubrey. There’s a lot of money riding on this first dinner. Would you like me and your father to pick you up?”

“I said I’m not coming. Did you not hear me?”

“Aubrey...” She lowered her voice. “I’ve been trying to hold back for the past few weeks, but you know what? I am sick and tired of you being so damn thoughtless and selfish about your father’s aspirations. Neither of us personally give a damn about your thoughts on the election, but since you’re a member of this family, I demand that you—”

“Go to hell.” I hung up and continued packing, even faster now.

Subject: Cab.

Miss Aubrey Everhart,

Your cab has arrived at the address you specified. It will wait for exactly five minutes.

—Durham Cab Co.

I rushed into the bathroom and filled a plastic bag with toiletries, and then I placed them into my suitcase and headed outside.

“Bus station, right?” The cab driver, a woman, smiled as I approached.

“Yes, please.”

She took my bags and placed them into the trunk as I slid into the backseat. I felt my heart hurting with every second that passed, and as much as I tried to block out the thoughts about Andrew, images of his face infiltrated my brain anyway.

I was picturing the last full night we spent together, the night before he kicked me out of his condo, and no matter how hard I tried to make sense of what happened the very next night, I couldn’t. All I could do was cry.

My phone vibrated against my knee and I flipped it over, hoping to see Mr. Petrova’s name, but it was Andrew.

“Hello?” I answered.

“What are you doing?”

“I have ballet practice on Wednesdays...Shouldn’t you know that by now?”

“If you were actually in ballet practice you wouldn’t be picking up your phone.”

Silence.

“Aubrey?” He sounded concerned. “Are you crying?”

“No.” I lied, turning up the volume on my car radio.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just said—”

“Stop fucking lying to me, Aubrey,” he said. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I got sent home from practice today.”

“Okay. And?”

“There is no ‘And’ about this...” Tears welled in my eyes. “I’ve never been sent home before. He made me feel like shit today. He even told the understudy to be prepared to take my place right in front of me, and then he told me not to come back until next week...”

“I’ve told you the reason why he does that. Why don’t you believe me?”

“Because I really was bad today,” I admitted. “My feet are swollen and I didn’t bandage them properly, so I was off by an eighth of a count for most of the day...”

He sighed. “I’m sure you were still ten times better than everyone else. Don’t you think?”

“No...”

“Trust me. I’m pretty sure he’s just—”

“Can I come over tonight?” I cut him off, hoping for a yes, but all I heard was silence. I knew I’d pushed my luck the first couple nights we spent together, but I didn’t want it to be a rare thing. I wanted more.

“Are you going to give me an answer, Andrew?”

“Yes,” he said. “You can come over. Where are you?”

“Outside your door.”

He opened it seconds later and looked me up and down, raising his eyebrow. “I would’ve picked you up.”

“I almost asked you to...”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me inside, keeping his eyes locked on mine. As the door shut, he pulled me into his arms and shook his head at me.

“What are you doing, Aubrey?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you keep insisting on breaking every rule I have?”

“Why do you keep letting me?”

Without saying another word, his lips were on mine and his hands were sliding around my waist—deftly unbuttoning my skirt, quickly pushing it down to the floor.

His hands grazed my backside, searching for my panties, but there were none.

“Remind me to return your collection.” He laughed softly and led me over to the couch.

He dropped my hand and then he sat on the floor, looking up at me. Unzipping his pants, he pulled out a condom and slowly rolled it over his cock.

I started to bend low so I could sit next to him, but he grabbed my thighs.

“Stop,” he said. “I don’t want you to sit on the floor.”

“Okay.” I looked over my shoulder. “Do you want me to sit on the coffee table?”

“No...” He trailed his fingers up my legs. “On my face.”

“What?”

“Sit your pussy on my face.”

I stood still, speechless—unable to process what he’d just asked me to do.

Smirking, he pulled me close and tapped my left leg. “Lift that onto the pillow behind me.” He commanded me with his eyes and I slowly lifted my foot and pressed it into the cushion.

“Good girl.” He rubbed his hands along the inside of my thighs, blowing kisses against my skin. “Grab onto my hair...”

My hands found their way onto his head as he slipped two fingers inside of me, as he slowly moved them in and out.

He darted his tongue against my clit and groaned. “Are you actually going to follow my directions today?”

“Yes...”

“I need you to be as still as possible.” One of his hands cupped my ass, palming it as he continued to stretch my pussy with his fingers. “Can you do that?”

I nodded, letting a low moan escape my mouth.

“Is that a yes?” He didn’t give me chance to answer. He drew my swollen clit into his mouth, instantly making my knees buckle beneath me.

Shutting my eyes, I screamed as he gripped my hips and slightly rocked me against his mouth—licking every part of me with his tongue, lapping up every drop.

“Andrew...” I could barely hear my own voice. “Andrew...”

My right leg lost its hold on the floor and I nearly fell forward, but he grabbed me and held me still—not moving his mouth away.

I pulled his hair hard, begging him to slow down, to let me attempt to control the pace, but it was no use.

He continued to fuck me with his mouth, ignoring my every scream.

As my hips jerked and quivers began to race through my body, he wrapped his arms around my legs and slowly pulled me down, lowering me onto his cock.

“Ahhhh....” I breathed as he buried himself inch by inch. “I...I...”

“You, what?” He kissed my forehead once he was entirely inside of me. “Do you not want to ride me this way? Would you prefer if I bent you over?”

I shook my head, and he covered one of my nipples with his mouth, swirling his tongue around it until it hardened.

Without him telling me to, I wrapped my arms around his neck and moved myself up and down his cock.

“Harder...” He bit my neck. “I want you to fuck me as hard as I fuck you...”

I grinded my hips into him again and again, as forceful as I could, but he grabbed me and began thrusting his own hips up from the floor.

“Andrew, I’m going to cum...” I cried out as he completely took over. “I’m going to—”

He slapped my ass as my body finally gave in, as his gave in, too.

Breathless, I leaned against his chest, but he didn’t let me rest long. He eased me out of his lap and stood up—walking off to toss away the condom.

Heading back over to me, he scooped me into his arms and carried me into his bedroom, gently lowering me onto his sheets.

I rolled over to the side of the bed I preferred—the side by the window, and waited for him to lay next to me, but he didn’t. He took a seat near the edge of the bed and lifted my feet into his lap.

I was too tired to ask him what he was doing, and the next thing I felt was a warm, soothing liquid dripping onto my skin. Then I felt his hands slowly spreading it around the places where the swelling hurt the most.

I moaned as his fingers massaged my soles, said his name as his fingers caressed every tender spot.

“Shhh,” he whispered, rendering me speechless as he continued to soothe me.

Every few minutes, he looked back at me and asked, "Would you like me to stop?"

I shook my head and kept my eyes shut, relishing every moment of this.

After what felt like hours of bliss, after he'd given me the best foot massage I'd ever had, he climbed in bed next to me and pulled me against his chest.

"Goodnight, Aubrey," he whispered. "I hope you feel better."

Elated, I threaded my fingers through his hair. "You're not going to insist on taking me home tonight?"

"Not unless you keep talking." He growled. "Go to sleep..."

"Thank you for the foot massage...That was really—"

"Stop talking, Aubrey." He rolled me on top of him. "Go to sleep."

"I was just saying thank you. I can't say thank you?"

"No." He pressed his lips against mine and kissed me until I couldn't breathe, saying, "Don't make me fuck you to sleep," in between breaths.

I attempted to roll over, but his grip was too strong.

Smiling, I positioned my head against his heartbeat and whispered, "Can you hear me? Are you sleeping?"

No answer. Just deep, sleeping breaths.

I hesitated a few seconds. "I love you..."

Foreseeable Risk (n.):

A danger which a reasonable person should anticipate as the result from his/her actions.

Andrew

“Jessica!” I glanced at the slightly normal looking cup of coffee on my desk.

“Yes, Mr. Hamilton?”

“Could you ask Miss Everhart to come in here, please?” I needed to see her face.

She’d been avoiding me all week, and if all I had to say was “sorry”—whether I actually meant it or not, it was worth it. I missed seeing her seductive mouth in the mornings, remembering how it felt when she pressed it against mine.

“I would do that,” Jessica said, “but seeing as though she put in her resignation letter last week, I’m pretty sure that’s impossible.”

“She *quit*?”

Without telling me?

Jessica raised her eyebrow. “She did. I gave you the letter she left, too. It was quite interesting.”

“I never got a letter.”

She walked over to my desk and sifted through the clutter.

“Here it is,” she said. “She left you two letters...Anything else?”

“No...”

She tilted her head to the side and tapped her lip, looking as if she wanted to say something, but she smiled and left the room.

Locking the door, I tore the first letter open and read it.

Dear GBH,

Thank you very much for hiring me as your undergraduate intern. I’ve had quite the experience working for you and am honored by all I’ve learned. However, due to personal reasons, I am resigning as of today.

I apologize for such short notice, and I wish your firm continued success in your future endeavors.

—Aubrey Everhart.

I sighed and opened the other letter that was addressed directly to me.

Dear Mr. Hamilton,

FUCK. YOU.

Overrule (v.):

To reject an attorney's objection to a question of a witness of admission of evidence.

Aubrey

New York City was an entirely different universe. It was nothing like I expected, yet everything I wanted all at once.

The sidewalks were persistently packed with people rushing to get somewhere, the streets were seas of taxis, and the cacophony of sounds—the shouting from the street vendors, the rumbling of the subway below, and the endless chatter between the executives and casual-ites all blended into an almost pleasing melody.

Not that I had much time to listen to it, anyway.

The second I arrived in New York last week, I'd checked into a cheap hotel and rushed to register for the NYCB audition.

Every day for the past week, I jumped out of bed at four in the morning and headed to Lincoln Center to learn the required audition piece—the hardest choreography I'd encountered in my life.

It was faster, choppiest, and the instructors refused to show it more than twice a day. There was no conversation outside of tempo counts, no questions were allowed either. On top of that, the company's pianist only elected to play the accompanying music at full speed, never slowing down to make the learning process easier.

There were hundreds of girls vying for a place in the company, and from what I gathered from conversations here or there, most of them were already professionals.

I didn't let that deter me, though.

When the grueling practices came to an end, I took that chance to find a new place in the city to dance on my own: A rooftop in view of Times Square, an abandoned historical store on the Upper East Side, or in front of bookstore windows in the West End.

Despite my immediate love for this city, it wasn't enough to distract me from my heartbreak. Nor was it enough to distract me from the fact that today, official audition day, I was late.

Sweating, I jumped off the subway and ran down Sixty Sixth Street—paying no mind to my burning lungs.

Keep going...Keep going...

A man to my left stepped out of a cab and I immediately jumped in.

"Lincoln Center, please!" I shouted.

"It's right up the street." The driver looked at me through the rearview mirror, confused.

"Please? I'm already late."

He shrugged and pulled off as I tried to steady my breathing.

Not wanting to waste any time, I pulled my black tutu out of my bag and pulled it over my tights. I took out my makeup and applied it the best I could, and as we approached the curb, I tossed a ten dollar bill at the driver and jumped out of the car.

Rushing into the building, I headed straight for the theater, relieved that one of the directors was still standing outside the doors.

“Yes?” She looked me up and down as I approached. “May I help you with something?”

“I’m here for the auditions.”

“For the *nine o’clock* auditions?” She looked at her watch. “It’s nine fifteen.”

“I’m sorry...I called an hour ago and said—”

“Your first cab broke down? That was you?”

I nodded.

She studied me for a few more seconds—pursing her lips. Then she opened the door. “You can change into your whites in the dressing room. Hurry up.”

The door shut behind me before I could ask what she meant by “[my] whites,” but as my eyes scanned the stage, I realized that every dancer was dressed in a white leotard and matching tutu.

Shit...

My cheeks heated as I looked over my outfit. I didn’t have my whites in my bag. They were at home.

Nearing the stage, I set my bag in a chair and tried to ignore that dread that was building inside my chest. I just needed to focus on giving it my all during this routine. That was it.

I found an open spot onstage and stretched my arms—noticing the smirks and whispers that were being thrown in my direction.

Undaunted, I smiled at anyone who made eye contact and continued my routine.

“May I have your attention, please?” A man’s voice came over the speaker. “Can everyone stop stretching and make your way to the edge of the stage, please?”

I set my leg down and followed the crowd, finding a spot on the end.

The man addressing us was a tall grey haired man with wiry glasses, and he was the definition of the word “legend”: His name was Arnold G. Ashcroft, and I’d followed him and his choreography for years. He was once the most sought after specialist in the world, but when he dropped in the rankings, it was only to his Russian rival: Paul Petrova.

“We’re happy to see such a huge turnout for this session of auditions,” he said. “As you know, due to a series of unfortunate events, we are overhauling our entire staff. That said, we are keeping our current production schedule as is, which means we will be filling in the roles of principle dancers, soloists, and corps members within the next fourteen days.”

“Rehearsals will be long and hard—four to ten, midnight if need be, and there will be no room for excuses or...” He looked me up and down, frowning at my attire. “*Mistakes.*”

“This is the first round of six. You will be told of your status once the music stops, and if you are sent home, please don’t hesitate to try again next year. I see a lot of failures from last summer, so I’m hoping you’ve learned something between then and now...”

“For this round, we’ll do a portion of the Balanchine routine in groups of eight. You may stretch for a few minutes and then we will begin.”

He waved at the man who was taking his seat at the piano, and then he turned around and gave a thumbs up to three people who were sitting in the judge’s seats. Smiling, he ascended the stage’s steps, and greeted a few familiar faces.

I made my way over and tapped his shoulder.

“Yes?” He turned around.

“Um...” I withered under his intense glare.

“Good morning, Mr. Ashcroft. My name is Aubrey Everhart and I’m—”

“*Late.*” He cut me off. “You’re also the only performer who isn’t wearing the mandatory white.”

“Yes, well...” I stammered. “That’s why I want to speak with you.”

“Oh?”

“I want to know if you would allow me to go home and change.”

“And why would I allow that, Miss Everhart?”

“So I can audition with the group this afternoon and be judged fairly. I just think that I’ve already—”

“Stop.” He pressed a pen against my lips. “Ladies, may I please have your attention?”

An immediate silence fell over the theater.

“I want you all to meet *Aubrey Everhart*.” He smiled. “She’s just informed me that due to the fact that she was late and decided to wear improper attire to her audition today, that there’s a chance she’ll be judged unfairly.”

The ballerina across from me folded her arms.

“Now,” he said. “Since the world of ballet is fair and has always been about catering to the needs of the *unprepared*, is there anyone who would have a problem if I allowed Miss Everhart to go home, change, and return for the auditions at six?”

Every dancer on stage raised her hand into the air.

“I thought so.” His tone was cold. “If you think a wrongly colored tutu is going to affect how well you perform, you should leave right now.”

I swallowed, wishing I could disappear.

“You can dance in the first group.” He shook his head at me and walked away.

Disregarding the soft snickering from the other girls, I returned to my former spot on stage and stretched once more. I tried to block out everything that had gone wrong this morning and pretended that I was in Durham again—dancing for one of the best directors in the world.

“Miss Everhart?” A woman said my name, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Yes?”

“Are you going to take your place at center stage with everyone else, or do you need more time to find it?”

I smiled at the judge’s table and stepped into the line.

The woman signaled to the pianist and he played the B-flat scale before starting the piece. As his fingers forced the notes, my arms went high above my head and I slowly spun around on my toes—wincing as my right pointe slipper cracked.

I ignored the pain and continued the routine. Terribly.

Each time I attempted a jump, I landed off balance and slipped an eighth of a count behind everyone else. My turns were awkward—frantically paced, and my pointe work was so choppy that I bumped into the girl next to me.

Embarrassed, I murmured sorry and spun around, but I lost my balance and fell onto the stage. Headfirst.

I ignored the loud outburst of laughter from the dancers in the audience and stood up, attempting to fall back into the routine.

“Stop!” Mr. Ashcroft bellowed from the side of the stage, making the notes come to an end.

He walked in front of our line and stepped directly in front of me.

“I just looked through your file, Miss Everhart.” He looked unimpressed. “You recently studied under Mr. Petrova?”

I nodded.

“Use your words, please.”

“Yes...” I cleared my throat. “Yes, I did.”

“And he wrote an actual recommendation letter on your behalf?”

“Yes sir.”

He looked at me in utter disbelief. Shock. “You expect me to believe that when you dance so stiffly? When you’re a count behind each and every step?”

“Yes...” My voice was a whisper.

“Well...At least you can always say that you studied under one of the greatest choreographers of all time. You can leave my theater now.”

My heart sank. “What?”

“I don’t think you’re a good fit for our company. We’ll email you this evening with a link to purchase discounted tickets for the season’s shows.”

A tear rolled down my face, and as if he could see that he’d just broken my heart, he patted my shoulder.

“I can tell that you’ve had training,” he said. “Very good training. And I can see that you have potential, but we’re not interested in *potential* here. For the rest of you, congratulations! You’ve earned yourselves a spot in the next round of auditions. Now, please clear the stage so the next group of dancers may perform.”

A loud applause arose from the hopefuls in the audience, and I felt as if I was watching my life fall apart in front of me. Hurt, I followed the dancers to the side steps—unsure of what to do next.

Grabbing my bag, I avoided the pathetic glances of the hopefuls and shook my head.

“That just goes to show you,” Mr. Ashcroft said to the other panelists, laughing, “even Petrova picks duds sometimes.”

I turned around.

Enraged, I marched up the stage’s steps and took a seat on the white line. I untied my right slipper and prepared another one—bending it forward and backward until it felt right.

“You can change your shoes in the restroom, Miss Everhart.” Mr. Ashcroft chided. “The stage is for actual performers. Or did Petrova not teach you that?”

“I need another chance,” I said. “Just because I didn’t nail the Balanchine piece that doesn’t make me a bad dancer.”

“Of course it doesn’t, honey.” He mocked me. “It makes you a *failed dancer*, who is currently using my stage and sucking up precious audition time for those who might actually make the cut in my company.”

I walked over to the pianist. “Tchaikovsky, *Swan Lake*. Act two, scene fourteen. Do you know that piece?”

“Umm...” He looked confused.

“Do you know it or not?”

“Yes, but—” He pointed to another judge who was now standing and crossing her arms.

“Could you please play it?” I pleaded with my eyes. “It’s only three minutes long.”

He let out a sigh and straightened his back, strumming the keys of the piano. With no count off, he played the first few notes of the concerto and the soft sounds echoed off the theater’s walls.

“Miss Everhart, you’re wasting everyone’s time...” Mr. Ashcroft’s face turned red as I slipped into fifth position.

I could hear him sighing and tsk-ing, could hear the other hopefuls murmuring, but as I twirled around the stage and transitioned from an arabesque to a grand jete, their talking stopped.

The notes lingered longer—darker, as the song progressed and I made sure each motion of my hands was smooth and graceful. As I leapt across the stage and completed a series of perfect pirouettes, I could see Mr. Ashcroft rubbing his chin.

Before I knew it, I was in a trance and I was dancing in the middle of Times Square, underneath flashing lights and a star-filled sky.

I continued dancing long after the last note, humming the additional refrain that most pianists ignored, and I ended by leaning forward on my left leg—holding my right one in the air behind me.

The panelists stared back at me. Their faces expressionless.

“Are you done, Miss Everhart?” Mr. Ashcroft asked.

“Yes...”

“Good. Now, get the hell off my stage.”

I stood upright and bit my lip to prevent myself from breaking down in front of them.

“Thank you very much for the opportunity...” I grabbed my bag and rushed off stage—running down the hallway and outside the building.

I stopped in front of a trashcan and bent over, waiting for the inevitable vomit.

Deep down I knew that I was a good dancer—that I’d just danced my heart out, and I honestly felt like I deserved a second chance.

The thought of failing had never crossed my mind when I signed up for this audition, and the option of returning to Durham was too painful to bear.

Heaving, I tearfully weighed my options: 1) Go home and rejoin Mr. Petrova’s dance program. 2) Go back inside and tell the panel they’re all fucking idiots, or—

“Miss Everhart?” Someone tapped my shoulder.

I spun around, finding myself face to face with a stoic Mr. Ashcroft.

“Yes?” I wiped my face on my sleeve and forced a smile.

“What you just did on stage was rude, unprofessional, and *horrible*. It was the worst thing I have ever seen a prospective dancer do and I didn’t appreciate it all...That said, be here *on time* for the second round next week.”

My jaw dropped and I didn’t get a chance to scream or say thank you.

He was already gone.

I pulled out my phone, anxious to tell someone that I’d made it to the next round, but I had no one to call.

All I had were angry texts from my parents, tons of their missed calls, and I knew better than to reach out to them right now. They didn’t really give a damn.

I searched for Mr. Petrova’s number—hoping I’d saved it, but an email from Andrew appeared on my screen.

Subject: Your Resignation.

I was tempted to open it, but my heart wouldn’t let me do it. He was the main reason why I fled here, and I didn’t need him intruding on my new life.

I deleted his message and decided that I wasn’t going to think about him anymore. All that mattered now was ballet.

Months later..

Rebuttal (n.):

Evidence introduced to counter, disprove or contradict the opposition's evidence or a presumption, or responsive legal argument.

Andrew

The fall season came and went, taking the changing leaves and amber sunsets with it. New interns filled the positions at GBH, new cases and clients packed the calendars, and as winter enveloped the city, one thing remained clear: Durham was only one step above the shit ladder when compared to New York City.

At least when it came to the winter, anyway.

This was the coldest winter the city had experienced, and since it was a Southern town, they were ill-prepared. The courtroom I was currently sitting in featured blankets lined against the windows instead of proper insulation, and there were space heaters jutting from every outlet.

There were few salt trucks available to control the icy streets, even fewer people who actually knew how to drive in such weather, and for whatever reason, there were no more suitable women available.

“Andrew?” Mr. Bach tapped my shoulder. “The prosecution is done with the witness...Are you going to redirect? That last line might have influenced the jury.”

“Permission to redirect, Your Honor.” I stood up from the table.

The judge nodded and I stared at the woman on the stand. She’d been lying through her teeth since this trial began and I’d had enough.

“Miss Everhart—” I cleared my throat. “I mean, *Miss Everly*, do you believe that leaving your husband in his time of need was what was best for your company?”

“Yes,” she said. “I told you that during our first meeting.”

“No.” I shook my head. “You told me that you loved him and that your sole reasoning for leaving him was because you thought he didn’t love you back. Is that not true?”

“It is, but—”

“So, because he didn’t say that he loved you on *your terms*, because he told you he was actually incapable of loving you that way, you decided to leave him. Didn’t you?”

“No...I left him because he was spending the company’s money on unnecessary things and cheating on me.”

“Did you ever think about *his feelings*?” I asked. “Did you think to simply ask if your leaving would affect him—whether you were on good terms or not?”

“He was...” She was breaking down. “He was cheating on me...”

“Was he? Or did you just want more than what he was willing to give you emotionally, Miss Everly?”

“Please stop...”

“Is it possible that you could be making all of this up?”

“No, never. I would never—”

“Is it possible that you’re a *fucking liar*?”

“Order! Order!” The judge banged her gavel and the jury gasped.

“Counsel, my chambers. NOW!”

I stared at the fake tears falling down Miss Everly’s face. This case was a wrap.

I walked into the judge’s chambers and shut the door. “Yes, Your Honor?”

“Are you out of your goddamn mind?”

“Excuse me?”

“You just called your own witness a fucking liar.”

I looked through the window, seeing that the bailiff was handing her a box of Kleenex.

“Are you on a new prescription?” she asked. “Drinking? Smoking something other than Cubans?”

“Because I’m having one bad day in court?”

“Because you’ve had *several* bad days in court.”

“I don’t recall calling any of my other witnesses fucking liars...”

“You called for an objection during the reading of a verdict.”

“Maybe I didn’t like the sound of it.”

“Maybe, but you never mess up in my court.” She paused. “*Ever*...Please go get yourself checked out, Mr. Hamilton. I’d really hate to be the judge presiding over your very first loss.”

She motioned for me to follow her out of her chambers. She took a seat in her chair and announced that the current trial was being postponed due to a rare rule brought up by the defense, and that we would reconvene two weeks from now.

Relieved, I closed my briefcase and ignored a red-faced Miss Everly.

“Mr. Bach,” she said, glaring at me, “I would really like for us to win this case, so could you please —”

“It’s already taken care of,” he said, cutting her off. “No worries.” He gave her a reassuring smile and asked Mr. Greenwood to walk her out to her car. Then he turned and looked at me.

“Andrew, Andrew, Andrew...” He sighed. “I think you need some time off. I’ll take over this case, alright? And Mr. Greenwood and I will be in contact with any of your clients who have cases within the next few weeks.”

“You’re overreacting,” I said. “It’s one fucking case.”

“One fucking case that you’re on the verge of losing.”

“I *never* lose.”

“I know.” He patted me on the shoulder. “Go home, Andrew. You’ve actually never taken a vacation anyway. Maybe it’s what you need right now.”

“No.” I grabbed my briefcase. “I’ll see you at the Reber consultation tomorrow morning.”

He called after me, but I ignored him. I sped back to GBH, prepared to immerse myself in more work. I was avoiding my condo as much as possible lately; I could hardly stand to be there.

Unopened condoms lined my wet bar—a reminder of how long it’d been since I had pussy, empty liquor bottles lined all of my window sills, and my Cuban cigar selection was long gone.

“Are you okay, Mr. Hamilton?” the main secretary asked as I walked through the firm’s doors.

I ignored her. Too many people were asking me that question lately and I was tired of hearing it.

I shut myself inside my office and pulled my phone’s chord out of the wall. I didn’t need any distractions.

For the rest of the morning, I read over my files in utter silence—not even answering emails from my own clients.

“Jessica!” I called her once the clock struck noon. “*Jessica!*”

“Yes, Mr. Hamilton?” She walked in right away.

“Is there any reason why you suddenly decided to stop organizing my case files by date?” I slid a folder across the desk. “Any reason why you’ve decided to stop doing your goddamn job?”

“You think I actually have time to organize all your case files by date? Do you know how long that takes?” She raised her eyebrow. “That was *Miss Everhart*’s idea. I told her it was a waste of time, but I guess not. If I have some free hours in between the Doherty case next week I’ll try to do that.”

“Thank you.” I ignored the fact that my heart skipped a beat when she said *Miss Everhart*. “You can get out of my office now.”

I pulled the papers from the file and began reorganizing them. As I clipped all of the witness testimonies together, Jessica cleared her throat.

“You miss her, don’t you?” she asked.

“Excuse me?” My head shot up.

“Aubrey,” she said, smiling. “You miss her, don’t you?”

I said nothing. I just watched as she sauntered over to me, slowly raising the sides of her skirt to show that she wasn’t wearing anything underneath.

Smiling, she picked up my coffee cup and took a long, dramatic sip.

“*Jessica...*” I groaned.

“You don’t have to admit to it.” She plopped her bare ass atop my desk. “But it’s clear that you haven’t been yourself for quite a while...”

“Are your ass cheeks touching my desk right now?”

“You don’t even insult me the normal way that you used to,” she said. “I actually miss that.”

I pulled out a box of Clorox wipes.

“She doesn’t stay in her old apartment anymore, you know. I think she moved.”

“What makes you think I care about where an ex-employee lives?”

“Because the address you gave me for that envelope and red box delivery belonged to her.”

“That was for an old friend.”

“Yeah, well...” She slid off my desk. “Your old friend must share an address with *Aubrey Everhart* because I pulled up her records from HR and she definitely stayed there.”

Silence.

“I thought so.” She smirked. “So, since you and I are so close—”

“We are *not* close.”

“It’s my duty as a friend to let you know that you’re really letting yourself go...” She actually looked saddened. “You’re not shaving, you’re coming to work every morning reeking of alcohol, and you’re barely yelling at the interns...I haven’t had a wet dream about you in a very long time.”

I rolled my eyes and stood up, wiping the part of my desk where her ass had been.

“But, since I know your secret about *Aubrey* now, you can know one of mine,” she said, lowering her voice. “Sometimes, in the mornings, when she would bring you your coffee and shut the door, I would stand outside and listen...” Her eyes lit up. “And I would just pretend that it was me...”

“Pretend *what* was you?”

“*Aubrey*,” she said. “Clearly she was good enough for you to break the ‘I don’t fuck my employees’ rule.” She stepped toward the door. “I knew the second she started here that you liked her.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course I don’t.” She looked over her shoulder. “But I do know that the second she quit, you’ve been a shell of yourself. You have yet to realize that you’ve been wearing the same blue suit for two weeks straight.”



I took a long swig of scotch from the bottle, numbly staring at the images that were playing on my television screen. A little blond girl playing in the rain—stomping her red boots in every puddle she

could find.

“It’s time to go, Emma...”

I winced at hearing the sound of my old voice, but I continued watching the scene.

“Five more minutes!” She begged with a smile.

“You don’t even know what that means. You’ve just heard me say it...”

“Five more minutes!” She jumped into another puddle, laughing. “Five more minutes, Daddy!”

“It’s going to rain all week. Don’t you want to go home and—”

“No!” She stomped her feet in a puddle again, splashing me. And then she smiled innocently into the camera before running away—begging me to chase her.

I couldn’t bear to watch anymore. I turned off the TV and knocked the DVD player to the floor.

Fuck...

Walking down the hallway, I straightened the “E” and “H” frames that hung on the wall—trying my best not to look too hard.

I didn’t need to make myself another drink tonight. I needed someone to talk to.

I grabbed my phone from the night-stand, scrolling down my contacts for the one person who’d once kept the nightmares at bay. Aubrey.

It rang four times and went to voicemail.

“Hi. You’ve reached Aubrey Everhart,” it said. “I’m unable to take your call right now, but if you leave your name and number I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

The second the beep sounded I hung up. Then I called again, just to listen to that small snippet of her voice. I told myself that I wasn’t being pathetic by calling her five times—knowing damn well that she wasn’t there, but when I called the sixth time, she picked up.

“Hello?” she answered. “Andrew?”

“Hello, Aubrey...”

“What do you want?” Her voice was cold.

“How are you?”

“What do you want, Andrew?” she asked, even colder. “I’m busy.”

“Then why did you pick up?”

“It was a mistake.” She ended the call.

I drew in a sharp breath, shocked that she hung up on me. I started to type up an email, chastising her for being so rude, but I noticed that she hadn’t responded to my last three in months:

Subject: Your Resignation.

Even though the last two words of your resignation letter were ridiculous and unprofessional, I’d like to take you up on your offer to fuck you.

Name the time.

—Andrew.

Subject: My Suit.

Since you have yet to pick up your final check, should I assume that’s your way of letting me keep it to replace the suit you ruined?

—Andrew.

Subject: BALLET.

I stopped by your dance hall earlier. You weren’t there.

Did you quit that, too?

—Andrew.

I decided that I needed to replace her. Fast.

I grabbed my laptop from my nightstand and logged into LawyerChat, looking for another Alyssa-type.

I spent all night roaming the chat rooms, answering questions left and right—gauging the personalities of the askers, but none of them grabbed me. Still, one woman who was listed as a high profile lawyer with ten years of experience seemed promising, so I clicked on her chat box.

“If you have ten years of experience, what could you possibly need help with on this site?” I typed.

“You’re never too old to learn new things...Why are you on here?”

“I’m looking for a replacement.”

“You’re trolling for an employee?”

“No, just someone I can talk to and make cum occasionally.”

She blocked me.

I tried talking to a few other women—keeping my true words to myself, but ultimately they just wanted to use me for information. They weren’t open to talking about anything else, and since LawyerChat had expanded its site recently, there seemed to be an influx of law students using it as a complaint board about their professors.

I shut the laptop and took another swig from my bottle—immediately realizing that there was only *one* “Alyssa-type”: Aubrey...

Maybe I made a mistake...

Out the corner of my eye I spotted an envelope under the slit of my door. It hadn’t been there when I first arrived home, and it hadn’t been there a few hours ago when I ordered my dinner.

Confused, I walked over and picked it up.

It was an official court summons to testify in a New York hearing, but it wasn’t addressed to my new name. It was addressed to Liam Henderson.

Remedy (n.):

The means to achieve justice in any matter in which legal rights are involved.

Aubrey

The Firebird.

Jewels.

Swan Lake.

I wrote down the roles I wanted to audition for in my planner, smiling as I ran my hands across my acceptance letter for the umpteenth time. I had ten copies of it—two of them were framed, seven were for inspiration whenever I was feeling down, and one was for my parents. (I just hadn't had the time or energy to draft an "I fucking told you so" letter to mail with it.)

I looked at the clock on my wall and checked my phone, trying to suppress the butterflies that were fluttering around my stomach.

The guy I was now dating, Brian—a fellow dancer in the company, was supposed to call me with something important he wanted to talk about.

Ever since I met him, he'd been trying his hardest to woo me—taking me on dates in between rehearsals, joining me as I danced on rooftops and icy park benches. He was kind, sweet, funny, and the perfect example of what it meant to be a gentleman.

He was like the nice guy in the Old Hollywood movies, the type that held your hand for no reason at all, the type that walked you to your door and waited until you were completely inside before stepping away. He was the type that kissed you—softly and tenderly, whispering that he liked your lips, but never taking things any further.

In other words, he was nothing like Andrew.

Nothing like.

Even though his kisses never left me panting and wet, and his touches never set my nerves on fire, he never made me feel like shit.

My phone vibrated and I looked at the screen. Brian.

"Did you receive the roses I sent you today?"

I grinned, looking over at the red and white blooms on my fireplace.

"Yes." I texted back. "Thank you very much. I love them."

"I placed something else in the vase for you, too... You should use it to relax tonight. I'll be calling you after I get out of rehearsal."

"Looking forward to it." I added a smiley face at the end of my text and walked over to the vase, lifting the flowers up by their stems. There was a huge packet of pink bath beads and rose petals with a handwritten note across the front:

The next time you take a bath... Think about me...

—Brian

My heart fluttered and I couldn't help but want to immediately take him up on the idea. I slipped out of my clothes and headed into the bathroom, tossing the beads under rushing water.

As I let down my hair, I turned the volume on my ringer to the highest setting, and before I could set it down, I noticed a new email. Andrew.

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest, as it always did when one of his sporadic emails or calls graced my screen.

Everything in me told me not to open it, to continue ignoring him, and to let him feel just how alone and underappreciated I felt months ago, but I couldn't help it.

Subject: Thoreau & Alyssa.

You once said that you missed when we were Thoreau and Alyssa because I supposedly treated you better. I don't think I treated you any differently. I just really wanted to fuck you. But when we did meet in person, I unfortunately wanted to fuck you even more.

I personally prefer us as "Andrew & Aubrey" because on a night like tonight, when there's nothing I would rather do than fuck you against my balcony until you cum, at least I can actually picture what your pussy feels like and no longer have to imagine.

Pick up the phone...

—Andrew

I shook my head and set the phone down, mentally erasing that message and stepping into the tub.

I lay back and let the hot water rise to my chest, exhaling as it warmed my skin.

It was becoming easier to avoid thinking about Andrew now that I was talking to Brian, but it was harder trying to force myself to forget. I still thought about him late at night when I was in my bed, often wishing he was inside of me.

Nonetheless, I wasn't running back to him and his asshole-ish ways, and I would never allow him to come back to me.

Never.

I scrubbed myself clean with a soft loofah, trying my best to ignore the intense throbbing between my legs that always came when thinking about Andrew. I filled a ladle with water and poured it over my head—unable to push away the thought of Andrew washing my hair in the tub, of him telling me to stand underneath the streams and hold the wall as he grabbed my waist and fucked me from behind.

My fingers found their way to my clit as I remembered him bending me over the vanity in his bathroom, saying "I need you to fucking take it...All of it..." as he palmed my breasts and kissed his way down my spine.

I rubbed my clit in circles—shutting my eyes as I pictured his lips on mine, moaning as it swelled with every caress.

"Ahhhh..." I felt my nipples hardening as the water cooled, and I was close—so close, to coming, but my phone rang.

Andrew?

I immediately stood up and wrapped myself in a robe, rushing to answer it—telling myself that I could pick up his call "just this once."

"Hello?" I held the phone up to my ear without looking at the screen.

"Aubrey?" It was Brian.

"Hi..." I sighed, trying to mask my discontent. "How are you?"

"Is this a bad time? You sound kind of upset."

"I'm not upset. I was just getting out of the bath."

"Oh, well good," he said. "Did you use the relaxation kit I bought you?"

"I did."

"Did you also think about me?"

"Yes..." I lied, feeling slightly guilty. "How was rehearsal?"

I walked to my dresser and slipped into a T-shirt, listening to him recount the many ways that Mr. Ashcroft was the devil reincarnate.

“He’s worse than Mr. Petrova.” I pulled my hair into a ponytail.

“Worse than Paul Petrova?” He laughed. “I don’t believe you. I’ve seen that man’s documentary, seen him make grown men cry.”

“Well, maybe years ago. Don’t get me wrong, he’s still rude and overbearing, but he has a layer of softness that Mr. Ashcroft lacks.”

“I’ll take your word for it...” He cleared his throat. “How tired are you right now?”

“Not too tired, shockingly.”

“Well...I wanted to talk to you tonight because I needed to know if you wanted to try something new in our relationship.”

“Sure.” I climbed into bed. “What is it?”

“Phone sex...” His voice became deeper. “Have you ever done that before?”

I held back a laugh and quickly took off my shirt, tossing it to the floor. “Yes.”

“Would you want to do it with me? Like, right now?”

“Yes.” I grabbed my vibrator from a box and slipped under the covers, happy that I wouldn’t need to think about Andrew to have an orgasm anymore. “Yes, I would like that very much.”

“Good,” he said. “Well...”

Silence.

“Well, *what*? Are you there, Brian?”

“Sorry, I was taking off my shorts.” He hesitated. “So, what are you wearing?”

“Nothing...I’m naked.”

“You’re naked, Aubrey?” He sounded as if he didn’t believe me. “Are you sure you’ve had phone sex before? This is the part where you’re supposed to tell me that you have on lingerie. Work with me, please.”

“Okay...I’m wearing a black thong and a black—”

“No, not black. I don’t like black. Try blue, navy blue.”

“Okay, it’s a navy blue thong and a blue bra.”

“Yeah, that’s more like it. Now, take off the panties with one hand.”

I lay there motionless, not sure as to whether I should turn on my vibrator or not.

“Now, imagine me...” He groaned. “Imagine me impaling you with my cock—so deep inside of you, so deep...”

I sighed.

“Can you picture it?” His voice became hoarse. “I need you to picture it...and touch your vagina.”

“*What*?”

“Your vagina. Touch it.”

I stood up and put on a pair of pajama pants.

“Are you touching it, babe?”

“Ohhh yeah...” I pulled a sweater over my head. “I’m touching my *vagina*...”

“Are you thinking about me licking your folds? Running my tongue along your ass crack?”

“Brian, you’re actually...” I shook my head. “You’re breaking up...”

“I’m going to stroke you down real good with my tongue, babe. Then I’m going to ram my cock into you again and again—never stopping even if you say no...You can’t say no...”

I grabbed a sheet of paper and crumpled it next to the phone. “I can’t hear you anymore, Brian...Reception in my bedroom is getting really bad...” I hung up in the middle of his panting and scrolled through my old emails—breaking down and reading the old messages from Andrew, the only man who could ever make me cum with words...

Whether I hated him or not, I needed a release and I knew this was the only way...

Stay (n.):

A court-ordered short-term delay in judicial proceedings.

Andrew

“Mr. Hamilton?” The flight attendant tapped my shoulder. “All of the other passengers have departed the plane sir. Thank you for flying first class, and I hope you enjoy New York.”

“I’ll try.” I stood up and grabbed my briefcase from the overhead bin.

I’d tried to get out of coming here for weeks, but it was to no avail. The second I booked my ticket, I canceled all of my consultations and meetings, asked for an extension on my current case, and packed one suitcase. Just one.

I didn’t need to be in this city longer than a day, and I refused to even testify. I was going to submit a written testimony to the judge and immediately return to Durham.

As I walked through the airport, I noticed that a few things had changed, but not as much as I’d hoped. People still walked at a breakneck pace, the air still reeked of failure, and the top newspaper was still *The New York Times*.

I placed a few dollars into the paper machine, twisting the key so it could spit out my copy, and then I flipped to the middle section where the justice pieces were kept.

There it was. Section C. The story that covered the entire page:

Another Hearing in the Ongoing Hart Trial: Henderson to Testify This Week

I skimmed the article, slightly impressed that the journalist was writing facts this time and not smearing my name for the hell of it.

I also noticed there were still no pictures of me.

Figures...

“Over here, Mr. Hamilton!” A brunette waved as I stepped off the escalator. “Over here!”

I walked over and she held out her hand.

“I’m Rebecca Waters, lead attorney.”

“I know who you are.” I offered her a firm shake. “How fast can we get to the judge’s chambers?”

“The judge’s chambers?” She raised her eyebrow. “I’m supposed to check you into the hotel so we can discuss your testimony...You’re supposed to stay here for a couple weeks.”

“My return flight leaves in fifteen hours.”

She looked shocked. “You only want to submit a written testimony? After all this time?”

“I find it quite impressive that you know how to listen and comprehend at the same time.” I looked at my watch. “Where is the town car?”

She groaned and led me down the bustling terminal, through the gates, and into the executive car lot. She was babbling about how “important” this case was, how it would finally close a chapter on my life, but I wasn’t listening.

My mind was literally counting the seconds I had left in this place.

“Good morning, sir.” The driver grabbed my bag as we approached the car. “I hope you enjoy your stay in New York City.”

I nodded and slipped into the back seat, rolling my eyes when Rebecca sat next to me.

“Could you at least stay for one night and think about this, Liam?”

“What did you just call me?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Andrew...I mean, Mr. Hamilton. Could you at least think about it?”

“I just did.”

“Fine.” She pulled out her phone, and I looked out the window as the car coasted through the city.

I winced as we passed a billboard where my old firm once held an advertisement, shut my eyes when we passed Emma’s favorite toy store.

“Mr. Hamilton...” Rebecca tapped my shoulder. “As a lawyer, I’m sure you know how much more compelling an oral testimony can be over a written one. I am begging you to reconsider this.”

“And I’m begging you to get over it.” I looked her directly in the eyes. “He and Ava ruined my life and I don’t have shit to gain by sitting in a courtroom full of strangers and explaining how. You want an emotional testimony? Hire a fucking drama student to read my words to the jury.”

“Things have changed. It’s not like it was six years ago.”

“That’s why *The New York Times* still won’t print my picture?”

“They won’t print your picture because they think you’re an asshole.” She snapped. “You also won a huge and expensive case against them years ago or have you suddenly forgotten that? Take it as a compliment that they’re even mentioning you in a positive light.” She tossed yesterday’s paper into my lap. “They even ran that piece. Looks pretty damn good to me.”

I picked up the paper and brought it close to my face, and before I could read the article, two words caught my eye: Aubrey Everhart.

Her name was at the bottom of the page, mixed in with several others, in a beautiful black ad:

The New York Ballet Company to Celebrate New Cast Members with Saturday Night Gala.

Tomorrow...

“I just...” Rebecca was still talking. “I just think you should at least stay for a night, clear your head, and really think about this.”

“I’ll stay until tomorrow.”

“Really?” Her eyes lit up.

“Yes.” I stared at Aubrey’s name again. “*Really.*”

Harass (v.):

Systematic and/or continual unwanted and annoying pestering, which often includes threats and demands.

Andrew

The prosecutor shook my hand over coffee and tea the next night, batting her light brown eyes.

“Thank you so much for agreeing to stay for a few weeks, Andrew,” she said. “This is going to be a real help in this case.”

“I’m sure...” I stood up and walked over to the window, looking at the snow covered streets below.

“Your old partner has definitely hired the best lawyers money can buy, and has paid fines and suffered penalties for years, but I think we can finally send him to prison with the new evidence that we have. That, and your testimony, of course.”

I said nothing.

“I’m not sure how you would feel about this, but...” Her voice trailed off, and seconds later she was by my side. “Would you like to catch up on all we’ve missed since you’ve been gone?”

“Excuse me?”

She rubbed my shoulder. “You left New York and you never looked back. You didn’t call anyone or keep in touch...We were such good friends and you—”

“Okay.” I cut her off and grabbed her hand, moving it away. “First of all, *no*, I do not want to catch up on shit. I don’t give a damn about what I’ve missed.” I looked her up and down. “But from the look of things, it hasn’t been much. Second of all, yes, we *were* friends. Past tense. You didn’t call or keep in touch with me when everyone in this city was dragging my name through the mud, did you?”

Her cheeks reddened.

“You didn’t even call to ask me if the rumors were fucking true.” I pointed to the door. “So, please don’t think that just because I’ve agreed to help put an asshole where he belongs, that you and I are, or will ever be friends.”

“I’m so sorry...”

“It’s six years too late for that.” I turned around. “I’ll be in court when I’m needed. You can leave now.”

I waited until I heard the sound of the door close and called the town-car driver. “What time do I need to leave for the gala if I want to be there once it starts?”

“Now, sir.”

I hung up and slipped into my coat, taking the penthouse’s private elevator to the lobby. Rushing through the hotel’s exit doors, I spotted the car across the street and headed over.

“We should be there in about thirty minutes, Mr. Hamilton.” He looked at me through the rearview mirror. “Are you meeting a date at this event tonight?”

“No,” I said. “Why are you asking?”

“Because if you were, I was going to suggest that we stop at the floral stand that’s three blocks down.”

“We can stop.” I looked out the window as he pulled off.

I’d thought about telling Aubrey that I was in town, or “good luck” for her performance tonight, but I didn’t see a point. Besides, last night, in a moment of weakness, I sent her a rather vague email and her

rare response didn't encourage further conversation.

Subject: Happiness.

Are you happy with your current life away from GBH? Are you pursuing your ballet dreams finally?

—Andrew

Subject: Re: Happiness.

Please stop emailing me and delete my number.

Thank you.

—Aubrey

“Mr. Hamilton?” The driver held the door open. “We’ve arrived...Do you plan on getting out of the car?”

“Thank you.” I grabbed the bouquet of roses and lilies off the seat and gave him a tip, telling him that I needed him to stay close, that I may be bringing someone else back with me.

The line to enter the venue was wrapped around the block, so I skipped everyone and walked straight through the front door.

“Excuse me, sir?” An usher immediately stepped in front of me. “There’s a line outside for a reason.”

“I don’t like to wait.”

“None of us do sir,” he said, crossing his arms, “but that’s gala policy unless you already have a ticket. Do you have a ticket?”

“I don’t like those either.”

He unclipped a radio from his belt buckle. “Sir, please don’t make me call security. You have to purchase a ticket just like everyone else, and you have to stand in line just like everyone else. Now, I’m going to kindly ask you to—”

He stopped mid-sentence once I handed him a clip of hundred dollar bills. “Did you say your ticket was in the front row, sir?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what my ticket says.”

He smiled and led me down the hall, into a colossal room that featured floor to ceiling windows, glimmering chandeliers, and freshly polished marble floors. Hundreds of tables were dressed in white table cloths—stamped with lavish gold and silver centerpieces, and the letters “NYCB” were etched onto every dinner menu and program.

There was no formal stage in this room, only a slightly elevated platform that stood in the center—in perfect view for all the dinner tables.

“Will this seat be okay for you, sir?” The usher waved his hand over a seat that was directly in front of the platform.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Dinner will be served in about an hour, the sponsors of the NYCB will be honored shortly after, and then the short tributes and the dance portion of the gala will begin.”

I thanked him again as I took my seat. If I had known the exact order of the program beforehand, I would’ve shown up much later.

Picking up the brochure in front of me, I flipped through the pages—stopping when I saw Aubrey’s face.

Her picture was taken mid-laugh, as she tossed her hair over her shoulder and looked directly into the camera. According to the picture, her hair was much shorter now—it barely touched her shoulders, and her eyes looked more hopeful and happy than I’d ever seen them.

I stared at the picture long and hard, noting all her new changes.

The lights in the room flickered, and a soft applause arose as a woman dressed in all-white stepped onto the platform.

“We will begin now,” she said. “Thank you ladies and gentlemen for attending the Annual New York City Ballet Company Gala. It is with great honor and pride that we present tonight’s artists—principle dancers, soloists, and corps members. As you know, due to quite a few unfortunate circumstances, we had to replace nearly ninety percent of our group over the past few months, but as always, the show must go on. And, I truly believe that this is the best class we’ve had in a very long time.”

The audience clapped.

“Our company will be performing several productions this year, but the ones that will be presented this winter are *The Firebird*, *Jewels*, and our company favorite, *Swan Lake*.”

More applause.

“Tonight, our corps will introduce themselves to you personally and perform small tributes as a thank you for your continued support of the arts. And as always, when it comes to the art of dance, please do not applaud until after the last note has played. Thank you.” She walked away and the lights transformed from a stark white to an airy blue, then they dissolved into heavy hues of purple and pink.

One by one, the dancers came out—reciting a short monologue and dancing to a short piece of piano music. While most of the performers were entertaining, a few of them made me wonder if they’d simply awoken this morning and decided try ballet for the first time.

In between the sets, I could hear a few murmurs from the crowd: “Are they sure this is their best cohort?” “Maybe they should’ve canceled the season after that accident...” “Hopefully, they’ll be having nonstop rehearsals until the season actually begins...”

A man next to me was whispering about how he missed “the good old days of the company” when Aubrey stepped onto the floor.

She was wearing a thin black top and a pink tutu, and her lips were coated in a deep dark red.

“Good evening, New York City,” she said. “My name is Aubrey Everhart, and...”

She was saying something else, something that made the audience clap loudly, but I could only focus on how good she looked. I’d never admit it to anyone, but I’d kept that photo frame of us on my nightstand ever since she left—looking at her pretty face at night whenever I had a bad day.

Tonight she wasn’t “pretty,” though. She was a fucking vision.

Her mouth stopped moving amidst another round of applause from the audience, and the soft sounds of a piano and harp slowly filled the room.

Aubrey shut her eyes and started her routine, dancing as if she was the only person here.

There was an immediate change in the gala’s atmosphere. Everyone watching her was fully engaged—captivated, by her every move.

Out of nowhere, a male dancer joined her, picking her up and holding her high above his head—spinning her around as the music became harsher. After he set her down, the two of them completed steps together—smiling at each other and exchanging glances that made it clear that they knew each other a little too well.

The second the music stopped, the male dancer pulled her into his arms and kissed her lips.

What the fuck...

The crowd stood to its feet and clapped for the first time all night, but I remained seated, completely taken aback by what the fuck I just saw.

“Maybe I won’t have to cancel my season tickets after all, eh?” The man next to me winked. “Bravissimo!”

I narrowed my eyes at Aubrey and her partner, seething as he wrapped an arm around her waist and strummed his fingers against her skin. He whispered into her ear and she blushed, making my blood

pressure soar to an all-time high.

“Well, what a response!” The director took the floor. “Thank you, Miss Everhart and Mr. Williams. I want you all to know that those two will be headlining next month’s Silver Moon Gala as well...” She continued talking, saying more about the program, but her words were soundless to me.

I was confused by what I just saw—not sure if Aubrey’s mouth had actually been on someone else.

More dancers took the floor, more applause, more speeches, and my thoughts remained the same. It wasn’t until the patrons took the floor, that I realized that the showcase part of this evening was over.

“Are you interested in donating to the NYCB?” A ballerina, still dressed in her white performance outfit, stepped in front of me. “Would you like to make a contribution?”

“My *contribution* was the ticket I bought for tonight.” I stood up, leaving the flower bouquet behind, and walked off in search of Aubrey.

It didn’t take long to find her.

Dressed in a rather revealing silver dress, she was in a corner laughing with her male dancer friend, batting her eyes as he handed her a drink.

“Excuse me, sir?” Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Yes?” I kept my eyes on Aubrey.

“Um, if you stay for the after-portion of the event, you have to donate...It’s part of the rules. It was written in bold so—”

“Here.” I handed her whatever bills were left in my wallet.

She disappeared.

Aubrey’s friend kissed her forehead and stepped away, giving me the perfect opportunity to approach, but she was swarmed by a group of other ballerinas.

Friends, it seemed.

I waited for their conversation to end, until she told them she’d join them later, and then I made my move.

As she turned around, I placed my hand on her shoulder—feeling a jolt shoot through my veins. “Good evening, Aubrey...”

She dropped her glass to the floor and slowly turned around.

“*Andrew?*” She stepped back. “What are you doing here?”

“Does it matter?”

She didn’t answer.

Neither of us said anything further, and that familiar tension that had always existed between us began to thicken with every second that passed.

She looked even more beautiful up close, and I was tempted to push her against the wall and reconnect, but I held back.

“Can I speak with you?” I asked.

She looked me up and down.

“Aubrey...” I looked into her eyes. “Can I speak with you?”

“No.”

“Excuse me?” I raised my eyebrow.

“I said *no*.” She crossed her arms. “As in, *no* you may not speak with me, and you can go back to wherever the hell you came from.”

She walked away and headed to the dance floor.

I sighed and went after her, clasping her hand and spinning her around. “It’ll only take five minutes.”

“That’s five more than I’m willing to give you.”

“It’s important.”

“Are you *dying?*” Her face turned red. “Is it a life or death matter?”

“Does it really have to be?” My hand caressed her cheek, temporarily silencing her. “You look fucking beautiful tonight...”

“Thank you. My boyfriend thinks so, too.”

“Your *boyfriend*?”

“Yes. You know, that person who doesn’t treat you like shit just because he likes you and you like him back? Interesting concept, isn’t it?”

I didn’t get a chance to respond to that.

The orchestra struck a sudden loud chord that reverberated through the room, and a voice came over the speakers.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” it said. “The Benjamin Wright Orchestra will now play their rendition of one of Tchaikovsky’s most revered pieces. The tempo of this song has a similar pacing for what some of you may know as the waltz. Please join us on the floor for this classic homage...”

I grabbed her hand and entwined it with mine, securing my free hand around her waist.

“What are you doing?” She hissed and tried to pull away. “I’m not dancing with you.”

I tightened my grip around her. “*Yes you are.*”

“Please don’t make me scream, Andrew...”

“What makes you think I wouldn’t love to hear that?”

She tried to move away from me, but I held her still.

“Five minutes,” I said.

“*Three,*” she countered.

“Fine.” I loosened my grip and swayed her to the music. “Are you aware that your boyfriend is a *male ballerina*?”

“The correct term,” she said, rolling her eyes, “is a *danseur.*”

“He’s a fucking ballerina...” I dipped her to the floor. “Is this what you’ve been doing for the past few months?”

“Living out my dream free from a certain asshole?”

“I expect more from you if you’re going to date someone else.”

“I don’t give a damn what you expect.” She hissed. “He’s everything you’ll *never* be...”

“Because he kisses you in public?”

“It’s more than that...But that’s on the never-ending list of things he has on you.”

“Does he make you cum?”

“He doesn’t make me *cry.*”

Silence.

I felt her pulling away from me, but I held her still. “Are you fucking him?”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t. I just want to know.”

“We haven’t had a conversation in months and you think you’re entitled to know who I’m sleeping with?”

“I wouldn’t necessarily use the term *entitled.*”

“No.” She pressed her chest against mine. “No, I am not fucking him, but you know what? I will be soon.”

“You have no reason to if I’m here.”

She burst into laughter and stepped back. “You think I would sleep with you? Seriously?”

“Aubrey—”

“Do you really think I’m that stupid?” She cut me off. “I don’t want anything to do with you, Andrew. You’re nothing but a muse for an orgasm, a good visual for a hand-fuck, and I may miss you, but—”

“You miss me?”

“I miss the *idea* of you—of what you could’ve been.”

“We can’t be friends?”

“We can’t be anything.” Her lips were close to mine.

“Why am I finding that hard to believe?”

“You shouldn’t.” She glared at me. “Because in order for me to ever entertain you outside of this dance, I would have to take you back.”

“Then take me back.”

“*Please!*” She scoffed, looking angrier than I’d ever seen her before. “You would have to beg me to take you back, Andrew. Fucking *beg* me...”

“Hey Aubs.” Her ballerina boyfriend interrupted us. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes.” She stepped away from me and kissed his cheek. “Everything is more than okay.”

“Who’s your friend?”

“*No one,*” she said. “Just some guy who made a donation.”

“Thank you for your donation.” He shook my hand like a woman and turned to Aubrey. “Are you ready to go home?”

“More than ready.” She took his hand and walked away from me without glancing back.



I stood on the balcony of my hotel room, completely confused about what had happened a few hours ago. I was expecting Aubrey to leave with me, to come back to my hotel so we could fuck and catch up.

Unable to stop thinking about it, I sent her an email:

Subject: Your Address.

We need to finish our conversation. Tell me where you live so I can come over and talk.

—Andrew.

Subject: Re: Your Address.

I highly doubt you only want to talk. You just want to fuck.

Nonetheless, I’m pretty sure Brian wouldn’t appreciate you coming over tonight.

—Aubrey.

Subject: Re: Re: Your Address.

He’s more than welcome to watch. He might actually learn something.

—Andrew.

No answer.

She didn’t respond for a long time, and when she finally did, all she sent me was a text:

“Leave me alone, Andrew. Please.”

I couldn’t. I emailed her again.

Subject: Sponsor.

I bought golden level season tickets. One of the benefits is getting a tour from the cast-mate of my choice. It will definitely be you.

—Andrew.

Subject: Re: Sponsor.

Thank you for that pointless information. If you do choose me, we won't be alone, and I'll make sure that our tour ends in the exact time allotted.

Now, please leave me alone. I'm out with someone who admires my brain more than my pussy.

You had your chance, you fucked up, and I'm not sure why you're in New York right now but I really don't care.

I seriously don't want to hear from you...Please go away.

—Aubrey

I sighed and scrolled down my contacts. I knew she was simply being difficult, and I wasn't going to let her get the last word. I pressed call on an old number and held it up to my ear.

"Who is this?" the old voice said over the line.

"I need an address."

"Who is this?"

"I need an address. Now."

"Liam?" There was a smile in his voice. "Is that you?"

"It's *Andrew*." I rolled my eyes. "Are you going to help me or not?"

"Well, since you asked so nicely..." There was a familiar humming sound in the background. "You know, I haven't heard from you since the last time I saw..." He stopped himself and cleared his throat. "What's the name?"

"Aubrey Everhart."

"Do you know what borough?"

"No," I said. "But the address can't be more than a few months old. She just moved here."

He was silent for a little while, tapping and touching buttons.

"Found it," he said. "7654 Fifth Avenue."

Five blocks away...

I thought about whether I should wait until morning to stop by, but I was already putting on my coat.

"It was nice hearing from you again, Liam..." the old man's voice brought me back to the present. "Good to know you're well and...getting over what happened."

"I'll never get over it." I hung up and headed outside, signaling for the town car driver to open the back door.

"Where to, Mr. Hamilton?" he asked.

"7654 Fifth Avenue."

"Right away."

It took less than twenty minutes to get there, and when we arrived I stared at the brownstone for a while. It looked like something I would've purchased years ago when I lived here, something far out of budget for a ballerina, so I figured her parents were paying the rent.

Stepping out of the car, I adjusted my coat and walked to her door—knocking five times.

"Coming!" She yelled.

The door swung open, but she wasn't standing behind it. It was her boyfriend.

"Um..." He looked confused. "Did you leave the pizza in your car or something?"

"I'm not a fucking pizza guy. Where is Aubrey?"

"It depends. Didn't we just see you at the gala?" He crossed his arms as Aubrey stepped into the doorway. "Who are you?"

"He's no one, *again*," she said, standing on her toes to kiss his lips.

He looked at me with his eyebrow raised as he returned her kiss.

"My cock has been in every inch of her mouth." I gritted my teeth.

Aubrey gasped, her cheeks turning bright red. “I am so sorry, Brian... Can you give us a moment please?”

He looked between the both of us, anger creeping onto his face, but he walked away.

“What do you fucking want, Andrew?” She fumed. “*What do you want?*”

“To talk.”

“About *what?*”

“You and me, about us being friends again...”

“That will never fucking happen. Is that it?”

“Aubrey—”

“What brings you to New York, huh? Did you need to come back and fuck some familiar women on Date-Match? Did Durham somehow run out of pussy?”

“It’s actually starting to feel that way.”

She started to close the door, but I held it still with my hand.

“I miss you, Aubrey...” I looked directly into her eyes. “I really do, and I’m...I’m sorry for kicking you out that night.”

“You should be.” Her voice was a whisper. “And if you really miss me, you’ll leave me alone.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re bipolar. Because the second I ask one too many questions, or suggest something outside of your comfort zone, you’ll treat me like trash again and I’d rather cut my losses now.” She wiped a tear from her eyes. “I was your only friend—your only fucking friend, and you treated me worse than any of the women you met online. If anything, *I’m* sorry that I ever let you do that. Please leave.”

“Aubrey, listen...”

“Is there super glue on my floor?” She pushed me down a step. “Is that why you’re still standing there?”

“Please, just—”

“Lie about one thing, lie about it all, right?” She pushed me again. “You’re still the biggest liar between the two of us. Lying by omission is still lying.”

“Can you please calm down and let me talk about this with you inside?”

“I thought you hated rhetorical questions.” She slammed the door in my face.

A Priori Assumption (n.):

An assumption that is true without further proof or need to prove it.

Aubrey

I woke up the next morning on edge, in utter shock.

I couldn't believe Andrew was in New York, couldn't believe he'd admitted missing me on my front steps last night.

Seeing him again brought out every emotion in me, and even though I'd told Brian that Andrew and I were done, I'd spent the rest of our date last night thinking about him.

Him and his perfect suit. Him and his perfect lips that nearly pressed against mine as we argued. And, shamefully, him and his perfect cock that I felt hardening in his pants as he dipped me on the dance floor.

Ugh!

I got out of bed and sent Brian a text. "Today is my one on one day with Ashcroft..Wish me luck!"

His response came immediately. "Good luck, babe! Get some coffee, you're going to need it..."

Slipping into the shower, I scolded myself. "Brian is a sweetheart and he's good for you...He may suck at phone sex, and you may have no desire to sleep with him right now, but he treats you better than you've ever been treated before..."

When I was wrinkled and prune-like, I stepped out and checked the time.

4:30 a.m.

I had twenty minutes to make it to the closest subway station and avoid the ire of Ashcroft. Throwing on some old sweatpants, I grabbed my ballet bag and snatched my coat from the bannister in the hallway. I double checked my wallet to make sure I had my metro pass, and when I opened the door, I found myself face to face with a stranger and a cup of steaming hot coffee.

"Good luck at practice today," he said, handing it over. "This was made especially for you."

"Since when do coffee shops deliver?"

He shrugged. "They don't."

I stared at the cup as he walked away, noticing that my name was etched atop the whipped cream in thin caramel, and that "Good luck," was written in cursive on the label.

It was a signature, sweet Brian move, and I immediately felt guilty for not giving him my full attention last night. As I walked to the subway, sipping what was arguably the best coffee I'd ever had, I vowed to give him my full attention from here on out.

I deleted all of Andrew's old texts and emails, even the ones I'd fake deleted by placing them in the archive. I blocked his number, preventing his calls from ever getting through, and although I couldn't block his emails, I changed the settings of my inbox so they would go straight to my spam folder.

When I finally arrived at practice that morning, I danced better than I'd ever danced before...



Later that night...

“How do you find the time to take the subway just to meet me at practice and walk me home?” I looked up at Brian as we crossed the street. “Where do you find the energy?”

“I make time for all the things I really like.” He kissed my forehead.

“Do you want to catch a movie this weekend? My treat? I owe you one...”

“What makes you say that?”

“I still feel bad about gala night and what that guy from my past said to you,” I said. “I’m really sorry.”

“No worries. I’m sure he’s—” He stopped talking as we approached my house, pointing at the man who was leaning against the door.

Andrew.

I took a deep breath as Andrew walked down the steps.

“Good evening, Aubrey,” he said, smirking. “And your name is *danseur*, correct?”

“It’s *Brian*.”

“Close enough.”

Brian crossed his arms. “I could’ve sworn I overheard her say that she didn’t want you anymore. Why can’t you take the hint?”

“Because she says things she doesn’t mean all the time.” He looked at me, instantly setting my nerves on fire. “And I know she’s just angry with me.”

“Dude!” Brian let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m her boyfriend so clearly she’s moved on...She has a *boyfriend*.”

“I honestly don’t feel threatened,” he said, still looking at me. “Did you get my coffee this morning?”

What?! “That was from you?” My eyes widened. “I thought...”

“What coffee, Aubs?” Brian looked concerned. “What is he talking about?”

“Andrew...” I shook my head. “Thank you for the coffee, but that doesn’t make up for anything...”

“I never said it did.”

A cold wind brushed by and I felt myself being drawn to him, literally drawn to him, and I took a few steps forward. But then I took a few steps back.

“I’m with Brian now...” I grabbed Brian’s hand and led him up to my door, refusing to look back at a seemingly hurt Andrew.

I shut the door and peeped through my blinds, noticing that he was still standing there. Confused.

“Look, Aubs...” The sound of Brian’s voice got my attention. “I don’t think the two of us are going to work.”

What? No, no, no. Of course, we will. This is just a minor issue.”

“I think your heart and mind are elsewhere...I think they always have been, actually.”

“Seriously?” I crossed my arms. “Because some psycho from my past shows up for one night and suddenly wants me again? That’s what makes you think that?”

“That, and the fact that some psycho sent me a text earlier today that said, “Her pussy belongs to me.” I’m just now remembering that...”

I sighed and he walked over, kissing my forehead.

“If it’s a minor issue, and he doesn’t mean anything to you anymore, we can try again in a month.”

“A month?”

He nodded. “That way I’ll know for sure, and our phone sex will be twice as amazing since we won’t have had it in so long...Then, maybe we can upgrade to actual sex.”

I said nothing, and he walked out of my place.

I peeped through the blinds again, watching him disappear into the night, and then I noticed that Andrew was still standing outside.

Livid, I stomped down the steps and headed straight toward him. “Do you have any idea how much I hate you right now?”

“Hate isn’t something that can be adequately measured.”

“You just ruined the one great relationship I had in this city. You just made him dump me.”

“Good,” he said. “I did you a favor.”

“Is this how you’re planning on getting me to talk to you again?”

“Part of it.”

“It’s not going to work.” I pressed my finger against his chest, emphasizing every syllable. “I told you that you would have to fucking beg me, and since I know that’s not how you operate—”

“You don’t know how I fucking operate.”

“Are you going to walk me to the subway station every morning?”

“I have a fucking car.”

“Walk me back from rehearsals?”

“Same answer.”

“Actually treat me with some goddamn respect?”

He cupped my face in his hands. “If you give me a chance to...”

I stepped back, still angry. “I’m not holding my breath.”

Omission (n.):

Inadvertently leaving out a word, phrase or other language from a contract, deed, judgment or other document.

Aubrey

Subject: Brian-gate.

I'm not sure how many more times I'll have to apologize for making your "boyfriend" dump you, but I am, in fact, sorry. Then again, maybe I should have waited until after you fucked him so you could be more appreciative.

—Andrew

"Ugh!" I tossed my phone across the room, nearly knocking over the beautiful vase of lilies he sent me yesterday.

Ever since last week's "Brian-gate," I had to face him every day in some capacity. In the mornings, he personally brought me my favorite coffee, walked me to the block where my subway stop was, and apologized profusely. In his own way, of course.

I never said a word back, though. I just sipped from my cup and listened.

Taking a seat on my couch, I grabbed an ice wrap and placed it on my shoulders. I was counting down the days to opening night, wondering how much more pain my body could take.

My feet were now unrecognizable; I no longer soothed their cuts and blisters. The muscles in my arms ached relentlessly, and when I told Mr. Ashcroft that I needed a few extra minutes to stretch my right leg yesterday, he said, "Then I need to replace you with a dancer who doesn't."

I cringed at the memory and heard a knock at my door.

"Coming!" I walked over and opened it, tempted to slam it shut once I saw Andrew.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Practice starts in an hour. You're going to be late."

"I'm not due there until the afternoon session. Thank you for the reminder."

"Can I come in until then?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Do I really need a reason?"

"I just want to talk to you for a few minutes, Aubrey."

"We can do that over the phone."

"You blocked my fucking number." He narrowed his eyes at me. "I've tried that already today. Twice."

"Have you tried email?"

"Aubrey, please..." He actually looked sincere.

"Fine." I held the door open. "But you have to leave in five minutes so I can take a nap."

He stepped inside and looked around, running his hands over the artwork in the halls.

Looking slightly impressed, he rubbed his chin. “Are your parents paying for this?”

“No, I haven’t spoken to them since I left.” I admitted. “A retired dancer from the company rents out all her condos to the newest cohorts.”

“Is it expensive?”

“Not at all.” I sat on the couch. “It’s the only way I can afford to live in this part of town. Otherwise, I’d be sleeping in a cardboard box.”

He stared at me for a while, not saying a word.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing. It’s just been awhile since you spoke a full sentence that wasn’t filled with malice.”

“Don’t get used to it.” I winced and placed another ice wrap on my shoulder. “I’m just trying to make your five minutes with me somewhat memorable.”

“They will be.”

Silence.

He walked over and sat next to me on the couch. “You got an A on your final assignment at GBH.”

“Did you give it to me out of sympathy?”

“I gave it to you because your work was the best.” He looked into my eyes. “Although, I could have done without the “FYI: Mr. Hamilton used to fuck me in his office” note that was at the end.”

I held back a laugh.

“Jessica misses you by the way.”

“Really?”

“She claims I was much more desirable when you were around,” he said. “And apparently she used to listen to us have sex.”

“What?”

“There’s no point in even trying to fire her anymore...I think she grew on me.”

“Do all the interns still hate you?”

“No.” He smiled. “For some strange reason, they started to like me shortly after you left.”

“Are you insinuating that your asshole behavior was my fault?”

“No.” He pulled me into his lap and took the ice wrap away. “I’m insinuating that I no longer pretend to care about any interns when my favorite one is missing.”

I blushed and he started to massage my shoulders—slowly kneading his hands against my skin.

I shut my eyes and exhaled, slightly tilting my head back instead of telling him to stop.

“Do you plan on ever accepting my apology?” he asked, pressing a kiss against my neck.

“No.”

“Is there any way that I could *make you*?” His fingers gently rubbed my collarbone, alleviating the pain.

“You could tell me the real reason you’re in New York...” I felt him unsnapping my bra. “I know you didn’t come all the way here just to see me.”

He kissed my shoulder. “You *don’t* know that.”

“I’m serious, Andrew.”

“As am I.” He pressed his palms into my back, temporarily rendering me speechless. “You’re a huge part of the reason why I’m still here, actually.”

“And the other part?”

He tilted my head back so I was looking directly into his eyes. “The other part doesn’t really matter.” He looked as if he wanted to kiss me, but he held back.

Instead, he slipped his hands underneath my legs and flipped me over so I was lying in his lap. “What time is your rehearsal again?”

“Four...” I barely managed. His touches felt too good.

“Can I drive you?” He softly kneaded the back of my shoulders. “I can do this to you for longer if you don’t take the subway...”

I nodded and shut my eyes, falling asleep at the mercy of his hands.



Hours later, Andrew pulled over to the curb at Lincoln Center.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and looked at him. “Are you going to be standing outside the ballet hall when I get done today?”

“Probably.”

“With hot chocolate?”

“Would you prefer something different?”

I smiled. “No...”

He leaned over and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “I thought I was doing the right thing by kicking you out that night, by pushing you away...It was definitely a mistake.”

“I’m not coming back to you just because you said that.”

“I didn’t ask you to.” He trailed his finger against my lips. “I would, however, like you to consider forgiving me.”

“I’ll think about it. Just because you—”

His lips were on mine—kissing me, begging me, saying all the things he couldn’t say with words. And this time I was listening, missing everything we once had before he pushed me away.

Not letting me go, he ran his fingers through my hair and caressed my neck.

“Go think about *that*,” he whispered, slowly pulling away from me.

“Um...” I struggled to catch my breath as he stepped out to open my door.

“I’ll see you tonight.” He kissed my lips before leaving me standing in the middle of the street, completely breathless again.

Shit...

I headed toward the dance hall, confident that I would dance like I was on air today. I opened the doors and felt someone grabbing my shoulder from behind.

“Aubrey?” The voice asked. “Aubrey, is that you?”

I turned around, shocked. “*Mom?* What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you...”

I noticed the pin on her suit, “Vote Smart. Vote Everhart,” and knew that wasn’t true. She was in town for something that had to do with my father’s campaign; I was only a pit stop.

“Well, now you’ve seen me...” I turned away and slipped inside the building.

“Wait, Aubrey.” She followed me. “Do you really think that moving across the country was the best way to get me and your father’s attention?”

“I didn’t leave North Carolina to get your attention.”

“Well, you certainly have it.”

“And look, it only took twenty two years...”

She sighed. “We’ve decided to talk to the department chair about letting you pick up where you left off during the summer semester. We can do that since you’re so upset about being a part of the campaign.”

“I’m not upset. I honestly don’t care.”

“Of course you do.” She sounded offended. “But if it makes you feel any better, we placed a picture of you and one of your ballets in our campaign brochure.”

“Did you do that so you could look like you actually care about college arts?”

“No, we donated fifty thousand dollars to Duke’s dance program to look like we actually care about college arts. The brochure picture was *personal*, although it would’ve been even better if you wrote that essay we begged you to write. We could’ve put that next to the picture.”

I felt a pang in my chest. “When does your flight leave, mother?”

“Excuse me?”

“When does your flight leave?” I repeated, my voice cracking. “I’m pretty sure it’s in three hours or less so you won’t have to spend a full day here, so you can go back and tell Dad that you tried to convince me to come home after you fulfilled your campaign work. I’m sure that’s still all that matters to you.”

She was silent.

“I left Durham because I’ll be living here for at least three years—which is the length of my contract with the company, where I’ll be pursuing my real dream. And I must say, it’s just a bonus that I won’t be anywhere near you.”

She gasped.

“Have a safe flight. Tell Dad I said hello.”

“You’re just going to leave me standing here?”

“You’ve done it to me my entire life.” I left the building. I was too angry, too hurt, to completely focus. I sent Ashcroft an email—letting him know I was using a sick day, and headed for the street.

“Aubrey!” My mother called from behind, but I kept walking. “Aubrey, wait!”

She finally caught up to me and grabbed my arm. “I can miss my flight...”

“And why would you want to do that?”

“So I can spend time with my daughter before she forgets that I exist...”

I held back tears.

“I can stay here for a few days and we can catch up in between your dance schedule,” she said. “I’ll make your dad fly up too if that’s okay with you?”

“That would be perfectly fine...” I nodded, but then it hit me. “No campaign talk, though.”

“Done deal.”

“No talking about me going back to law school, either.”

“I can live with that, too.” She nodded.

“And no talking shit about ballet.”

She hesitated, but she nodded again. “Okay, fine.” She hugged me. “Can you hail us a cab so I can book a room at the Four Seasons?”

“Why? You can just stay at my place.”

“Oh, please.” She slid a pair of shades over her eyes. “I looked up what professional ballerinas make. I know what type of apartment you can afford in this city, and daughter or not, I refuse.”

I didn’t want to laugh, but I couldn’t help it. I knew making up would be a long process, but I was willing to give it a try.

She walked over to a newspaper stand, and I held out my hand for a cab.

“Oh, *The New York Times* always picks the best cases to cover.” She flipped through the paper. “There’s one hell of a trial going on this week.”

“Criminal or corporate?” I asked as a taxi flew right past me.

“Both,” she said. “And I actually know this guy. Well, I know *of* him anyway...Absolutely incredible lawyer...”

“We’re never going to get a cab at this rate.” I shook my head at being snubbed again.

“I doubt he’ll ever get recognition for that government case...”

“What are you talking about?”

“Liam Henderson.” She held the paper in front of me, pointing to a picture-less article. “Remember? He’s on me and your dad’s list of lawyers who’ll never be given the credit they deserve because they

went against the government. This guy was your favorite, I do believe.”

“Oh, yeah.” I remembered. “So, why is he in the paper now? Did he mess up because he didn’t receive his due fame? Is he in trouble?”

“No, looks like he’s just testifying in a case. Article claims he’s been living down in the South and even partnered at some firm, but that can’t be true. Any firm down there would be bragging if they had him, and I haven’t heard anything.”

“I’m sure they would.” I finally waved down a cab. “We can go now.”

“It’s quite weird though.” She tapped her lip. “In all of his career, I’ve never seen a picture of him—maybe one or two, but they were stock pictures from his college days. I’m sure he looks different now.”

“Mom,” I said, opening the car door. “The cab charges by the minute.”

“Now the article claims he’s been living in North Carolina under an assumed name for the past six years. But of course, they’re not revealing *that* name. They need to get better researchers, don’t you think? How could a lawyer of that status manage to change his name, switch states, and still practice the law?” She handed me the paper as she stepped into the cab. “He’d have to erase his entire identity and start all over. Who would do that?”

I gasped and flipped to the article as I sat in the backseat. I read it word for word, over and over, and everything around me became a blur. I could practically feel my jaw dropping as I flashed back to my first interview at GBH:

Miss Everhart, are there any lawyers that you wish to model your own career after?” Mr. Bach smiled at me.

“Yes, actually,” I said. “I’ve always admired the career of Liam Henderson.”

“Liam Henderson?” Andrew looked up at me with his eyebrow raised. “Who is that?”

Suppression of Evidence (n.):

The improper hiding of evidence by a prosecutor who is constitutionally required to reveal to the defense all evidence

Andrew

Former Partners to Finally Appear in Court Opposite Each Other:
Hart Case Continues This Week.

That's what the headline in the judicial section of *The New York Times* read this morning. To those who knew nothing about the case, I was sure that it was simply another story to pass the time, another superficial scandal to devour with their morning breakfast.

But for me, it was the end of a six year chapter that had gone on for far too many pages. It was part of the reason why I left, part of the reason why after I testified in a few days, I would leave this city for the very last time.

I looked outside the window at the Waldorf Astoria's restaurant, wondering how it could possibly be raining so heavily in the dead of winter.

"Mr. Hamilton?" A woman in a suit stepped next to my table.

"Yes?"

"I'm Vera Milton, the general manager," she said. "You've had several calls from a Miss Ava Sanchez... She keeps telling us that it's important and that she needs to speak with you. She's on the line for you now..."

I sighed. "Could you patch her call to my room in two minutes please?"

"Certainly sir."

I left the newspaper on the table and headed straight for the penthouse suite. As soon as I unlocked the door, the phone in the parlor room rang.

"Hello?" I answered.

"It's me..." Ava said softly.

"I'm aware. How did you find out where I was staying?"

"Really?" She scoffed. "I need you to do me a favor..."

"Goodbye, Ava."

"No, wait." She sounded frantic. "I really am sorry for everything I did to you, Liam."

"What did I tell you about calling me that?"

"I remember when you visited me when I was being held in jail—before all the hearings started...Remember?" She paused. "I know how hard seeing me must have been back then, how lonely you had to be to come and visit *me* of all people...You even told me you were contemplating changing your name to Andrew and leaving New York...And then I begged you to save me. Remember that?"

"I'm really not in the mood for story time right now."

"You were such a softie back then...So compassionate, so caring—"

"Get to the fucking point, Ava."

"At the trial this week, I know that Kevin—"

"I.e. my former best friend that you fucked?"

"Yes." She sighed. "Him..."

“What about him?”

“He’s not the monster you think he is.”

“Are you calling about a favor that’s never going to happen, or are you calling to be his fucking character witness? I’m confused.”

“He’s still sorry for what he did...He was—”

“Which one is it, Ava?” I snapped. “I’m not a fan of this vague shit.”

“Do you really want to hurt him?” Her voice softened. “I think you’ve already punished us enough. I’m already behind bars, so there’s really no need for him to suffer at this point. ”

“The two of you will never suffer enough.” I hung up and sent a text to an old contact I had at corrections, telling him that Ava had contraband in her cell.

The last thing I wanted to think about was my old partner and former best friend. The only time he needed to be thought of was during the upcoming hearing, and never again after that.

I scrolled through my text messages, noticing that Aubrey had sent me a simple “Okay” when I asked how today’s audition went.

With the exception of the day I massaged her shoulders, she was still being short with me.

I opened my inbox to send her a longer message, but I saw that she’d sent me one first.

Subject: Yes.

I just received your newest set of flowers and your note about going on a date tonight...I have a few stipulations, though.

—Aubrey

Subject: Re: Yes.

Name them.

—Andrew

She sent a new message.

Subject: Date.

I’m allowed to ask you whatever I want and you have to answer truthfully.

—Aubrey

Subject: Re: Date.

I always answer truthfully. Is the word “stipulations” not plural?

—Andrew

Subject: Re: Re: Date.

You have to be a complete gentleman. I don’t want to be fucked in another bathroom...

What time are you picking me up?

—Aubrey

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Date.

I actually wasn’t planning on fucking you tonight, but since you’ve clearly entertained that possibility, I’ll be sure to send a list of potential locations prior to the date.

Eight o’ clock.



I knocked on her door at 7:58, dressed in a black designer suit I'd purchased hours ago.

There was no answer, and before I could knock again, the door swung open and she stepped out wearing a short black dress that left little to the imagination.

"Are you aware that it's still winter?" I trailed my finger along her exposed shoulders. "You're going to need a coat."

She looked behind me. "You took the subway here?"

"Yes."

"We're taking the subway on our *date*?"

"The car will come later." I smiled as confusion spread across her face.

She grabbed her coat from inside and shut the door, looking up at me. "Do you even know how to use the subway?"

"Of course I do," I said, clasping her hand. "I wasn't always well-off when I lived here..."

A light snow fell as we made our way to the subway tunnel, and she leaned against me—pressing her body closer to mine. Holiday lights were strung about the tallest buildings—sparkling against the night, and a faint sense of excitement swirled through the air.

There weren't that many people out tonight, and as we boarded a nearly empty train, Aubrey laughed at that fact.

"This is the first time I've ever seen a subway like this," she said. "I usually have to fight for my own tiny space."

"Hmmm." I prevented her from taking a seat, instead making her share a pole with me. "How did your audition really go today? Surely you have more to say about it than okay."

"I was crying when I sent that text. I was overwhelmed."

I raised my eyebrow.

"I landed *Odette/Odile* in *Swan Lake*—on a *professional* level." She looked as if she was about to burst into tears. "I still can't believe it...All of my dreams are actually coming true."

"Maybe you're meant to play that role..." I wiped a stray tear from her eyes.

"Maybe." She leaned closer. "I'm just happy that they're giving us the next few days off...I think I'll be able to relax and keep up with the news a bit more. You know, actually have some semblance of a life outside of the dance hall."

"You could spend more time with me if you want to take a break. The news in this city is overrated and mostly false."

"Is that so?"

"Yes," I said, looking into her eyes. "I wouldn't believe half of the shit in any of these papers."

She smiled. "Have you heard anything about the huge trial that's happening this week?"

"I'm pretty sure there's more than one."

"No..." She shook her head. "Not like this one..."

I hesitated. "What makes this one so special?"

"It's more intriguing than special...It's about two lawyers who once shared a firm—both of them were big shots, you know? One of them even won against the government in his very first case."

"It was probably a lucky break."

"I don't think so." She looked into my eyes. "I've read the transcripts. He knew exactly what he was doing, and the verdict actually affected public policy."

I said nothing.

“But the thing is, he never got credit for his work—outside of word of mouth from people who knew the details, you know?” She paused. “But anyway, from what I’ve read and pieced together, it seems like he was falsely accused of a laundry list of federal charges a few years later.”

“Aubrey...”

“It looks like everyone ran with the story—all of the papers, all of the news outlets, and the truth wasn’t filtered until months later, after his name was already tarnished.”

I stared at her, begging her to stop, but she continued.

“The charges are still pending against his old partner to this day, that’s just how many there were. But *him*—this upstanding lawyer with one hell of a track record, he just vanished. Into thin air.”

“If he was that upstanding, then I’m pretty sure that’s impossible.”

“Is it?”

“*It is,*” I said.

“I thought that, too...” She searched my eyes for answers. “But I think the guy I’m talking about is capable of anything.”

“What are the names in this case you’re speaking of?”

“The accused is Kevin Hart, and the key witness is Liam Henderson.”

“I’ll google it tonight.” I sighed, not wanting to continue this conversation.

A voice came over the speakers, announcing our stop, and I took her hand again.

“I know you made me agree to stipulations,” I said, looking at her as we stepped off, “but can you agree to one of mine?”

“Depends on what it is.”

“Ask me the deep conversation questions after dinner.”

“Is that where we’re going right now?”

“No.” I led her up the steps. “I wouldn’t dare. I don’t want you accusing me of treating you like all my other dates.”

“Does that mean you won’t fuck me at the end?”

“It means I won’t leave you at the end.”

She blushed, and I kissed her forehead as we walked through the streets of flashing lights and sparkling billboards.

She didn’t say much of anything else as we moved from block to block, only blushing each time I looked at her.

“Here,” I said, stopping her as we approached our first destination.

“Broadway?” She looked up at the grand marquis.

“You mentioned you haven’t had the chance to come here yet,” I said. “I used to come here all the time when I lived here...”

“All the time?”

“At least once a week.” I held the door open for her. “Twice when this particular play was performed.” I ran my fingers across the words, *Death of a Salesman*, before handing our tickets to the usher.

She smiled as he led us to the private balcony, as he offered us complimentary wine since we were so early.

“I would’ve never taken you for the drama type,” she said, taking a sip from her glass. “You’ve never mentioned that to me before.”

“I actually almost went to theater school instead of law school.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“A law degree attracts a higher percentage of pussy.”

“What?!” She rolled her eyes, laughing. “I’m being serious.”

“I received a bigger scholarship for law school.” I resisted the urge to pull her into my lap. “Best decision I ever made.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but the lights began to dim and she leaned closer to me, whispering, “I would’ve liked to see you as an actor...I think you would’ve been really good at it.”

I felt her placing her hand on my thigh. “I don’t think I would’ve wanted to see you play anything serious though. I think I would prefer—”

“Are you going to talk through this entire play, Aubrey?” I cut her off, ignoring the tell-tale look on her face—the one of severe longing, needing.

“Am I not allowed to make comments?” She sounded offended. “Am I not allowed to do that until *after dinner* either? If that’s the case, why even take me out? Why would you even—”

“I’ve seen this play a million times...” I pressed my finger against her lips as the lead actor stepped onto the stage. “And although I want you to experience it too, if you would rather me entertain you in a *different* way, just tell me.”

“What?”

“Would this balcony make it onto your list of approved places?” I asked. “If I fucked you here, would that still count as me being a gentleman?”

Her eyes widened and she quickly moved her hand away from my lap. “I was just teasing you, Andrew...”

“I’m aware.” I kissed her neck. “And I’ve told you on numerous occasions that I don’t appreciate that, whether you’re mad at me or not...”

She sucked in a breath as I slid my thumb underneath her panties.

“I’ll stop asking questions,” she said. “I’ll watch the play...”

As she turned her face toward the stage, I moved out of my seat and kneeled in front of her.

“Andrew?” She whispered harshly as I spread her thighs apart. “What are you doing?”

“Making sure you enjoy the show.”

I didn’t give her a chance to respond. I quickly ripped off her panties, and buried my head in between her legs, running my tongue against her bare pussy—enjoying a taste I’d missed for months. I sucked her clit between my lips, shutting my eyes as it swelled in my mouth.

“Andrew...” She moaned as she squeezed her legs around my neck, grabbing onto my hair and begging me to slow down.

I couldn’t. She tasted too fucking good.

I forced my tongue deeper inside of her, claiming every part, marking what was mine.

Her hips began to rise off the seat, and I pushed them down—punishing her with stronger strokes, slipping my fingers inside of her and commanding her to stay still.

“I can’t...” She thrust her hips up again. “I can’t...”

A loud applause arose from the theater below us, echoing off the walls as the first scene ended.

I sucked her clit harder, darting my tongue against it repeatedly until she couldn’t help but scream my name across the theater.

Shaking, she grabbed my shoulders, gripping me harder than ever as she came into my mouth.

I held her thighs as she continued to shake, as tremor after tremor ran through her body.

As she came back down, I caressed her legs and kissed the inside of her thighs.

Grabbing her ripped panties off the floor, I wiped her clean. Then I stuffed them into my pocket before taking my seat again.

“Is something wrong sir?” An usher stepped into our balcony. “I heard a disturbance.”

“A *disturbance*?” I looked at Aubrey then back at him. “No, I don’t think there was one here.”

“Are you sure?” he asked concerned. “What about you, Miss? Are you okay?”

“Yes sir.” Aubrey nodded, attempting to look as normal as possible. “I’m more than fine.”

He walked away, and within seconds, she seemingly transformed into the Aubrey I remembered from months ago, the one that was incapable of not asking questions.

Not that I minded, though.

By the first intermission she'd asked all that was possible about the play and leaned against me, whispering, "This is perfect, Andrew...Thank you." And then she didn't speak again until the show ended two hours later.

"The lead was amazing," she said as the curtains closed. "I really felt all of his emotions in that last scene..."

"Me too." I helped her into her coat. "Do you have a curfew? Any time that I need to get you back home?"

"I'm twenty two years old."

"I'm well aware." I rolled my eyes. "I found that out the hard way, thank you. I meant, do you have a few more hours to spend with me or do you have to get up early?"

"Not until the afternoon..."

"Good." I led her out of the theater and signaled to the town-car driver across the street. "I want to take you somewhere else. Can I?"

"I would love that..."

I helped her into the town car and after I slid inside, she moved into my lap—pressing her lips against mine, whispering thanks once again.

Holding her close, I gave her a brief tour of my past as we drove through the city—grateful that the driver avoided driving by my former firm.

I showed her my favorite restaurants, my favorite places to relax, and a few places I would like to take her to before I left.

"We've arrived at the Waldorf Astoria, Mr. Hamilton." The driver looked at us through the rearview mirror. "Will this be the final stop for the night?"

"Yes," I said, noticing Aubrey narrowing her eyes at me.

"I thought you said—"

"Relax..." I kissed her forehead. "This is where I've been living since I flew here."

"Oh..."

I took her hand and walked her through the lobby and onto the elevator that led to the roof.

Opening the doors, I noticed everything was set up exactly as I asked: A lone white clothed table sat in front of a dancing fire, soft lights hung in waves across the trellis, and through the falling snow, the words "I'm sorry" twinkled against the building directly across from us.

"This is so beautiful, Andrew..." she said, looking around. "When did you change your mind about dinner?"

"I didn't." I pulled out her chair and uncovered the platter of chocolate and vanilla covered strawberries. "It's dessert."

"Did you think of all this yourself?"

"I did." I sat next to her and put my arms around her shoulders.

"You know," she said, "typically on a date the two people sit across from each other."

"Did you miss the memo about me making sure that I wouldn't treat you like any other date?"

"Not at all." Her mouth was on mine within seconds and my hands found their way into her hair.

Pulling her forward, I bit her lips and looked into her eyes.

She was silently telling me to take things further, rubbing her hand against my cock.

"Stop touching me, Aubrey," I whispered, warning her. "I'm not going to be able to be a gentleman anymore if you don't stop..." I stood up and walked to the door, giving myself some space. "I'm trying to prove to you that I can get through a date without fucking you..."

She followed me, smiling. "I'm pretty sure you already failed at that..." She threaded her fingers through my hair and hastily unbuttoned my shirt.

I wedged my knee between her legs and slid a hand across her thighs, sighing as I felt how wet she was.

"Aubrey..." I groaned as she reached into my pocket and pulled out a condom. "I can wait..."

"I can't." She freed my cock from my pants and rolled the condom onto me without letting my lips go.

I secured my arms around her waist and lifting her up, carrying her over to the rooftop's railing. "You have no idea how much I've missed your pussy." I kissed her lips. "And your mouth."

"Is that all you miss?" Her hands went around my neck.

"If it was, then we wouldn't be here right now." I slowly slid inside of her, filling her inch by inch, staring into her eyes as I remembered just how good she fucking felt.

Without saying another word, I slid my hands down to her sides and moved her up and down—groaning as her pussy gripped me tighter and tighter with every stroke.

Her lips found their way to mine, and neither of us let go—grinding into each other as a second light snow fell over us.

Her nails dug into my back as she came close to coming, her teeth trapped my bottom lip to prevent herself from screaming out.

"Don't let go yet, Aubrey..." My cock was throbbing inside of her. "Wait..."

She shook her head, fighting it, but she held on for a few more seconds—looking into my eyes.

"I missed you so much," I whispered. "So fucking much..."

Falling forward into my chest, she came with me—biting my skin as her legs went limp around my waist.

Both of us were breathing heavily, staring at each other as we once did months ago, and we remained entwined.

I kissed her lips, repeating how much I missed her, and she smiled—softly telling me to pull out of her.

"Would you like to stay the night?" I asked, picking up my jacket and holding it out for her. "You can tell me more about that case you're so intrigued with lately."

"The Henderson & Hart one?" she asked. "You really haven't heard anything about it?"

"No, but if you spend the night we can google it together."

"I don't think so." Her voice was suddenly flat. "I need to go." She adjusted her dress and walked over to the table, picking up her purse.

"Is something wrong?"

She didn't answer. She pulled out her phone to check the time and sighed.

"Aubrey, what are you doing?"

"Forcing myself to see that you're still the same and you'll never change." She looked hurt. "Your idea of the truth is, and will always be, duplicitous. That's all."

"Excuse me?"

"Thank you for a wonderful night...I'll always remember this and cherish it, just so you know."

"I'm really starting to wonder if you are, indeed, *bipolar*..."

"Why didn't you tell me that your name was Liam Henderson tonight?" She shook her head, and I inhaled a sharp breath.

"I gave you every opportunity to," she said, looking hurt. "I practically begged you to tell me, but you opened up about everything except for that."

I hesitated. "I was going to tell you everything later tonight, in bed."

"Sure you were." She scoffed. "Is there any reason why you didn't even tell me this when I said you were once my favorite lawyer in my interview?"

“Once?”

She nodded. “Yes. *Once*. The essays I used to read by Liam all stressed complete and utter honesty. I guess that all changed once he became *Andrew*.”

“Aubrey, don’t...” I stepped forward and she took a step back. “I was honestly going to ask you to come to the final hearing.”

“Can I use your town car to get home or do I need to call a cab?”

“Stop this. Now.”

“Cab it is.” She shrugged. “I wish you the best of luck with your testimony. And I hope you treat the next girl you find nicely from the beginning so she won’t have to love and leave you alone in the end.”

“Give me a chance to talk, Aubrey...”

“We have nothing more to discuss.” She opened the door. “*Please* do not follow me, Andrew. You can’t trust me and I can’t trust you, so I don’t want anything to do with this anymore and I need you to finally respect that.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but she spoke first.

“Goodbye Andrew, *Liam*,” she said, “whatever the hell your name is.”

“Aubrey...”

The door slammed shut and I knew it was pointless to go after her in that moment.

She was gone.

Swear (v.):

To declare under oath that one will tell the truth.

Andrew

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?” The judge said to me a few mornings later.

I said nothing, the sudden departure of Aubrey still fresh on my mind.

“Mr. Hamilton, I asked you a question.” The judge chided.

“I apologize,” I said. “I do swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God.”

“We may proceed.”

The defense lawyer stood up and cleared his throat. “Mr. Hamilton, your legal name was formerly Liam Henderson, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Could you please tell the court how you know my client, Kevin Hart?”

“We were once partners at Henderson & Hart.”

“Partners *and* best friends, correct?”

I looked over at an expressionless Kevin. He was dressed in a grey suit, still incapable of wearing a matching tie.

“Yes,” I said to the lawyer. “Once upon a time.”

“Is it true that you got into an altercation with him at a bar six and a half years ago?”

“Define altercation.”

He picked up a sheet of paper. “Did you walk into a bar and punch him? Leaving him with a broken jaw and a fractured ribcage?”

“He was fucking my wife.”

The jurors gasped and the judge banged his gavel.

“*Mr. Hamilton...*” The judge spoke sternly. “That type of language is not allowed in my courtroom. Please answer the question.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, I did injure Mr. Hart...*Severely.*”

“Similarly to how you injured your own wife?”

“*Objection!*” The prosecutor stood up. “Relevance, Your Honor?”

“Sustained.”

“Fine.” The defense lawyer held up his hands in surrender. “Is it true that you blame Mr. Hart for the downfall of your former firm?”

“Clearly the Department of Justice does since he’s the one on trial today.”

“*Mr. Hamilton...*”

“Yes.” I clenched my jaw. “Yes, I blame him for the demise of our former firm.”

“Is it true that you also blame him for the unfortunate death of your daughter?”

“*Your Honor!*” The prosecutor shot me a look of sympathy. “Relevance?”

“Overruled...Answer the question, Mr. Hamilton.”

I looked away from Kevin and balled my fists. "Yes."

"Your daughter died amidst the weeks leading up to the complete collapse of your firm, and within those weeks you managed to severely beat your partner, batter your wife—"

"I didn't batter my fucking wife. She made that shit up. Have you done any fucking research?"

The judge banged his gavel, but I continued talking.

"I'm not sure what low level community college was dumb enough to issue you a law degree, but the case between me and my wife was thrown out years ago because she lied about numerous things to a grand jury. And seeing as though she was sent to prison and I was cleared of all charges, you can accept that as a fucking fact. So, before you ask me another bullshit question and try to damage my character, remember that *your* client's livelihood is at stake during this trial. Not mine."

The judge let out a deep sigh, but he didn't say anything further. He just motioned for the defense to continue.

"During your partnership, is it true that your wife was in charge of all the firm's monetary dealings?"

"Ex-wife. And yes."

"And you never thought to double check where she was allocating most of the funds?"

"I had a degree in law, not accounting."

"So, you never thought it was slightly suspicious that your new firm was bringing in seven figures monthly?"

"No." I sighed, thinking back to those days, those clients. Everyone we dealt with had far more than I would earn in my lifetime and I thought nothing about the monthly profits Ava reported; I trusted her.

"Is it fair to say that the demise of your firm could be due to your wife's handling of funding?"

I gritted my teeth. "Yes."

"Interesting." He picked up a sheet of paper and asked the judge if he could approach me. "Could you read this to the court please?"

"I'd rather not," I said.

"You'd rather not?" He laughed. "Mr. Hamilton, as a lawyer yourself, surely you know that you will be held in contempt for refusing to read requested evidence."

"Read it, Mr. Hamilton." The judge demanded.

"You're a fucking liar, Ava." I read my old words. "You've fucked so many people behind my back that I've lost count. As far as I'm concerned, you deserve to rot behind bars. Maybe then your overworked pussy will get a much needed break."

A juror covered her mouth in shock, but I continued reading.

"Thank you for telling me that my cock was never up to par, that after all those years of marriage you were never satisfied...Since you and Kevin have not only managed to take away my firm, but have also ruined the one thing that made my life worth living, accept this letter as a goodbye." I looked up at the defense.

"Could you also read what you wrote after the PS?"

I rolled my eyes. "Since you'll only be around women for the next fifteen years, I suggest you give pussy a try. The taste is quite impeccable."

"Objection, your honor." The prosecutor stood up. "I don't see how this document is relevant to the case. The defense also failed to produce that letter during discovery. I move to strike."

"Sustained. Consider it stricken." The judge looked at his watch and then stood up. "Let's adjourn for lunch. Testimony will continue this afternoon."

As the jury and the courtroom attendees filed out, I sat still. I had nowhere to go.

"I didn't know he was going to bring up your daughter. I'm so sorry..." The prosecutor offered me a small smile. "I'll redirect once he gets done...Your partner is definitely going down, he's just trying to discredit your character a bit, to make him look a little more sympathetic to the jury."

“You are aware that I’m a lawyer as well, right?” I stepped off the stand. “I know exactly what he’s trying to do.”

I stepped out of the court and outside into a heavy snowfall, looking up at the sky. I considered leaving the courthouse and risking contempt, but a part of me wanted to help seal the deal on Kevin’s fate.

It’d been a long time coming—all the lies, the betrayal, the pain, and he deserved whatever he was going to get.

Someone tapped my shoulder from behind.

“You got a minute?” A familiar voice asked. Kevin.

“I don’t.”

“I figured...” He sighed. “Whatever happens at the end of this trial—”

“Did you not hear what I said?” I spun around to face him, taken aback by how haggard he looked up close. Time hadn’t been good to him at all.

“I’m sorry for everything me and Ava put you through,” he said with a genuine look in his eyes. “The money and clients were coming in so fast and we were all so young..”

“Young?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Young and dumb, you know? It was—”

“Dumb as fuck.” I clenched my jaw. “But it was more than stupidity, Kevin. It was greed. And when the newspapers started to put the pieces together, when the clients started demanding answers, you both turned on me. You blamed me... You filed for custody of Emma, knowing damn well you didn’t really want her. You just wanted to hurt me since you were her biological father.”

“Liam..”

“And you did.” I could honestly admit that once and for all. “You really fucking did...”

“If I could take it back—”

“You can’t.” I cut him off. “But you can tell me one thing...”

“What is it?”

“The night you ruined my life... Well, not the first night, the night that came months later, were you drinking?”

“What does it matter now?”

“Were you fucking drinking that night?” I glared at him and he sighed, looking down at the ground.

“Yes...”

“Thank you for finally being honest.” I scoffed. “I’ll sleep even easier at night knowing that you’ll be joining Ava behind bars after this week.”

“Ava’s back in prison?” He looked hurt, disappointed.

“Nine more years.” I smiled, but it quickly faded. “Six more than what Emma got.”

I didn’t give him a chance to respond. My heart was clenching at the thought of losing Emma again, at imagining all the pain she must’ve felt on her last day, so I shut my eyes—trying to block another dark memory from passing by.

Reasonable Doubt (n.):

Not being sure of a criminal defendant's guilt to a moral certainty.

Six years ago...

Liam Henderson

Living in New York never felt ordinary. Every day there was something new to discover, something I'd never seen before.

Even though I was still running on the fumes of winning one of the biggest, yet non-reported cases in the state, I was still trying to find myself—personally and professionally. I was realizing that national popularity would always elude me, but as long as I was under-rated and not over-rated, I was perfectly fine with that.

I dropped a book of essays on my coffee table once I heard a loud knock at the door. It was a familiar loud and annoying one that my best friend Kevin always used.

“You know, you can't keep coming over in the middle of the—” I stopped talking when I realized it wasn't Kevin. It was a woman and a man, dressed in grey suits.

“Are you Liam Andrew Henderson?” The woman asked.

“Who's asking?”

“Are you Liam Andrew Henderson?” The man spoke sternly.

“Depends on who wants to know.”

They both blinked.

“Yes,” I said. “I'm Liam Henderson.”

“You've been served.” The woman thrust a thick blue envelope into my hand, the tenth time this had happened to me this week.

“Is this some type of joke? Is the *New York Times* trying to get a rise out of me again?”

They exchanged glances, confused.

“I was just doing my job,” I said. “If they want to continue their pettiness by refusing to print my picture for the rest of their paper's life, that's fine. I'm okay with that, really. But serving me papers as a prank every day for a week and a half—”

“The SEC doesn't do pranks,” the woman said, before they both walked away.

I shut my door and immediately called Kevin.

“This better be an emergency,” he answered. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Has our firm pissed anyone off lately?”

“Of course we have. Why?”

“I just got served papers by the SEC, again.”

“Have you actually opened any of the other ones?” he asked.

“Two of them,” I walked over to my coffee table and pulled out a drawer. “Something about a client named Ferguson who claims we haven't been putting his money in escrow? He's suing us for five million and supposedly contacting our other clients. Do we even have a client named Ferguson?”

“We have three clients named Ferguson.”

“Have we pissed any of them off?”

“Not to my knowledge.” He sounded concerned. “I’m pretty sure they would’ve contacted us first before filing the charges, don’t you think? Are you sure it’s not *The New York Times* playing a mean joke on you? This is like the tenth letter you’ve received.”

“That’s the first thing I asked tonight. They said it’s not them.”

We were both silent for several seconds.

“It’s them.” We laughed in unison.

“Sorry for calling at this hour.” I stuffed the envelope into the drawer with all the others. “I’ll talk to you later.” I hung up.

“Daddy?” Emma walked into the living room, wiping her eyes as she walked over to me. “Can I go play?”

“It’s three in the morning, Emma.” I shook my head. “What do you think?”

“I want to go play...” She smiled, giving me that look that made me incapable of saying no.

I smiled back and kissed her forehead, thinking of where we could possibly go out at this hour. Central Park was out of the question, as was any park, really. There was a twenty four hour donut shop nearby that we could walk to or—

I stopped mid thought. Kevin was having a special playroom built for her at the office, a room that was twice the size of his own. He’d said it would prevent me from using “I have to go check on Emma” as an excuse when we worked on demanding cases.

“I know somewhere we can go.” I picked her up and carried her to her room, helping her into her favorite shoes—a pair of red rain boots she wore every day, even when it wasn’t raining. “Okay, go sit on the couch so I can get dressed and then we’ll go okay?”

She rushed out of her room without saying another word. I really needed to find a way to curb her wake-up-at-three-in-the-morning routine ASAP, but a part of me liked it. It was our special time together.

I put on a sweatshirt and sent my wife a quick email.

Subject: Emma.

Taking Emma out to play. Are you still at the coffee shop?

Love you,

Liam

Subject Re: Emma.

What are you going to say when she asks you for a pony?

(Yes, I’m still here...Tax season is going to be the death of me. Want me to bring you a cup back? Want to try a latte?)

I love you more,

Ava

Subject: Re: Re: Emma

Nothing. I’ll just buy the pony.

(No, thank you. You know I really hate coffee.)

Impossible. I love you more than you’ll ever know,

Liam

“I’m ready! I’m ready!” Emma rushed into my room, knocking over a stack of folders. “I’m ready!”

Laughing, I put my phone in my pocket and attempted to stuff the papers back in order—stopping once I saw my signature. Forged.

Confused, I sifted through the other papers—noticing the same thing.

What is this?

“Let’s go, Daddy!” Emma tugged on my pants.

I tucked the folder underneath my arm and clasped her hand. “Your nap today is going to have to last for at least five hours. Do you know that?”

“I don’t like naps.”

“Of course you don’t…” I walked her out of our apartment and to my car. As usual, Ava had slipped a note underneath the windshield wipers.

Dear Husband,

I love you—so very much, and it pains me to see you, someone with as much money and status as you have, driving a car like this. I know you’re modest, and the most expensive suit you own probably costs eighty dollars, but come on! You have to live, Liam!

I’m taking you car shopping next week and I’m not taking no for an answer,

Ava.

PS—Thank you for the roses you sent me yesterday. I got you something special and placed it on your desk at the office.

I smiled and secured Emma into her car seat, giving in when she requested to listen to her favorite song on repeat while riding to the firm.

The sleek design of the building still took people’s breath away when they saw it for the first time. It was the one thing I spared no expense on when constructing; I made sure the translucent gold panels were state of the art, that the law scale statues were properly erected on marble ledges, and that the stone letters above the entrance—“Henderson & Hart” were polished every week.

And, as a giant “fuck you” to the government for burying my first case, the case that should’ve made me a household name and landed me on billboards all over this country, I had the office built right in front of their Social Security Office.

Pulling into the reserved parking spot, I looked in my rearview mirror—seeing that Emma was fast asleep.

Figures…

I stepped out and carried her inside anyway. I was sure she’d wake up soon.

“Good morning, Mr. Henderson.” An intern greeted me as I walked inside.

“Good morning, Laura,” I responded. “Am I in a different time zone today? Why is everyone awake and working right now?”

She blushed. “It’s tax season.”

“I keep hearing that…” I stepped onto the elevator. “I’ll see you later.”

Emma stirred in my arms, murmuring, but only soft snores followed.

When the elevator doors glided open, I walked through the massive “H&H” glass doors headed to Emma’s half-finished playroom. I gently lowered her onto the massive pink bed and tucked her under the covers, whispering “I love you,” before I dimmed the lights.

I took a seat in the corner and pulled out the folder that was under my arm, reading over what seemed like written receipts and accounts of money exchanges. Things I didn’t recall doing.

I pulled out my phone to text Ava, to see if this was just another elaborate joke—something she was prone to pulling, but I heard her voice.

“Fuck!” She yelled.

I jumped up and headed to where the shouting had come from, pausing once I heard a familiar voice.

“Your pussy feels so fucking good...”

“Ahhhh...” Ava was moaning. “Just fuck me...Fuck me harder...”

I completely froze, unable to take another step. I didn’t want to believe another man—Kevin, from the sound of things, was fucking my wife or that she was cheating on me.

I couldn’t believe it. I trusted her way too much.

But, as she screamed a few more times—the same screams she yelled when having sex with me, I knew it was true.

“Is this how you always conduct business, *Mrs. Henderson*?” Kevin asked, laughter in his voice.

“Are you seriously going to call me that after we just fucked?” She groaned. “Can we actually get back to work now? That’s the third interruption tonight and I’d actually like to get something done.”

“Fine, fine...”

Papers shuffled, windows opened, but I remained frozen—still in disbelief. It wasn’t until I peered through the slit of the door that my brain actually began to process what was happening.

“What are we going to do about this Ferguson shit?” Kevin asked.

“Ferguson shit? That’s what we’re calling it?”

“Oh, right. Here’s a better name for it: Five to ten years for me. Fifteen years for you.”

“I was thinking twenty.”

“*Twenty*?” He slammed the table. “Are you out of your fucking mind? Twenty years? Are you suggesting that we just turn ourselves in?”

“No...” she said. “Just Liam.”

“What?” He sounded appalled. “Are you joking right now?”

“Do you hear me laughing?”

Silence.

“Ava, look...” He sighed. “Liam is like a brother to me—”

“Says the man who’s currently fucking his wife...Some brother you are.”

“This is a mistake.”

“A mistake would be one time,” she said, lighting a cigarette. “Once a day for the past few years isn’t necessarily the same thing. Sorry.”

My heart sank.

“It was a mistake, Ava.” He looked conflicted. “Tonight was going to be the last time anyway. I can’t keep doing this to him.”

“I don’t want to stop.” She walked over to the window and sighed. “I can’t...”

“What?”

“He doesn’t give me what I need anymore...”

“You’ll have to find a way that he can. Now actually might be a good time to start, seeing as though he might have to be your lawyer.”

She turned around in tears. “Is this really the last time?”

“The first time should’ve been the last time.” He walked over and massaged her shoulders. “You were only using me... You tend to forget that.”

“I wasn’t—” She choked back a sob. “I wasn’t using you...”

“Yes you were.” He kissed her lips. “And that’s okay. I sympathized.”

“Did you think I was a horrible person?”

“No.”

“You promise?”

He nodded, cupping her face in his hands. “He couldn’t give you a baby and you wanted one...Naturally...That’s completely understandable.”

I held back a gasp.

“He doesn’t fuck me like you do...” she whispered.

“Stop it, Ava.” He kissed her cheek. “Stop it.”

I didn’t want to hear anymore.

I couldn’t take it.

As the two of them kissed and held each other—completely immersing themselves in their own world, I forced myself to walk away.

I hit the lights in my office and noticed a bright blue box on my desk. It read, “To: the love of my life. From: Your first and only love.”

My heart ached again as I tore the wrapping and looked inside: A new set of cufflinks, a set that probably cost more than all of my suits combined. My initials were engraved in them, and she’d enclosed a quote from my favorite authors:

“Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of life much so. Aim above morality.”

-Henry David Thoreau

I sighed. She’d left out the last part of the quote, the “Be not simply good; be good for something.”

I pulled out my phone and sent her an email:

Subject: Coffee.

I think I will try some coffee...Are you still at the coffee shop?

—Liam

Subject: Re: Coffee.

Yes. I think I’ll be here all night.

What kind would you like?

—Ava.

Subject: Re: Re: Coffee.

Whatever you think is best for a first timer...

Have you talked to Kevin today?

—Ava

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Coffee.

Not at all. He’s been weirder than usual lately. (We really need to find him a girlfriend...) Have you?

—Ava.

I didn’t answer.

I left my office and walked over to Emma’s playroom, looking at her as she slept peacefully. I wanted to make her wake up, make her look at me, so I could study her features and pick them apart, so I could see for myself that she was indeed Kevin’s, but I couldn’t.

She was *mine*, biological father or not.

I carried her out of the firm and rushed home. As soon as I set her down, I flipped over the coffee table and opened the envelope I'd filed away hours earlier.

It was a standard summons, a demand to appear in court, but the charges listed didn't end on one page. They didn't even end on two.

It was a ten page manifesto, a laundry list of bullshit that I would never attempt: bribery, racketeering, tax fraud, mail fraud, wire fraud—every fucking fraud.

What the hell is this?

I pored over the documents for hours, my mind racing a mile a minute. Still, I couldn't completely process everything—my mind was still thinking about Kevin and Ava.

How she'd lied to me.

How he'd lied to me, too.

And now, this.

The door opened at five in the morning, and Ava set a hot cup of coffee in front of me.

"We need to talk," she said.

I said nothing. Just closed all the folders and looked at her.

"I just got served by the SEC..." She paced the floor. "Served, like *legit papers*...They came to the firm and—"

"I thought you were at the coffee shop."

"I was." She swallowed. "I stopped by the firm after getting your coffee so I could pick up a few things."

"Was anyone there with you?"

"Of course not." She scoffed. "Look at what time it is. Anyway..."

I couldn't hear anything else she was saying. I could see her lips moving, make out some of the sounds that were coming out of her mouth, but the lies she'd just told me were blocking out everything.

"Why are you cheating on me?" I blurted out, suddenly annoyed by the tears falling down her face.

She sucked in a breath and looked me up and down. "Liam, the SEC has just unreasonably served me papers. Are you seriously accusing me of infidelity right now?"

"I'm not *accusing* you. An accusation would imply that there's a chance you could be innocent. Why. Are. You. Cheating. On. Me?"

She toyed with the gemstones on her necklace. Then she started to hum the refrain of a classic Sinatra song, "New York, New York."

"Don't make me ask you again, Ava," I said. "I know you've fucked Kevin."

Her eyes finally met mine. "Fine...Yes, I fucked him. Now, what?" Tears formed in her eyes. "I didn't mean for it to happen. I never thought I would cross the line with him of all people..."

"You told me Emma was a surprise..." I said. "That you didn't want to have kids until we were in our mid-thirties."

Her face paled. "You were at the office tonight weren't you?"

"I was..."

Silence.

"So," I said, mentally putting together the puzzle pieces. "Either you're lying to him about me not being able to give you a baby—because last time I checked, right before Emma was *miraculously* conceived, you were still making me wear condoms and we weren't even trying to have a fucking baby. Or, you're lying to me, and you just wanted to fuck my best friend for an ulterior motive you're saving for later. Which is it?"

"I still love you, Liam, It's just—"

"Which is it?"

She said nothing, she just stood there with more tears falling down her eyes.

I held up one of the folders I'd been reading through. "I was looking through these tonight...At first, I thought they were standard mail-outs that you'd signed for me while I was gone or too busy, standard office supply orders, things like that..."

"Where'd you find those?"

"But it turns out," I said, ignoring her question, "That these are all fucking favors from judges and clerks that I don't recall asking for. Ever."

"Liam..."

"Is there anyone in this city that you haven't fucked to get something in return?"

She looked as if she actually had to think about it.

"I send you flowers every day—every. fucking. day." I stepped forward. "I tell you that I love you and that you complete me, every day and this is what I get in return?"

"I understand how you feel, Liam, but—"

"No, you don't fucking understand." I clenched my fists. "I've never even entertained the thought of being *friends* with another woman. I make sure everyone knows I'm completely unavailable, that no one else stands a damn chance."

"I cheated for your benefit, Liam. I did it for you."

What the fuck?

I'd heard a lot of bullshit in my life, but that line officially took the cake.

"How do you think you won the Luttrell case?" She wiped away her tears and narrowed her eyes at me. "You think you did it with your award winning rhetoric and charm?"

"Do you have a mental disorder that you failed to tell me about?"

"I fucked the judge three days before the verdict. You were going to lose. And if you lost that case, there's no way some of our current clients would've picked our firm to handle their account."

"Our firm?"

"You think you built it alone?" She laughed. "Liam Henderson, warm-hearted, loyal, and too nice for his own fucking good? Please. I had to intercept every contract you sent out and redraft half of the terms. If I'd left it up to you, your firm would be nothing more than a pipe dream. You should be thanking me because you have no idea how much work I've done to put you where you are."

"You've never argued a single case."

"No, but I've fucked a lot of powerful people to make sure you never lost one."

"I've never lost because I'm a damn good lawyer."

"And I'm a damn good lay." She shrugged. "Of course, my own husband has been so busy this year that he probably wouldn't even know."

"You're blaming me for throwing your pussy around?"

"I'm shocked you even know what the word *pussy* means." She hissed. "We lay in bed together every night and you never want to fuck me."

"You always say that you're tired. Or is that a lie, too?"

"I was only tired of fucking you." She brushed past me and shut the door to Emma's room. "What do you want to do now, huh? Divorce me?"

"Is that a serious question?"

"It is." She smirked and a knock came to the door.

We both stood rooted to the floor, and the knock came again.

"I'll get it." I warned. "You stay there."

I walked away and opened it, expecting to see Kevin so I could punch the shit out of him, but it was a different woman in a suit.

A young blonde.

“You’ve um…” Her cheeks reddened. “You’ve been…”

“Served!” Someone whispered loudly from around the corner. “Tell him he’s been served…”

“You’re an intern at *The New York Times*, aren’t you?” I rolled my eyes.

She nodded, but then she added. “My boss says you can go fuck yourself, and that even though we’ll never run your picture, we’ll make sure everyone knows that your firm is about to be run into the ground starting tomorrow.” She handed me the copy print for an article in tomorrow’s paper. “He says it’s your turn to feel some karma.”

I slammed the door in her face.

“I think you need to seriously weigh your options before you act out on your emotions.” Ava was right behind me, holding a sleeping Emma.

“Is this a threat?”

“It’s a promise…”

I raised my eyebrow. “And what exactly are the proposed terms?”

“If you help me sort this thing out—if you get the SEC off the firm’s back, both of us can avoid serving any time.”

“I’m not serving any fucking time. I didn’t do anything wrong. And if you think I won’t be the first person in line to help the state put your ass away, you’re sadly fucking mistaken.”

“Awww.” She pouted. “Look at you. Trying to sound all masculine and tough for a change, sounding like the man I wish you could’ve been.”

“Fuck you, Ava.”

“Not a chance.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “Let me try phrasing this another way: I know that you’re Mr. Lawyer of the Year and you’d never willingly lie because you have a conscience and all that. But if you don’t help me, or if you refuse to tell investigators that you were partly responsible for what happened—that we *all* played a small part, I’m filing for sole custody of Emma.”

“File away. No judge in his right mind would give you sole custody.”

She laughed. “This is actually why people fuck to get what they want, *honey*. It comes in handy for times like this. Besides, you’re not even her real father.” She kissed Emma’s forehead. “Did you overhear that part while you were watching us fuck or were you too busy taking notes?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer.

“Do not fuck with me, Liam.” She hissed. “You have no idea how far I’m willing to go to stay out of prison.”

“Even though you deserve to be there?” I snatched Emma away from her, making her stir. “You sought out clients using my name and you misappropriated the money. For what?”

“Status. Something you’ll never understand.”

“Something you’ll never need.” I countered. “Everyone behind bars shares the same level of popularity.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m going to give you a few days to come to your senses.”

“Or else what?”

“You don’t want to know the answer to that.” She walked out, slamming the door behind her—waking Emma.

She looked at me with her bright blue eyes, smiling. “Can I go play?”

I nodded, unable to even speak. Carrying her to the balcony, I didn’t even bother grabbing an umbrella for myself. I set her down and helped her into a coat, trying not to think about what Ava could possibly have up her sleeve.

Emma tilted her head up to the sky and swallowed raindrops, and then she dashed away from me—running in circles.

A loud thunder roared in the distance, and as if she could tell what I was about to say, she looked at me with a wide grin. “Five more minutes!”



The New York Times didn't waste any time printing the story. Well, stories.

Henderson & Hart, Revered Law Firm, Embroiled in Scandal.

Hart Agrees to Cooperate Against Henderson, Following Brutal Bar Brawl.

Henderson Arrested, Questioned, After Wife Claims Recent Domestic Abuse.

The only story they didn't mention, out of a hanging thread of respect, was my losing custody of Emma. Of me having to hand her over to Kevin.

I was innocent of every charge I faced, but due to the fact that I'd bashed Kevin's head in, and Ava had claimed I was just as violent with her, it left the judge no choice but to put her in custody with her supposed “loving and biological father per the mother's request.”

I thought it would only be for a week or two, a month at most, but as the charges piled up and the cases were trudged through the courts at a snail's pace, the months wore on and on.

To make matters worse, Kevin and Ava purposely took Emma to places they knew I frequented: My favorite place at Central Park, my spot on the Brooklyn Bridge, my favorite restaurants.

In between my court appearances, I followed them to the park—resisting the urge to yell at them for letting her get too close to the streets, holding back the urge to take her back and flee the state.

Instead, I filed injunction after injunction—fighting multiple cases at once. I searched through every loophole of custody, documenting cases after case of non-biological fathers retaining rights.

Eventually the truth about Ava and Kevin's scheme began to surface, and on the same day that Ava confessed to lying about me beating her—when she admitted that she'd made that all up, I won custody of Emma.

It was three days before her fourth birthday, so I arranged for a few of her neighborhood friends to come by with their parents. The theme was the rainforest, of course, and the party favors were umbrellas and rain-boots.

Kevin, still foolishly proclaiming his innocence in regards to the fraud, had grown quite attached to her over the past few months. He asked if he could still see her on the weekends once he returned her to me, but I didn't even bother answering that question.

He'd seen her long enough.

Standing outside my brownstone, I called him two hours before her birthday party, making sure he was still dropping her off on time. Instead of talking to me like an adult, he made Emma repeat his every word to me.

“We'll be there soon,” she said, a smile in her soft voice. “Can you please let us enjoy our last few hours alone? She's my daughter, too.”

“See you soon, Emma.”

“Goodbye, Daddy!” She hung up and I rearranged the party decorations for the umpteenth time, greeting the early guests and directing them into the living room.

Half an hour passed.

A whole hour.

Two.

I called Kevin, annoyed that he was pulling this bullshit of a stunt—as if it was even *half* as difficult as it had been for me, but there was no answer.

Upset, I dialed the police and they showed up to my door within minutes.

“Are you Liam Henderson?” They asked.

“Yes, I’m the one that called.”

I pulled the court order out of my pocket and explained what was happening, how Kevin was technically committing kidnapping, but they interrupted me.

They weren’t at my house to take a report.

They were there to give one.

As they calmly explained what had happened, how she was less than a block away when the car collided with a truck, my world stopped.

I asked which hospital she was being flown to, which route was the fastest to take, but the cops simply sighed and looked past me, as if they didn’t want to say anything further.

They didn’t have to.

Their looks said it all.



Emma’s funeral was held on a grey and wet day, another harsh blow to my chest. I sat through speeches from the few people she’d crossed paths with, from her young friends who had yet to fully comprehend what her death really meant.

My next door neighbor, a four year old named Hannah, said, “I hope you come back next week, Emma. You can come to my birthday party.”

I stared at the tiny casket as they lowered it into the ground, half of me wanting to jump in with it and risk being buried alive. At least then I wouldn’t have to feel anything anymore.

As the crowd dissipated one by one—tapping my shoulder and saying, “I’m so sorry for your loss,” as they left, I spotted Ava walking into the cemetery.

Flanked by two prison guards, she fell to her knees and bawled once she reached the uncovered grave.

“You made me late for my child’s funeral.” She cursed at the guards. “I fucking missed it...How cruel can you possibly be?”

“All furloughs have the same time constraints, ma’am,” one of them said flatly. “We couldn’t have left any earlier.”

She shook her head and continued to cry, beating her hands against the ground. As if she needed to distance herself from the guilt, she stood up and walked towards the podium, reading the papers that were left behind.

She broke down again and I walked over.

“Liam...” She held out her arms. “She’s really gone, isn’t she?”

“*She is.*” I refused to console her. “And it’s all your fault, Ava. Your fucking fault.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” She sniffled. “Don’t you think I *feel* that?”

“It should be you down there in the ground right now. It should be you.”

“Liam...”

“She didn’t deserve to be taken away from me and you know it.”

“I do know that...I was just—”

“Trying to prove a point? To do whatever it took to hurt me because you fucked yourself over and you wanted to bring me down with you?”

“We can get through this...We can still find a way to restore your name in this city, and you’re the best lawyer I know so...I know you can turn everything around and maybe help me too. Maybe forgive me?”

“I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure you rot in prison, to make sure you never get out and that the parole board never gives you an ounce of sympathy.”

“You don’t mean that, Liam...”

“If I ever find a way to get away with murder, you and Kevin will be my first victims.”

The guard across from us gave me a look.

“Don’t be like this, Liam...”

“My name won’t be Liam for too much longer just so you know. It’ll be Andrew.”

“Are you leaving? Are you about to leave me here?”

“That should be you in the ground right now...” I noticed the funeral director stacking the chairs, mindlessly breaking down what was just another ceremony to him. “That should be you...”

One of the guards began speaking with the funeral staff, inquiring as to whether they should leave the premises or not. Noticing her time here was limited, Ava grabbed onto me. “Liam, I mean...Andrew. You clearly still love me because you’re trusting me with that...We can rebuild everything we had, we can start over, you and me...We can do this if you help me...”

I grabbed her hands and moved them away as one of the guards stepped closer.

“You know I don’t belong in prison,” she said, crying. “They’re transferring me to a permanent location next week...Save me, Andrew...Save me...”

I said nothing.

“If I could take everything back, I swear...I swear I would. Don’t you think I love Emma, too?”

“Loved,” I said. “It’s past tense now, don’t you think?”

She sighed. “Please don’t leave me...”

“I won’t.” I stepped back so the guards could escort her back to the van. “I’ll write...”

“Really?” Her eyes looked hopeful as she walked away. “Okay, I look forward to your letters...I look forward to fixing us...”

The rain picked up its pace, transitioning from a drizzle to a downpour, but I remained standing—unable to walk away from Emma. I re-read her tiny tombstone, crying as her face crossed my mind.

*Emma Rose Henderson,
A Daddy’s girl, through and through.
Gone too soon,
But never forgotten...*

I stared at those words for hours, letting the rain drench me to the bone. It wasn’t until the director informed me that the gates were closing, that I walked away.

Lost and heartbroken, I spent the next few months in a dizzying haze. Despite the fact that Ava was the one behind bars, the paper continued spouting her lies as facts, slandering me, and I didn’t even bother disputing it.

I didn’t have the energy.

I submitted written testimonies through lawyers I’d hired—knowing that eventually things would sort themselves out. I didn’t even care that Ava had hired her own high profile team to block me from getting a divorce.

I no longer gave a fuck about anything.

My firm collapsed before my very eyes—everything down to the sink-ware was sold off in parts, and in the legal community, the downfall became a warning, a tell-tale of what happened when status and

greed consumed one of us.

I drank every morning, letting the alcohol numb my pain. And whenever I awoke from passing out, I drank again. It was only when I started drinking coffee that I could somewhat function well enough to get anything done.

Visiting the cemetery was too painful, almost as painful as stepping inside Emma's room. So, I hired a few people to pack it away in boxes, telling them to leave out the "E" and "H" frames; I could bear to look at those since she'd hand-picked them.

For months, I mourned the life she would never have—attempting to make sense of it all. I knew deep down that I couldn't stay here, but I couldn't leave as the same man that I was; I knew that I'd never get over Emma, but I needed a way to cope. A way to slowly re-integrate myself into the real world.

Stopping by a newspaper stand, my eyes caught an article about the newest hotshot lawyer in town—Michael Weston. Dressed in one of the expensive suits that Kevin once raved about, he was the talk of the city and from the words I was reading, he was cocky—only slightly cockier than I had become recently.

"Oh, you got the last one..." A woman said as she stepped next to me.

"You want this paper?"

"Well..." She blushed. "Not really the paper. I just want the ad of Michael Weston so I can show my friends my ideal dream guy."

"Have you read some of the shit he's said in this interview?" I raised my eyebrow. "He's an asshole."

"That just makes him more loveable, don't you think?"

"They asked him what he does when he gets less than favorable reviews." I couldn't believe how fucking gullible this woman looked. "Do you want to know what he said?"

"Sure." She crossed her arms. "What does he do when he gets bad reviews?"

"He looks at his bank account," I said. "And then he claims, and I quote, 'I don't recall learning that someone needs to be well-liked in order to be successful.' He really said that."

She practically melted into the sidewalk. "I bet he really knows how to fuck..."

I gave her the paper and walked away. Her bringing up sex was a reminder of how long it'd been since I slept with someone.

And then it hit me: Sex.

I needed some, badly.

I signed up for an online dating site, Date-Match, and slowly shed the layers of the man I used to be. I bought expensive suits—one for every day of the week. I slowly curbed my excessive drinking to make room for a new appetite, and instead of punching my walls to de-stress, I invested in Cuban cigars.

Still, the women I met online were average, and none of them seemed to be about sex. They just wanted to talk about bullshit—always leaving me restless and alone at the end of the night to drink away my sorrows; forcing me back to square one with my experiment.

Like the woman who was sitting on the edge of the bed right now, a goddamn mile-a-minute talker. She was a few years older than me, a teacher of some sort, and she couldn't shut up for shit.

She was talking about her life in college, about some boy named Billy she once loved—some boy who never loved her back. Before she could start elaborating about the campus bond-fire where the two of them met, I realized that I couldn't take this shit anymore.

"Billy and I would've been perfect together, I think," she said. "There was even this one time that—"

"Are we going to fuck or what?" I cut her off.

"*What?*" She clutched her chest. "What did you just say?"

"I said, are we going to fuck *or what?*" I emphasized every syllable. "I didn't reserve this hotel room so I could sit and listen to you talk all night."

Her jaw dropped.

"I thought that..." She stuttered. "I thought that you liked me."

“I like you enough to fuck you. That’s about it.”

Her eyes went wide and she stepped back. “All this time that we’ve been dating you’ve only been thinking about sleeping with me?”

I mentally added “rhetorical questions” to the list of shit I wasn’t going to put up with anymore.

“I was under the impression that all those dates you took me on was because—”

“I took you on all those dates so we could scratch the surface of each other’s personalities. So I could know that you’re not some psycho-murderer, and so you could be assured that I’m not one either.” I grimaced at all the time I’d clearly wasted. “The purpose was so the both of us could be comfortable enough to fuck, and then after that we could go our separate ways.”

“It was only going to be *once*?”

“Do you have a hearing problem?”

She looked completely lost, and I wasn’t in the mood to make this picture any clearer.

Before I could say another word, she looked into my eyes.

“So,” she said, still in shock, “all the things on your profile were a lie?”

“No. Everything on my profile is one hundred percent accurate.” I pulled out my phone. “I specifically wrote what I’m in for, and I’ve been more than lenient spending my time with you. You seem like a nice person, but after tonight—whether we fuck or not, I won’t be speaking to you again. So, what’s it going to be?”

She stood there, her jaw dropped once more, and I glanced at my profile.

Sure enough, I’d forgotten to adjust the default settings when I’d signed up for Date-Match, and my “What I’m Looking For” box was still set to bullshit: “Long conversations, a connection with someone I can truly relate to, and finding my one true love.”

Ha...

I quickly erased all of the text and looked up, noticing that my date for tonight was still in the room.

“If you continue standing here,” I said, “I’m going to assume that you do want to fuck tonight. If not, the door’s right behind you.”

The sound of her huffing was the last sound I heard before the door slammed so hard it rattled the mirror on the wall.

Unfazed, I contemplated what I wanted to write in my profile’s box. Over the past few months, I’d found disappointment after disappointment—wasting too much of my time and money on women who were not on the same wavelength as me.

And now it all made perfect sense. All those unnecessary dinners, late night conversations, and utter bullshit was about to end right now.

I didn’t need another relationship—those days were gone forever, and I would never spend more than a week talking to the same woman on the phone.

As the sun set outside the hotel room’s window, the perfect phrasing came to me, and I typed: One dinner. One night. No repeats.

Then I highlighted it and placed it in bold.

Staring at it, I realized how bare it looked, how someone might actually think I wasn’t dead ass serious, so underneath, I made things completely clear:

Casual sex. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Condone (v.):

To forgive, support, and/or overlook moral or legal failures of another without protest, with the result that it appears that such breaches of moral or legal duties are acceptable. An employer may overlook an employee overcharging customers or a police officer may look the other way when a party uses violent self-help to solve a problem.

Aubrey

I sat in the back of the courtroom, listening to Andrew break down on the stand. Twice, when the defense purposely brought up Emma, he lost all composure.

Yet, as I saw the look in his eyes at the mere mention of her, of the “slip” of her name, I felt his pain.

I kept my head down the remainder of his testimony so our eyes wouldn’t meet, so he wouldn’t know I was here, and when the judge called for a short recess, I slipped outside.

Reporters were murmuring in the hallway, hoping he didn’t read any of their old articles about him years ago, and suddenly they were shouting questions.

“Mr. Henderson! Mr. Henderson!” They hounded him the second he stepped outside of the courtroom. “Mr. Henderson!”

He stopped and looked at them. “My name is *Mr. Hamilton*.”

“How do you feel about potentially sending your former partner and best friend away to prison?”

“He’s sending himself to prison,” he answered.

“Do you have any intentions of reconnecting with him while he’s behind bars?”

He ignored that question with a blank stare.

“Your name was cleared years ago and yet you still left New York,” someone else asked. “Now that everything is in the open for good, any chance that you’ll come back and re-open your firm?”

“I’m about to spend my last hour in this city on the way to the airport,” he said, pulling shades over his eyes.

The throng of reporters followed him out of the courtroom, and he slipped inside the car without a second glance.

Sighing, I pulled out my phone and re-read the messages he’d sent me this morning, somewhat regretting that I didn’t respond.

Subject: NYC.

I would like to see you one last time before I leave. Can I pick you up for breakfast?

PS—I really was going to tell you everything that night...

—Andrew

Subject: Your Pussy.

This message is actually not about your pussy. (Although, since I’m on the subject, it is number one on my list of favorite things.)

Come to breakfast with me. I’m outside your door.

As I was rereading that email, a new one popped onto my screen:

Subject: Goodbye.

—Andrew

I knew my lack of response was immature, that it was my fault that I didn't get to see him before he left, but I felt as if he could've made more of an effort. And I still felt that he was wrong for not being open with me when he should have.

Leaving the courthouse, I headed home and thought about all the half-truths and lies that had swirled our relationship. Alyssa. His wife. My real name. His real name.

Everything we had was built on lies...

Letting tears roll down my face, I opened the door to my house, prepared to shower until I couldn't cry anymore, but Andrew was standing in my living room.

"Hello, Aubrey." He glared at me.

"Breaking and entering is a crime." I crossed my arms. "Shouldn't you know that?"

He said nothing, just continued glaring at me—looking me up and down.

"Don't you have a flight to catch?" My voice cracked. "Shouldn't you be spending your last hour in New York on the way to the airport?"

"I realized I still have something to say to you."

"Do you have another fake name you want to tell me about? Another secret identity that you want to —"

"Stop." He stepped closer and closer until I backed into a wall, and he looked directly into my eyes.

"I need you to listen to me, Aubrey. Just fucking listen..."

I tried to move away from him, but he grabbed my hands and pinned them above my head. Then he used his hips to keep me still.

"You're going to stand here and listen to me for the next five minutes whether you like it or not." The words came out rushed, heated. "Since you suddenly care about knowing the truth, I'll tell you the fucking truth..."

I tried to say something, but he leaned down and bit my lips. Hard.

"I liked you when you were Alyssa and I was Thoreau—when we spent nights talking about your ridiculous homework and my law firm... I even liked you after you fucking lied to me and I saw you at your interview—I *liked* you..." He tightened his grip around my wrists. "And even though I knew I shouldn't have chased you down and showed up to your apartment that day, I did, and I fucked you...After that, I *really* liked you."

"Are you being serious right now?"

"Dead ass serious." He glared at me and bit my lips again, silently commanding me to keep quiet. "I didn't want to like you, Aubrey. I wasn't supposed to, and I didn't need to, but every day after that you were all I could think about. You and your smartass mouth, and how your lies maybe weren't so bad after all."

"What about *your* lies? Do you still think that you're above morality? That—"

"*Stop talking.*" He choked out. "Let me finish."

I swallowed and he stared at me a few seconds before continuing.

"Yes, I hid the fact that I was married from you, and although it was unintentional, it was still a lie."

"A *huge* lie."

"*Aubrey...*" He gripped me tighter. "I hadn't thought about Ava in a very long time...On the contrary, I've been thinking about you every day since you left."

“No, you haven’t...”

“I have.” He looked directly into my eyes. “I drove to your ballet class twice a week, trying to see you, trying to talk to you and apologize...I sent things to your apartment. I even showed up twice, but that was before I knew you’d moved.”

“You’re just saying all this so you can fuck me...” I shook my head and turned away, but he made me face him again.

“I’m saying all of this because I love you...”

I gasped and tears formed in my eyes.

“I fucking love you, Aubrey...” he repeated, wiping my face. “And I’ll do whatever it takes to show you that.” He brushed his lips against mine. “Do you still love me?”

“No, I don’t... Not any—” I felt his lips against mine, silencing me.

I didn’t want to kiss him back, I wanted to push him away and tell him to leave, but I parted my lips and let his tongue slip inside of my mouth.

Slowly, he freed my hands from his grip and locked his arms around my waist—keeping his lips attached to mine. He didn’t give me a chance to talk, to breathe. He just kissed me senseless until I couldn’t take it anymore.

“If you can honestly say that you don’t love me,” he whispered, slowly pulling away from me, “then I’ll leave you alone.”

“And if I can’t?” I asked, breathless.

“If you can’t, you’re going to show me to your room so you and I can become reacquainted.”

“Reacquainted?” I moaned as he cupped my ass. “Is that code for conversation?”

“It’s code for fucking.”

“Would it kill you to say make love just once?”

“Depends on if you actually love me or not.”

Silence.

His fingers were now trailing the zipper on the back of my skirt, gently pulling on it as I looked into his eyes.

“I hate you,” I said, making him raise his eyebrow. “If you said all of those things just to get my hopes up, I’ll never forgive you.”

“You still haven’t...” He kissed me gently. “I meant every word I said.” He pulled my zipper down. “And I really need to know whether or not you still love me because...” He stopped talking.

My skirt fell into a puddle on the floor and he tugged my thong away from my waist until it snapped.

“Aubrey, tell me...Tell me right now.”

I gasped as he slipped a finger inside of me, as he groaned at how wet I was.

“Yes...”

“Yes?” He moved his finger in and out. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, I—” I paused as he kissed my lips. “Yes, I still love you.”

“Where’s your bedroom?”

I looked to my left and he immediately tugged me down the hall, shutting the door behind us. He didn’t give me a chance to get undressed. His hands were all over me—unbuttoning my shirt, ripping my bra, and caressing my breasts.

I reached forward and unbuckled his pants, pushing his pants down. Then he tossed me onto the bed, climbing on top of me.

I spread my legs beneath him, lifting my hips up so he could fuck me, but he didn’t. Instead he kissed my neck—whispering how much he missed me, how much he needed me.

“Andrew...” I felt his cock rubbing against my thigh.

He slowly moved his mouth to my chest—swirling his tongue across my nipples as he palmed my breasts. His kisses traveled further and further, all the way down to my thighs.

I shut my eyes as he pressed his tongue against my clit, as he teasingly darted it against me in slow, sensuous circles.

“Ahhhh...” I tried to clamp my legs shut, but he pinned them to the mattress and looked up at me.

“Aubrey...” His voice was low.

“Yes?”

He circled his thumb around my clit, making it swell in pleasure. “Tell me that I own this.”

I shut my eyes as he increased the pressure, rubbing his thumb around and around.

“Tell me that I own your pussy, Aubrey.”

“Yes...” I writhed underneath his hand. “Yes...”

“Say it.” He prevented me from rolling over. “I need you to say it.”

Tingles traveled up and down my spine and I finally stared back at him. “Yes...You own it.”

He smiled and pressed his head between my legs again, devouring me—making me scream at the top of my lungs, but he didn’t let me cum.

Instead, he flipped me over. “Get down on all fours.”

I caught my breath and slowly obliged, and the next thing I felt was him palming my ass, kissing his way down my spine.

“I still haven’t claimed every inch of you...” he said, squeezing my cheeks harshly. “But I’ll save that for when I think you’re ready...”

I murmured as he slid into my pussy inch by inch, making me lean forward. He took the elastic out of my hair and pulled me back, whispering, “It’s going to feel just like this...Maybe even better...”

“Ahhhh...”

“And when it happens, you’re going to let me cum inside of you...” His other hand skimmed my sides and squeezed my breasts. “I want you to feel every last drop...”

“Andrew.” I gripped the sheets.

“Yes?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

He was slapping my ass as he pounded into me, giving it to me rough as he whispered my name.

I met him thrust for thrust, unable to let go of the sheets, and when I felt myself nearing the edge—coming close to it as he tortured my clit with his fingers, he denied me once again.

He pulled out of me, making me whimper, and then he made me face him once again. Immediately burying himself inside of me, he stared into my eyes—slowly sliding his cock back and forth, suffocating my screams with his mouth.

I felt his cock throbbing inside of me, felt my muscles clenching as he cursed against my lips and as we locked eyes again, we both came at the same time.

I fell forward against his chest, panting. “Andrew, I...”

He cut me off with a kiss. “I love you, too...”

We lay there connected for what felt like forever—him threading his fingers through my hair, me rubbing my hands against his chest.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes...”

He rolled out of bed and stood up to toss away the condom. “Come here.”

I couldn’t move. I was still feeling weak from my last orgasm.

He shook his head and slipped his hands underneath my thighs, picking me up and carrying me out of the room, checking each door we passed. When we reached the bathroom, he set me down on the floor.

“I don’t think I can stand up long enough for a shower...” I whispered.

He ignored me and turned on the water. "We're not going to take a shower." He picked me up and gently placed me into the tub.

Climbing in behind me, he grabbed an empty bottle and filled it with warm water. Then he gently poured it over my head.

He grabbed some shampoo from the ledge and squirted a few drops into my hair, lathering it to suds.

I heard him asking me questions, something about how I was feeling or if I wanted to talk to him about whatever I had on my mind, but as his fingers continued to massage my scalp, everything went black.



I woke up in bed alone.

There was no note from Andrew, and all of his clothes were gone.

I was starting to think having sex with him was all a dream, but I spotted his wallet sitting on top of my nightstand. I pulled the covers off of me and smiled once I saw that he'd dressed me in a silk slip.

I made my way out of the room and down the hallway where he was standing out on my balcony smoking a cigar.

"Since when do you smoke?" I stepped behind him.

"I don't often," he said. "Only when I need to think."

I nodded and looked out into the night sky, but I suddenly felt him pulling me against him.

"Aren't you going to ask what I'm thinking about?" He smirked. "Surely you have questions."

"I do, *Liam*."

"We can talk about it."

"Now?"

"If that's what you want..." He put out his cigar and walked me over to a chair, pulling me into his lap.

"How long have you known about that?"

"A couple weeks..."

"Hmmm."

I shook my head. "Do Bach and Greenwood know who you really are?"

"They do."

"So, why do you have to hide it from everyone else?"

"Esteemed lawyer or not, no one wants to take on someone who has a history in the papers...It makes a high profile firm look bad." He kissed the back of my shoulder.

"What was Emma like?"

He sighed, looking at me. "She was perfect..."

I thought of a way to change the subject, but he continued talking.

"She hated when I went to work, and she would beg me to come sometimes, so I'd let her..." His voice was low. "And then I wouldn't get any work done because the park was right across the street and she always wanted to play...Always."

"Did she follow you around at home?" I asked.

"She was my shadow. She would come sleep on the couch if I was up working, and if she saw me leave the room to take a call, she would cross her arms and look offended if I didn't invite her to listen." He let out a short laugh, but he didn't say anything else.

"Can I ask you something?" I leaned against his chest.

"If I say no I don't think it'll stop you..."

"Where do we go from here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean...What happens now with us?"

He looked at me, confused. “Us?”

“Are we in a relationship? Are you going to stay with me, or are you going back to Date-Match?”

He stared at me for a long time. “I can’t stay in New York, Aubrey. I think you can understand why...”

“You had no plans to stay past tonight did you?”

“No.”

“And you leave in the morning?”

“Yes.” He tried to kiss my hair, but I moved away. “So, was this some type of way to get your Aubrey fix before you went home? Say all the right things so you can feel better about yourself when you leave?”

“I wanted you to know that I loved you before I went home.”

“And to get some pussy on the side, of course.”

“Of course.” He smirked, but I didn’t return his smile.

“I told you not to get my hopes up, Andrew.” I stepped back. “And you did it anyway.”

“What do you want me to do, Aubrey? Move in with you? Fucking propose?”

“I want you to stay...And if you can’t stay, I want you to leave...Now.”

“Aubrey...”

“Now,” I said. “We can still be friends, but I don’t want to—”

“Stop.” He pulled me close and pressed his mouth against mine. “We’re more than friends...We always were. I just can’t be with you right now.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but he kissed me again and again, whispering as he cupped my breasts, “I would really prefer if we spent the rest of night in bed and not arguing...”

Adjourn (v.):

To suspend proceedings: to suspend the business of a court, legislature, or committee indefinitely.

Weeks later...

Aubrey

I stood on my toes backstage—tilting my head toward the ceiling, rehearsing the final move of the production one last time. I should've been happy and smiling—overjoyed at the fact that I was about to debut in the leading role in a New York Ballet Company production, but I wasn't. Far from it.

I felt alone, and I knew no amount of applause or accolades would take those feelings away.

I was still hanging onto my last few moments with Andrew: The early morning sex in the shower, the sex against my door, the sex in the town car on the way to the airport. (And there was also the final romp in the airport's bathroom...)

He told me that he loved me each time—that he didn't want to leave me, but he left anyway.

Our relationship was now relegated to talking on the phone every night—recapping our days, getting off on each other's fantasies in between, but it wasn't enough. And I knew it wasn't going to be enough for me for too much longer.

I needed him here.

“Forty minutes everyone!” A stage hand slipped past me. “Places in forty!”

I took a deep breath and walked to a mirror that hung near the wing. Staring at myself, I looked over tonight's costume—a glimmering white visage that looked like it'd been plucked from a dream: Sparkling crystals adorned every inch of the leotard, the tutu was freshly fluffed and sprayed with glitter, and my feathered headband was far more defined and layered than the one I'd worn in Durham.

“Aubrey?” A familiar voice said from behind.

“Mom?” I spun around. “What are you doing backstage?”

“We wanted to come and tell you good luck in person.” She nodded at my father.

“Thank you...”

“We also want you to know that despite the fact that we still wish you'd pursued law school, we're very proud of you for pursuing your own dreams.”

I smiled. “Thank you, again.”

“And we are also very, very honored to have you as our daughter because you're such an inspiration to all the college students who will be heading to the polls in this year's election—students who have similar dreams and ambitions regarding careers in the arts.”

“What?”

“Did you get all that?” She turned to the reporter behind us who was shutting off his device. “Make sure you use that last part as a sound bite for the next commercial.”

“Seriously?”

“What?” She shrugged. “I meant every word of that, but it's also good to get it on tape, don't you think?”

I didn't bother with a rebuttal.

My father stepped over and hugged me, posing for an unnatural photo-op, but when the photographer walked away he smiled.

“I’m happy for you, Aubrey,” he said. “I think this is where you belong.”

“You’re just saying that because you think me being here means I won’t mess up the campaign at home.”

“No, I *know* you being here means you won’t mess up the campaign at home.” He laughed. “But I’m still happy for you.”

“How reassuring...”

“It’s true,” my mother chimed in. “We’re excited for you.”

“Ladies and gentlemen we are about to begin our show in exactly one hour!” Mr. Ashcroft bellowed. “If you are not a ballerina, a danseur, or a stagehand please find your way off my stage. Now!”

My parents embraced me—holding onto me for a long time. As they pulled back, they took turns kissing my cheek before they walked away.

I adjusted my headband one last time and checked my phone. Sure enough, there was an email. Andrew.

Subject: Good luck.

I’m sorry I couldn’t make it to your first opening night, but I look forward to hearing about it tonight when you call me.

I’m sure you’ll be quite memorable to everyone in the audience.

—Andrew.

PS—I miss you.

Subject: Re: Good luck.

I am not calling you tonight. You should’ve been here. I’ll *think* about recapping it for you next week.

—Aubrey.

PS—You “missing me” would be a lot more convincing if the subject of the email you sent two hours ago wasn’t “I miss your pussy.”

Subject: Re: Re: Good luck.

I know I should’ve been there. Hence the aforementioned apology.

And you *will* call me.

—Andrew

PS—I miss you both.

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Good luck.

I really wanted you to be here...

—Aubrey

I turned off my phone so I wouldn’t have to continue messaging him. I needed to focus.

All the rehearsals and dance lessons I’d taken over the past twenty-two years had brought me to this moment. In thirty-six minutes, my every move would be on display for one of the biggest audiences in the dance world.

It would draw critiques from the staunchest critics—the most advent admirers of ballet, and the papers would run early reviews that could make or break the remaining production run. But right now, in this moment, none of that mattered.

This was my dream, I was finally living it, and I could only make sure I was the best I could possibly be.

“Are you ready, Miss Everhart?” Mr. Ashcroft placed his hands on my shoulders. “Are you ready to show this city that you belong here?”

I nodded. “Very much so, sir.”

“Good, because I’m ready for them to see that, too.” He clapped his hands above his head, signaling the rest of the dancers to circle us.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is officially opening night,” he said. “You’ve worked hard for months, logged every necessary hour and then some, and I do believe that tonight’s execution of *Swan Lake* will be the best execution this audience will ever see.” He paused. “If it isn’t, I’ll make sure you pay for it at tomorrow morning’s rehearsal.”

There were groans. We knew he wasn’t kidding.

“I’ll be sitting in the balcony at center stage, and I will not give you one clap, no inkling of applause, if the show is anything less than perfect. Are we clear?”

“Yes sir.” We collectively murmured, still intimidated by his power.

“Good. Take your places now.” He walked away from us and snapped his fingers. “Make me proud.”

I took my place at center stage and turned my back to the curtain—raising my hands above my head. I heard the orchestra giving their instruments one final tuning, heard the pianist replaying the refrain he missed at this morning’s rehearsal, and then I heard silence.

Ear deafening silence.

The lights in the gallery flickered, slow at first then faster, and everything went black.

Five...Four...Three...Two...

The pianist played the first stanza of the composition and the curtains rose, cueing the spotlight to shine against my back.

The swan corps—twenty ballerinas dressed in complementing white tutus, formed a circle around me, and as they stood on their toes, tilting their heads back, I slowly turned around to face the audience—pausing, taking all of the nameless faces in, and then I became lost in my own world.

I was Odette, The Swan Queen, and I was falling in love with a prince at first sight, dancing with him underneath a glittering orb of lights, telling him he needed to pledge his love for me if he wanted to break my lake’s spell.

The gasps from the audience could be heard over the music, but I kept my focus.

I seamlessly transitioned from the white, sweet swan who wanted nothing more than to fall in love, into the black, evil swan—Odile, who wanted nothing more than to prevent it from happening.

I illustrated love, heartbreak, and devastation over the course of two hours, never stopping to catch my breath, never missing a beat.

In the final frame, where the love of my life vows to die with me instead of honoring his mistaken promise to the black swan, I can’t help but deviate from the choreography.

Instead of taking his hand and letting him lead me into the “water,” I leapt into his arms—letting him hold me high for all the other swans to see. And then the two of us spun into oblivion—“dying” together.

The music began its decrescendo—half-somber, half-light, and the lights shut off—leaving nothing. Ending everything with blackness.

And silence.

All of a sudden, a raucous applause arose from the audience and a collection of cheers—“Bravo!” “Encore!” “Bravissimo!” echoed off the walls.

The stage lights brightened and I took a bow, looking out into a sea of well-entertained faces: Mr. Petrova was front and center, nodding as he clapped, mouthing, “Good job, good job.” My mother was

wiping a tear from her eye and looking up at my father, saying, “That’s our daughter.” Even Mr. Ashcroft, still stone faced, was standing and applauding, stopping once his eyes met mine.

“Bravo.” He mouthed before turning away.

I kept a smile plastered on my face as I scanned the room, looking for the one person I wanted—the one person I *needed* to see, but he wasn’t there.

“Thank you ladies and gentlemen for attending our opening night,” one of the directors said as she took the stage. “Per our opening night tradition, we will now introduce the members of our corps to you...”

I tried to focus on the introductions, tried to focus on someone else other than Andrew, but as I was lifting my head up from another bow, I saw him.

He was there in the front row, in the last seat on the left. He was looking at me and smiling, mouthing, “Congratulations.”

“And last but not least, our leading lady of the night and a new principle dancer here at NYCB—Aubrey Everhart!” The director said into the mic, and the audience cheered loudly.

“Miss Everhart?” She nudged me, whispering, “Miss Everhart, you need to take your final bow and leave the stage...”

I didn’t move. I continued staring at Andrew.

“Miss Everhart?” She whispered, more harshly now. “Take a bow and get backstage...*Now...*”

I walked away from her and headed straight toward Andrew—taking my time down the stage’s side steps. I stood in front of him, looking directly into his eyes—ignoring the confused murmurs of the crowd.

The director said a few more words, Mr. Ashcroft gave his regards, and the curtains closed without me.

As the audience gave one final applause and started to file out of the room, I finally found my voice.

“I thought you said you weren’t coming...” I whispered. “Did you come here just to see my show or are you staying a little bit longer?”

“I’m staying a little bit longer.”

“Does that mean permanently?”

“No.” He wiped away my tears. “It means I’ll stay here until you realize how terrible this city is—until you’re ready to leave.”

“I signed a contract for three years.”

“Every contract is negotiable.” He smiled and pulled me into his arms. “And if you don’t apologize for ruining the closing credits tonight, they just might risk breaching it and fire you...”

“Where will you work?” I asked. “Are you going to practice law? *Can you practice law?*”

He kissed my lips. “I’ll be teaching at NYU.”

“What?” My heart immediately felt for the future students. “Why?”

“What do you mean, why?”

“You’re a terrible teacher, Andrew...All of the interns at GBH hated you.”

“I don’t give a fuck.”

“I’m serious...” I was actually worried. “I think you should reconsider. Teaching isn’t for everyone, so —”

“First of all,” he said, cutting me off and tightening his grip around me. “I *am* a good fucking teacher. It just depends on the subject matter...” He trailed his finger across my lips. “I can recall teaching you how to do something very well...”

I blushed.

“Second of all, last time I checked, all of the interns at GBH were quite unteachable and they were dumb as stones—all except one.”

“The one that was a fucking liar?”

“Yes,” he said. “That one.”

“I heard she broke all your rules.” I brought my hand up to his face. “I heard she ended your one dinner, one night, and no repeats streak...”

“I’m pretty sure that she didn’t.”

“Is that so?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Is it still going on? Is that still your personal motto?”

“To a certain extent,” he said, pressing his lips against mine. “Since I still like the sound of it, and will only be dating her from here on out, I’ll just replace the word ‘one’ with ‘*more*’...”

Epilogue

Six Years later...

New York, New York

Andrew

I stood in front of a classroom at New York University—counting down the seconds, asking myself why I'd ever agreed to this.

“Are there any questions?” I looked at my watch.

Several hands flew into the air.

“I'm only answering three of them.” I pointed to a young woman in the front row. “Yes, you. What is it?”

“Um...” She blushed. “Good morning, Professor Hamilton. My name is—”

“I don't care what your name is. What is your *question*?”

“Um, it's been about two weeks since the semester started and you have yet to give us a syllabus...”

I ignored her and pointed to a jock in the back row. “Yes?”

“You also haven't told us what books we need to buy...”

“Does anyone in this classroom know the definition of the word, *question*?” I picked the last student, a redhead sitting by the window. “Yes?”

“Is it true that we're required to take turns bringing you coffee every day?”

I looked at the coffee mug on my desk, at the sign-in sheet that listed which student had brought it today.

“It's not a requirement,” I said, picking up the cup. “But if you miss your day to bring me my coffee, I'll make sure everyone in this class regrets it.”

They groaned collectively and shook their heads. A few of them still had their hands raised, but I was officially done for the day.

“Read pages 153 - 260 from the printout by next class. I expect you to know the ins and outs of each case. Class dismissed.” I walked out, saying nothing further.

Slipping into my car, I noticed a new email on my phone.

Subject: Bathroom.

Thank you for sending me that very inappropriate note with my flowers today. Everyone in my cohort now knows that you and I have yet to fuck in our brand new bathroom.

Why are you so ridiculous?

—Aubrey.

Subject: Re: Bathroom.

You're very welcome for the flowers. I'm hoping that you liked them.

And that wasn't a “note” that I sent you. It's a demand that's about to be addressed within the next few hours.

Why do you deny that you love it?

I could picture her rolling her eyes at my last message, so I revved up my car and sped back toward our home.

Even though I'd spent the last six years here, I was still building my tolerance for the things I once hated, things that now bothered me less and less, but I still had a long way to go.

Some memories can never be replaced...

Aubrey was completely captivated and entranced by this city, though. Whenever she wasn't incessantly touring with the ballet company, she was insisting that we try every restaurant, theater, and tourist attraction possible—trying to make me fall in love with everything again.

I parked in front of our brownstone—a newly purchased brick building in Brooklyn, and walked up the steps.

“Aubrey?” I said as I opened the door. “Are you in here?”

“Yes.” She called from a distance. “And I'm not in the *bathroom*.”

“You will be eventually.” I walked down the hallway, stopping when I saw her hanging another frame in her office.

The walls were covered in pictures of her standing at center stage, a different picture for every night she'd opened a show.

“Do I need to have another room built for you and your photos?” I asked. “You're running out of space.”

“No, I think this is the last one.”

“Are you still retiring at the end of the month?” I stepped behind her and kissed her neck. “Or have you changed your mind yet?”

“I'm not changing my mind.” She turned around to face me. “I think it's time for me to focus on something new.”

“Becoming the female version of Mr. Ashcroft when you teach?”

“I won't be that bad,” she said. “But I do need a break like you said, I think...”

I nodded. I'd been extremely supportive throughout her professional career—traveling with her out of the country to see some of the shows, hiring a personal massage therapist who was at her beck and call, and documenting all of her achievements from the newspapers.

But I'd recently noted a change—a shift, in her attitude: Although she was happy when she went to rehearsals, even happier when telling me about new things the company was trying, she seemed to be more interested in a life outside of the company, so I suggested that she take a short break.

I was still trying to figure out how she'd interpreted my suggested “break” as a “retirement.”

“I loved dancing in Russia.” She smiled, pointing to the picture. “Do you remember that?”

“I do remember that...” I said, continuing my assault of her neck, slipping my hand under her shirt.

She murmured as I rubbed my thumb around her nipple, as I gently bit her skin. But then she stepped away. “I actually need you to go fax my revised contract to the company...I have to let them know officially by five o'clock.”

“*After* the bathroom.” I clasped her hand. “We have four hours.”

She rolled her eyes, but she gave in, taking my lead into the bathroom.

I turned on the water and pulled her dress over her head. “If you're hell bent on retiring from performing and simply teaching, we'll have more time to spend together.”

“More time for you to convince me to leave New York?”

“We really don't have a reason to stay,” I said, threading my fingers through her hair. “If you're going to teach, you can commute.”

“And if I don't teach? If I decide to continue dancing instead?”

“I’ll buy season tickets.” I cupped her face in my hands, raising my eyebrow. “I never asked you to retire, Aubrey...I just think you need a break. You haven’t taken a week off in more than six years...”

“I *am* going to take a break...”

“Is it going to last longer than two days?”

“A lot longer...”

“Two weeks?”

“It’ll be at least nine months...”

“What?” I backed up, shocked. We’d stopped using protection once we moved in together, but she’d still taken birth control. “What are you saying, Aubrey?”

“I’m saying you’re going to be a father,” she said, nearly whispering. “And I think that’s a good enough reason for us to stay...”

I was silent for several seconds, pressing my palm against her flat stomach.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “Is this not something that you wanted? I wanted to tell you this morning, but you were in a rush, so—”

I cut her off with a deep kiss and pulled her close, rubbing my hands against her bare back. “I’m more than okay...” I looked into her eyes. “It *is* something I wanted...”

She murmured, “I love you,” against my lips and I said it back.

Breathless, she leaned against the shower door. “Can you go fax my letter now? It would really be nice if, for once, I wasn’t late doing something because you have no self-control and were too busy fucking me.”

“I’ll definitely fax your letter...” I drew her lip into my mouth and squeezed her ass. “*After* the bathroom.”

She tried to dash away one last time, but I pinned her to the wall and kissed her until her body went limp.

Pulling away as she gasped for air, I lifted her leg around my waist—sliding my cock inside of her inch by inch.

Her arms went around my neck as she tilted her hips up, as I gripped her sides and pulled her into me.

“When we get back from dinner...” I whispered and skimmed a hand down her stomach and to her clit, swirling my thumb around it. “I’m going to fuck you until you can’t take it anymore...”

She groaned and dragged her nails across my skin. “*Ahhh...*”

“Now that you’re quitting, I’m going to be inside of you every day...”

“*Andrew...*”

I felt her body tensing and lifted her other leg around my waist—pressing her back further into the tile. “Every day...”

Her pussy clutched my cock tighter and throbbed against me, so I held her taut and watched as she reached her climax— as she completely let go.

Biting her bottom lip, I held her close to me as another orgasm made its way through her body. “Stop fighting it...”

“I’m...I’m not...”

“Aubrey...” I looked into her eyes as I came seconds after her, and the two of us remained entwined for several seconds as the shower’s water poured over us.

“I hate you sometimes...” she whispered, motioning for me to let go of her legs.

“I love you, too.” I gently set her down.

I grabbed a loofah, and slowly ran it over her body—pausing when I reached her stomach. “Did you go to the doctor yet?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I just took a test...I’m going there tomorrow.”

“*We’re* going there tomorrow.”

She looked as if she was going to say something else, but she simply moaned as I pressed the loofah against her thighs.

“Here,” she said, grabbing a different loofah when I was finished. “Let me—”

“No.” I gripped her wrist and pointed to the shower bench. “You can sit.”

“What?”

“Go sit down.”

“Seriously?” She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at me. “You’re not going to let me return the favor because I’m *pregnant*? Is that what this is?”

“Yes.” I washed my chest. “That’s exactly what this is.”

She sighed. “Andrew...”

“I can’t lose another one.” I looked into her eyes. “I don’t want you doing anything at all.”

Nodding slowly, she stepped back and sat on the bench, keeping her gaze locked on mine.

When I was finished, I turned off the water and wrapped her in a towel. Claspng her hand, I led her into our bedroom.

“Do I need to put a cover sheet over your letter?” I asked.

“No, but if you’re in an accommodating mood, I would prefer if we skipped your faculty dinner tonight.”

“That’s not happening.” I rolled my eyes and grabbed her sheet off the headboard. “You have plenty of time to get ready for it. I’ll be back.”

Ignoring her deep sighs, I left the room and headed into my home office. It, too, was covered in frames of her ballet shows. And, much to my annoyance, she’d placed a picture of us kissing right above my desk—a picture that always found its way there no matter how many times I placed my framed law degree there.

I turned on the fax machine and pulled out the tray, stopping once I actually read her letter:

Dear Mr. Ashcroft, staff of NYCB, and current cohort,

I am writing this letter to officially resign as a principle dancer from the company. As we discussed previously, I would like to take on a more instructive role for at least two years, in which I will be pursuing some personal dreams of mine. I have full intent on returning to the stage once the time is right, but at this current moment, I need to do what is best for me and my future family.

—Aubrey Everhart



Aubrey

I adjusted my seatbelt and looked over at Andrew. “How long are you planning to stay at this event tonight?”

“Until it’s over.”

I rolled my eyes, thinking about the last dull faculty dinner we’d attended. Half of the awardees were sleep an hour into the ceremony.

“Are you nominated for an award or something?” I asked.

“What makes you think someone would *ever* nominate me for an award?”

“Seeing as though you somehow managed to win ‘Professor of the Year’ three times in a row, I’m pretty sure it’s not impossible.”

“No.” He smiled. “The Professor of the Year banquet is next week.”

“And tonight is?”

“Does it matter?” He placed his hand on my exposed thigh, rubbing it gently. “I want you to be here. When do you plan on telling your parents that you’re pregnant?”

“Tomorrow...Are you going to tell anyone?”

He was silent for a few minutes. “Jessica.”

“Jessica?” I laughed. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” he said. “She’s a good friend.”

I couldn’t deny that. Even though she once had an unrelenting crush on him, she’d been nothing but supportive of us since we moved to New York. She called once a month to say hello, but to also ask him for dating advice. She even asked me sometimes.

Pulling the car into a parking garage, he looked over at me. “You stopped taking birth control months ago, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“Why?”

“Because you’ve talked about wanting to have a child more than you’ll ever admit...”

“I told you I wanted you to have a career, to achieve everything you wanted first.”

“I have,” I said as he put the car in park.

He cupped my face in his hands and stared at me, looking deep into my eyes. He opened his mouth to say something, but there was a sudden knock on the window.

The valet.

He sighed and leaned back, letting a man in a white tuxedo take the keys as another man helped me out of the car.

“Enjoy your night,” the two of them said in unison.

Andrew pulled me close and we strolled along a walkway that was adorned with bright lights. As we approached the glass entrance of the restaurant, a host nodded at us.

“Good evening, Mr. Hamilton,” he said as he opened the doors. “Miss Everhart.”

“Good evening,” I said, wondering how he knew my name.

I felt Andrew kissing my hair as we stepped into a dimly lit room where patrons were sitting around white clothed tables.

He led me over to a spot by the windows and pulled out my chair.

I looked around the room, noticing that the usual signs for an over-the-top faculty meet and greet were nowhere to be found. None of the faces looked familiar, and there was no special mention of anything NYU related on the restaurant’s menu.

As I turned to face Andrew again, to ask him what was going on, I noticed he’d placed a small black box at the center of the table.

“I was going to wait until after dinner...” He grabbed both of my hands and my heart stopped. “But...”

Everything around me blurred and I took several deep breaths. “But *what?*”

“I want you to have this now. I think I’ve been very patient regarding this matter, so—”

“Yes.” I let his hands go. “I say yes...Can I open it?”

He smiled. “Sure.”

I took one last deep breath before opening the box, before pulling out the—

“Earrings?” I asked, trying to keep a smile on my face as I looked over the sparkling diamond pointed slippers.

“Yes.” He nodded, smiling. “You mentioned wanting some of those two weeks ago, so I figured with your news about the baby...”

I tuned the rest of his sentence out and stared at the jewelry.

“Do you not like them?” He tilted my chin up.

“Yes, but I...I thought...” There were tears welling in my eyes. “Yes...Yes, I like them very much, Andrew.”

He raised his eyebrow. “Why does it look like you’re about to cry?”

“I’m not...” I stood up. “Can you please excuse me for a minute?”

I didn’t wait for him to respond. I walked away and grabbed the elbow of a waiter, asking where the restroom was.

Rushing in that direction as quickly as I could, I checked all of the stalls before releasing a pent up, “Is he serious?!” cry. Then I let the rest of the tears fall down my face.

I should’ve known better...

I shook my head, knowing that I wasn’t going to be able to finish tonight’s dinner without showing my emotions. I immediately pulled out my phone and started to type a message for him, but he walked through the doors.

“This is the *women’s* restroom,” I said. “Get out. Now.”

“So you can send me an email?” He smirked.

“Yes. So I can send you an email.” I stepped back. “I’m almost finished with what I have to say, so if you could just—”

“Why are you crying, Aubrey?” He stepped toward me, making me step backward until I was pressed against the wall. “Was it something I said?”

“I’m about to have your baby, Andrew. We’re going to be parents...”

“I’m aware.” He glanced at my stomach and wiped tears from my eyes. “Although I’m pretty sure your hormones shouldn’t be affected this quickly if you’re only a few weeks pregnant.”

“Are you ever going to propose?” I couldn’t hold that question back anymore. “It’s been *six years...*”

“I don’t recall setting a time frame.”

“You said after I was settled with my career and...” I sighed as he wiped away another stream of tears. “I just want to know if it’s a yes or a no so I won’t get my hopes up again...If you don’t plan on ever marrying me because of your past, because you think I’ll hurt you like Ava did, or you just have no desire in ever committing to me for the long-term, I just need you to tell me right now so I can—”

I stopped talking once I felt him slipping a ring onto my finger.

“You only had to wait twenty more minutes.” He kissed my forehead, and I looked down at the ring—gasping once I held it in front of my face.

It was a massive princess cut design that featured small bits of blue sapphire around the platinum band. And along the setting that held the main jewel in place, a line of intertwined “As” glimmered beneath the light.

I looked at him in utter shock. “You were going to propose to me here?”

“No.” He kissed my lips. “On the roof.”

Silence.

“Were you going to get down on one knee?” Another tear fell past my cheeks.

He nodded.

“In front of other people?”

He nodded again.

“Can you still do that?”

“Why would I?”

“For memories sake.”

“You already said *yes.*”

“I know, but I can temporarily take the ring off so I can still hear whatever you were going to say.” I twisted it around my finger, but he stopped me.

“If you take the ring off, I’m going to assume that your answer is *no*...” He glared at me. “But since I know you’ll never let it go if I don’t actually say the words, I’ll say them for memories sake.” He grabbed my hand and led me out of the restroom and up a set of steps.

Opening the doors ahead of us, he pulled me through the outdoor section of the restaurant, where patrons sat underneath a white heated canopy. He walked me over to the ledge and placed his jacket over my shoulders before picking me up and setting me atop a cold stone.

Then he looked over his shoulder, at the diners who were now eyeing us suspiciously as he got down on one knee.

“Do you want the edited or the non-edited version?” He looked into my eyes.

“Non-edited...”

“Okay.” He took my right hand and held it in his. “Aubrey...The beginning of our relationship was a lie, a huge fucking lie, but for some odd reason, I couldn’t be happier that that was the case.”

He paused. “Over the past six years, we’ve dug our way to the truth, and as much as it hurt sometimes, I can honestly say that it was more than worth it.”

I blushed as the people behind him fell silent, as they strained to hear what he was saying.

“I wanted to propose to you several years ago, but I didn’t want to hold you back or distract you from focusing on your career, so I bought the ring and decided I would wait until you accomplished everything you wanted, until we could actually enjoy some time together.”

A woman stood up and put her hand over her heart, mouthing, “Awww...”

“And even though you get under my skin like no other, and you continue to push me out of my comfort zone...There’s no one I’d rather be with, and there’s nothing I would rather do than fuck your pussy for the rest of my life.”

There was a collective gasp, a chorus of “What did he just say?”

“So...” He circled his thumb around my ring. “Will you marry me?”

I nodded, feeling fresh tears fall down my face as he stood up and pulled me into his arms.

“Did you really have to say that last line?” I whispered as he claimed my mouth with his.

“Yes.” He trailed his tongue along my lips. “I want you to be well aware that ring or not, I’m still the same Andrew.”

“Or Liam...”

“No, *Andrew*.” He kissed me again, more passionately this time. “Liam fell in love with the wrong woman...“Andrew” didn’t...”

****The End****

BONUS SCENES

(Before you read this...Did you read the extended epilogue at the end of RD3? YES...It's there...Go back and read that before this LOL)

When I began working on this series, I was terrified. I'd never written in the erotica genre before, and I was still learning about the romance genre as a whole. Gone were my days of reading Orwell, Didion, and Baldwin; they'd been replaced with the likes of awesome authors who specialized in steamy stories that sent shivers up and down my spine.

So, quite naturally, it took me a while to understand the difference between contemporary romance and erotica. And when I was putting the final touches on Reasonable Doubt 3, I realized that the ending was falling back into my former terrain.

The scenes that showed Aubrey & Andrew in the future were a tad bit too contemporary. Okay, they were sappy...LOL

But since there was no real "flow" to those scenes, and I felt like they might have led you into thinking that there would be an RD4 (I promised you a *trilogy*), I decided to simply end it with their HEA.

Now that their story is complete though, and since quite a few readers have asked about those scenes, the deleted glimpses of their future follow this letter.

(Back at home after accepting Andrew's proposal)

Aubrey

I slowly rolled on top of Andrew, feeling weak after yet another orgasm. "Hi..."

"Hi." He rubbed his hands against my bare back and kissed my lips.

"You owe me a dinner..." I whispered. "A cooked one, not delivered."

"You think I'm going to get up and do that right now?"

"I think you're going to do whatever I want for the next few months." I smiled, knowing it was true; I could tell. "Do you prefer a boy or a girl?"

"No preference." He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. What about you?"

"I'm partial to a girl..."

"And why is that?"

"I've just always wanted a little girl," I admitted. "To treat her better than my parents treated me, you know?"

"So, you'll cry if it's a boy?"

"I'll cry if he ends up being anything like you."

Laughing, he sat up and pulled me with him. He slipped into a pair of sweat pants and helped me into a slip. Then he took my hand and led me into the kitchen, setting me on one of the bar stools.

I leaned against the countertop as the two of us settled into what had become a routine since we started living together: Contrary to my comment about delivery, Andrew cooked for me whenever I asked. (Of course, there was an oral price that came with it afterwards, but it was one I was more than willing to pay.)

When my touring schedule became hectic and I only had five hours in between the next show and a rehearsal, dinner had always been waiting for me. And every opening night, he'd sent a boxed entrée along with a bouquet of flowers backstage just in case I wanted to eat right away.

"What if it is a girl?" He placed a small chicken salad in front of me. "Do you have any names in mind?"

"Aubrey, but we can spell it with an 'i' instead of an 'ey,' you know?"

He rolled his eyes. "That's not happening."

"I was joking." I plucked a strawberry from my plate. "I was thinking Autumn..."

"Autumn? Is there a reasoning behind that?"

"It's our favorite season," I said. "It's also when I fell in love with you, and when you fell in love with me."

"I fell in love with you in the winter."

"No. You *realized* that you loved me in the winter. You already loved me in the fall."

"I'm pretty sure I didn't." He poured me a cup of juice before sitting next to me. "I need to ask you something."

"Since when do you need permission?"

Cupping my chin, he turned my head so I was facing him. "Do you want a wedding?"

I nodded, running my finger along my ring for the umpteenth time.

"Before or after the baby?"

"Before..."



A couple months later ...

Andrew

I wasn't sure why Aubrey selected a vineyard in upstate New York for our wedding, but she insisted. We'd toured the venue no less than twenty times per her request, and on every occasion she'd swooned over the acres of lush plants, the small white cottages that stood in the distance, and the massive trees that shaded the area where we would be married.

One of the biggest benefits of being married here, though, was the unlimited fresh wine that was served at the outdoor bar.

"Andrew?" A male voice said from behind as I picked up a glass.

I turned around, finding myself face to face with Aubrey's father. "Governor Everhart."

"Ah, that title has such a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

I didn't answer.

Sipping a glass of wine, he sighed. "I never thought this day was coming, never thought my Aubrey would get married." He took a longer sip. "To her former *boss*, no less."

I didn't answer that either.

"You're ten years older than Aubrey..." He finally said something that deserved a response.

"Yes, I am. Are you insinuating something?"

"Not at all," he said. "It's clear that you two are in love...You'd have to be to attend all of those overseas ballet shows without falling asleep."

"It's called being supportive."

"I know...Not that it matters now, but I would like to know for sure: Were you two having a relationship while she was your intern at GBH? Did you really just happen to meet again in New York after she quit?"

"Mr. Everhart..." I set my glass down, tired of playing into the story Aubrey had concocted years ago. "Since you asked me so nicely, I'm going to say this once and only once. Me and your daughter were actually—"

"There you are!" His wife came over and slipped her hand in his. "I was looking for you. Are you harassing the groom on the big day?"

"I wouldn't necessarily call it harassment," he said. "I was just asking him a few questions..."

"Oh?" She looked back and forth between us. "What type of questions?"

"He wanted to know if I was sleeping with your daughter when she was my intern."

She gasped, putting her hand on her chest. Then she looked up at him. "Seriously? I think you're really letting this governor thing go to your head. Of course someone like Andrew would never do something like that."

"Of course, I wouldn't." I smiled, nodding my head in agreement. "That's a very terrible rule to break, don't you think? Sleeping with an *intern*, especially an undergraduate intern, since that's what she was at the time, correct?"

He said nothing.

"See?" His wife kissed his cheek and then she turned around and hugged me. "Maybe after the baby you can convince her to reconsider law. Then the two of you can be just like us."

I held back my comment and returned her hug.

Before our lively conversation could go any further, the wedding director walked over with her clipboard.

"The bride-to-be is ready now," she said, smiling. "Time to head on over."

Mr. Everhart looked at me one last time and slowly extended his hand. "She thinks the world of you, and I've never seen her this happy before. Thank you..."

His wife hugged me one last time, and the two of them walked away.

I found it quite ironic that he'd seen Aubrey recently, because I hadn't seen her in three days. She'd scheduled her bachelorette party for this past weekend and claimed that she needed to get a few last things for the wedding on her own.

As I walked down the path of petals that led to the altar, I looked over the small crowd: Aubrey's parent, a few of my coworkers, Mr. Bach and Mr. Greenwood, and a group of dancers from Aubrey's cohort.

I didn't attempt to invite anyone from my family. I didn't see a point in asking them to come, or pretending that we had any type of relationship for the sake of a wedding.

"What took you so long?" Jessica tilted her head to the side as I took my spot next to her. "I told you that this is supposed to be the happiest day of your life."

"I told you that you could wear a dress." I looked over her tailored tuxedo.

"I wanted to commit to playing the role of the best man. You know, do my best to look like one of your guy friends."

"Your hair is in curls."

"Yes, but..." Her cheeks reddened. "My boyfriend loves when I wear my hair like this, especially when we're in bed because he likes to—"

"Jessica..." I couldn't help rolling my eyes, but then I laughed. "Thank you for being here."

"My pleasure." She hugged me. "I'm very happy for you and Aubrey. It's about time you finally married her."

I didn't get a chance to reply. The small orchestra to my right had begun to play, and the audience was standing to its feet.

Stepping out all alone—just like she wanted, Aubrey locked her eyes on me as she slowly made her way down the aisle.

There were whispers from everyone, flattering comments about how beautiful she looked, and I honestly couldn't take my eyes off of her.

Her hair was pulled to one side, in a bevy of curls that fell past her shoulder and lightly grazed the top of her chest. She was wearing a thin crystal headband that featured a few white feathers and matched her stunning dress: It was strapless and hugged her hips—perfectly—hiding her small baby bump. Adorned with subtle crystals that glimmered on every inch of the fabric, its long train stretched down the aisle.

As she stepped closer, I wiped her eyes with my fingertips.

"Stop crying," I whispered, taking her hand.

She nodded, but more tears made their way down her face.

As the small crowd took their seats, the pastor began to read scriptures.

"The couple has elected to keep this ceremony short and simple," the pastor said, holding back a laugh. "Their exact words to me were, Just marry us and get everyone to the reception. We're only paying you for one hour."

The audience laughed, and I slipped my arm around Aubrey's waist—pulling her close to me.

"I guess that's my cue." The pastor laughed louder. Then he cleared his throat, whispering that I needed to let her go, but I ignored him and kissed Aubrey.

"Mr. Hamilton?" He cleared his throat again.

Briefly letting Aubrey's lips go, I spoke. "We both told you not to give a speech. Just skip to the 'now pronounce' part." And then I claimed Aubrey's mouth once more, ignoring everything else around us, whispering in between breaths that she was forever mine.



A few years later...

Aubrey

Our three year old daughter, Autumn, absolutely adores Andrew. She follows him around whenever he's at home, refuses to let anyone else tuck her in at night, and if she wakes up late, she runs into our bedroom in the morning just to make sure "He's here."

With the exception of her blond hair, she's inherited all of his features—his piercing blue eyes, his smile, and unfortunately, his personality.

She's also strangely addicted to Pop-tarts—*coffee flavored* Pop-tarts.

"Don't even think about it, Autumn." I cross my arms as she pushes her plastic ladder across the kitchen floor. "You had two for dessert, so you can't have another one until tomorrow morning."

She stops for a moment—looking as if she understands. But then she continues pushing the ladder across the floor.

"Autumn..." I step in front of her just as she presses it against a lower cabinet. "Tomorrow morning."

"Daddy said—"

"I don't care what *Daddy* said. I said no."

Seemingly hurt, she gasps and rushes out of the room.

I sigh and start to silently count.

And in five...four...three...two...

Andrew walks into the kitchen, carrying her at his side. Without glancing my way, he strolls right over to the countertop and opens a new package of Pop-tarts, handing one to her.

"Thank you!" She squeals as he sets her down, and as if she's trying to ease her betrayal, she breaks the tart and hands me a piece.

"I want to share with you, Mommy," she says, looking into my eyes. "Will you share with me?"

I resist the urge to roll my eyes as I take her peace offering. "Thank you, Autumn."

"You're welcome!" She gives a bigger piece to Andrew, and then she rushes off again.

"Andrew," I say, taking a deep breath. "We need to talk."

"About a fucking Pop-tart?"

"This is not about a Pop-tart. This is about your continued inability to say no to a three year old. If I say no, she immediately runs to you. And instead of being on my side about it, you simply say yes."

"Then maybe you should just start saying yes."

I narrow my eyes at him and step closer. "She's going to be spoiled rotten if you keep this up...You don't have to say no all the time, but once or twice wouldn't kill you."

"It actually would." He pulls me into his arms and kisses me until I'm breathless. "I don't want to make her cry. Ever."

I suck in a few breaths as he rubs my back.

"She only asks for treats every now and then," he says. "She doesn't really ask for much else."

This is true. Outside of her growing doll collection, her attention has lately been geared toward the empty studio Andrew had built in our apartment last year.

She's starting to show slight interest in ballet: She watches me rehearse on the weekends, laughs whenever I show her my numerous tutus, and she even imitates me by holding her hands above her head from time to time.

"Daddy, can you tuck me in now?" Autumn returns to the kitchen and looks at Andrew—still chewing on that Pop-tart.

"Of course," he says, clasping my hand.

We follow her into her bright yellow bedroom, and as usual, wait for her to pick a book from her shelf.

She selects *Cinderella* today, and surprisingly hands the book to me. "I want Mommy to read it."

Smiling, I wait for Andrew to tuck her under the covers, and then the two of us sit on the edge of the bed—taking turns reading until she falls asleep.

“She didn’t even make it to the midnight part this time.” I kiss her forehead.

“Are you complaining?”

“No, I’m just surprised.”

“You probably bored her to sleep with your monotonous tone.” He pulls me up and turns off the lights.

“She stays up to the very last page whenever I read.”

“Would you like to sleep on the couch tonight?”

“Only if you’ll be putting your pussy on my face.”

“I won’t be.” I follow him into our room and get into bed. “You’ll be lucky if I even let you kiss me tonight.”

He slips in next to me and pulls me close—calling my bluff by kissing me again and again.

“When’s the last time we had sex?” I whisper against his lips.

“This morning in the shower.” He slides a hand between my legs, gently rubbing my clit. “You don’t remember?”

“Yes...” I moan softly as he bites my bottom lip and rolls me on top of him.

“Are you sure?” He kisses my neck. “I can fuck you again to make you remember.”

“Ahhh...” I feel his cock hardening beneath me, feel him palming my ass as he continues kissing my skin. “Andrew...”

I draw my head back and kiss his lips, running my fingers through his hair. I feel him pulling at the back of my bra, unsnapping the first hook, but a familiar sound breaks our moment.

It’s the patter of little feet against the hallway’s hardwood floor.

Sighing, Andrew kisses my forehead and gently rolls me off of him.

“I’m scared...” Autumn says as she walks into our room. She walks over to Andrew’s side of the bed and lifts her hands up. “Can I sleep in here?”

“Yes.” He immediately picks her up and places her between us, tucking her in once again. His hand reaches out for mine and he caresses it, silently saying we’ll finish in the morning.

“How much longer do you think she’ll do this?” he whispers an hour later. “It’s starting to happen twice a week.”

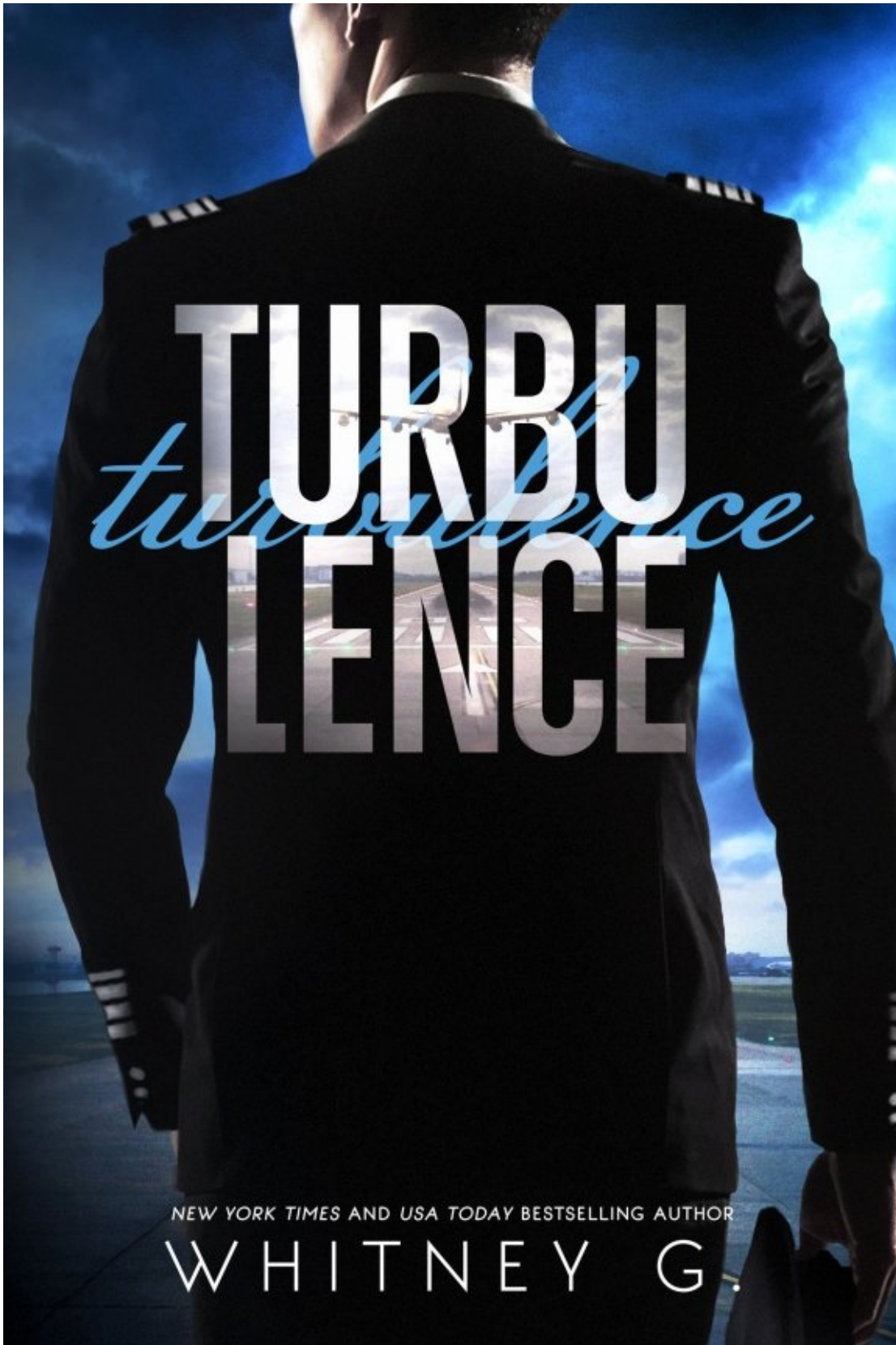
“Is it bothering you?”

“Not particularly.”

“Good.” I sit up and lean over Autumn, briefly kissing him on the lips before returning to my pillow. “Because I’m pretty sure it’ll keep happening until you learn to tell her no...”



TURBULENCE



NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WHITNEY G.

SYNOPSIS

Strap yourself into the cockpit for the 'flight of your life' via the newest erotic romance from New York Times bestselling author Whitney G.

Jake Weston and I met under a cloud of clichés: Boy meets girl. Boy charms girl. Boy screws girl.

He was the sexiest, cockiest man I'd ever encountered, but I had no idea he was a senior pilot when we met. No idea we worked for the same airline and had secrets just like me.

After a passionate night of unforgettable sex, I thought I'd never see him again, but when I did, neither of us could walk away...

We weren't supposed to be together, we definitely weren't supposed to fall in love, and yet our turbulent and forbidden love affair took on a life of its own.

We knew we could potentially crash and burn, but what we had was so intoxicating and inescapable that we were both willing to risk it all...

This is us.

This is our messed up love.

This is *Turbulence*.

*This is for you.
Only for you.*

TURBULENCE (n:)

The quality or state of violent disorder or commotion.¹ Chaotic or unstable motion in the atmosphere.²

US. Anything and everything that characterizes *us*.³

PRE-BOARDING

GILLIAN

Prologue

How many times will you burn me?

Three, four, five, maybe ten—

Is it me who's burning you?

Yes, 'this' needs to end.

If you walk away first, I'll follow suit.

I've told you this before, and yet you never do...

The first time I flew through severe turbulence, I swore on my life I'd never fly again.

It happened during a red-eye flight from Seattle to London, when three hours in, we were swept up in a sudden summer storm. The plane shook violently as the passengers screamed and prayed for their lives, and my calm assurances of "Hold on! Everyone, please just hold on!" fell on deaf ears.

The pilot was young and inexperienced, his soft voice not comforting in the least. And as the glasses from the first class cabin shattered onto the floor amidst toppling luggage, I promised myself that my days in the sky were long over if we ever landed.

I broke that promise hours later, of course, but I could finally say that I'd experienced the worst of what turbulence could ever be.

Or so I thought.

"Miss?" A passenger in first class interrupts my thoughts, touching my elbow as I walk down the aisle. "Miss?"

"Yes?"

"How much longer until we arrive in Paris?"

"Eight hours, sir." I resist the urge to tell him that he asked me this question fifteen minutes ago.

"Would you like something else to drink tonight?"

"A refill on my white wine, please."

I nod and quickly oblige, retrieving the wine from the galley's cooler and filling his glass to the top. I need to take care of him as fast as possible so I can finally sit alone and address the unbearable ache in my chest.

"May I have a blanket as well?" the man asks before I can step away.

I force a smile and retrieve one from the overhead bin above his seat, unwrapping it for him and placing it onto his lap. "Would you like anything else?"

"No, but—" He stops mid-sentence and raises his eyebrow. "Oh, wow, your face is really red. Why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying." I lie. "It's allergy season."

"Allergies? On a plane?"

"Would you like anything else from me, sir?" I feel a tear rolling down my cheeks. "If not, I'll be sure to check on you again soon."

He doesn't answer me. Instead he pulls a handkerchief from his breast-pocket and holds it out to me.

“Whatever it is,” he says, looking me up and down. “I hope it’s not a guy. You’re much too beautiful to cry over something like that...Wait. It is a guy, isn’t it?”

I don’t respond. I simply take his handkerchief and walk away.

I head toward the back of the plane—past a cabin full of sleeping passengers, and lock myself in the lavatory. As more tears fall down my face, I pull out my phone and log into my private blog so I can reread the words I wrote months ago. So I can remember the agonizing feeling of failing to listen to myself.

~BLOG POST~

This is the last time I will say this to myself.

The very last time.

My heart can’t take another sequence of angry arguments, another round in this dangerous game of “Will we make it? Should we make it?” or another spin on this never-ending carousel of highs and lows.

Yes, the way this man fucks me is incomparable and leaves me craving more the second he pulls out of me. And yes, the way he pleasures my pussy with his mouth and makes me come for hours on end will forever be unparalleled. But the way we fit (rather, don’t fit) has finally reached its climax.

I will not go back.

I will not go back.

I. Will. Not. Go. Back.

A knock comes to the door before I can read the rest, and I sigh.

“Someone’s in here,” I say. “The occupied light is on.”

The knock comes again, much louder this time, so I groan and open the door.

“The occupied light is clearly—” My words are cut short with a gasp, as I take in the sight of the man I currently despise, the man I’ve been attempting to avoid this entire flight. The pilot. His beautiful blue eyes are glaring into mine, his jaw is clenched, and no matter how badly I don’t want to be attracted to him right now, I can’t help it.

With his hard and chiseled face of perfection, his full and defined lips that are definitely molded for long and alluring kisses, and a cockiness that radiates off his body from miles away, he’s always managed to leave me breathless and aroused with a single glance.

Behind him, a few reading lights in the cabin blink off, and a few TV screens begin to play the second in-flight film.

“We need to talk, Gillian,” he says, his voice tight. “Now.”

“I’ll pass.” I try to slam the door in his face, but he holds it open and pushes me inside—locking the door behind him.

For several seconds, neither of us says a word. We simply stare at each other like we have so many times before, with pain and disappointment hanging in the air between us.

“I have nothing else to say to you, Jake.” My voice cracked. “Nothing else to say.”

“Good.” He hisses. “I’ll do most of the talking.”

“Well, that’s quite ironic. You don’t normally *talk* at all.”

“Are you fucking someone else?” His words come out so harsh and clipped, I’m not sure that I heard them right.

“What?”

“Do I need to repeat it?” He glares at me, closing the gap between us. “Are you fucking someone else?”

“We haven’t spoken in weeks.” I grit my teeth. “I haven’t seen you *in weeks*, and this is the first thing you ask me? How about, ‘Hello, Gillian. It’s been a long time since we last spoke. How are you?’”

“Hello, Gillian.” He mocks me, locking his eyes on mine. “It’s been a long time since we last spoke. How are you?” He doesn’t give me a chance to answer. “*Are you fucking someone else?*”

“No.”

“Are you seeing someone else?”

“That’s the same goddamn question.”

“Then give me the *same goddamn answer.*”

“No.” I cross my arms. “No, I have not been seeing someone else, but I will be soon. And you know what? It’ll be someone who doesn’t make me feel this way every few weeks, someone who doesn’t get a sick thrill out of disappearing on me for weeks at a time or leaving me wondering at all hours of the night because he won’t open up to me. Best of all, it’ll be someone who will respect me and not act like loving me is a burden.”

“I’ve never said loving you was a burden.”

“You’ve never said you loved me at all.”

Silence.

“Gillian...” He sighs, running a hand through his dirty blond hair. “Listen to me.”

“*Screw you.* Let me leave, please.” I push at his chest, attempting to get away, but he holds me still. “Let me leave right now, Jake.”

“No.” He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me close, using his free hand to wipe away my tears with his fingertips. He caresses my back and kisses the corners of my mouth, softly biting my bottom lip like he usually does, right before he fucks me. “You know that I never want to hurt you.”

“Do I?”

“You fucking should.” He bites my bottom lip again, much harder this time, and then he whispers against my mouth. “I need you to give ‘us’ another chance.”

“What makes you think I would be stupid enough to do that?”

“Because I’m not the only person here who has ever made a mistake.” He runs his fingers through my hair, his lips brushing against mine. “I recall the start of this being quite fucked up.”

“It’s *still* fucked up.” I look into his eyes. “You still refuse to let me in, you still won’t talk to me and tell me the simplest of things. I’ve been nothing but open and honest with you, and yet, all this time later—” The rest of my sentence ends on his lips and his tongue slides against mine—begging me, teasing me, overpowering me.

I try to resist, to push him away, but it’s no use. His kiss is an instant taste of the high I’ve been missing, a reminder of just how good we can be when we’re together. Slowly giving in, I begin to whisper questions against his lips as he claims my mouth again and again.

I ask if he’s having sex with someone else, he says no. I ask if he’s dating anyone else, and he punishes me with a squeeze of my ass and a rough and abrupt “No.” I start to ask where he’s been these past few weeks, why he always slips away from time to time, but he ends my questions with an even deeper kiss that sends tingles up and down my spine.

“We can talk tonight,” he whispers. He grabs my hand and presses it against the front of his pants, letting me feel how hard his cock is. “We can talk about whatever the hell you want to talk about tonight.”

“Tonight as in ‘the morning’ when we actually land in Paris, or ‘tonight’ as in right now?”

“Tonight as in right after we leave this restroom, as in right after I make you turn around against that door and remind you who your pussy belongs to.” He covers my hand with his and silently commands me to unzip his pants. “Is that good enough for you?”

I nod, he claims my mouth with his one more time, and another string of arguments is suddenly snapped—soon to be long forgotten shreds, just like all the others. As his hand slides up my skirt and wetness drips between my thighs, I know, once again, that all is lost.

All is us.

All is *turbulence*.

How many times did you burn me?

Three, four, five, maybe ten?

Was it me who burned you?

Yes, it was you, again and again.

I should've walked away, so you could've followed suit.

But I think you knew all along that I never wanted to...

TERMINAL A:
BOY MEETS GIRL

GATE A1

JAKE

Dallas (DAL)—> Singapore (SIN)—> New York (JFK)

There were only three things I hated in this world more than my cruel circus of a family: The new changes in the airline industry, the fact that the airline industry was the only industry I could ever see myself working for, and the fact that ‘Do Not Disturb’ signs on hotel room doors apparently didn’t mean shit anymore.

Twice this morning, unwelcome knocks had come to the door at the absolute worst moments. The first time was while I was having sex, while the woman I’d invited up to my room was bent over my coffee table with her ass in the air—my cock thrusting in and out of her pussy. The second time was while I was flipping through the morning newspapers, using the flame from my final cigar to burn through all the lie-infested pages.

And now, within the same three-hour span, another set of knocks were tapping against the door.

“Mr. Weston!” This time there was a voice, a female voice. “Mr. Weston, are you in there?”

I didn’t answer. I continued standing under the hot streams of the shower, trying to think of any possible way I could get out of this.

“Mr. Weston, it’s me! Dr. Cox!” The shrill voice came again ten minutes later. “I know you’re in there! If you don’t answer this time, I’ll have to assume something is wrong and call the police!”

Jesus Christ...

I turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. Not bothering to grab a towel, I walked through the bedroom suite and opened the door, finding myself face to face with a red-haired woman in an all-white suit.

“What the fuck do you want?” I asked.

“*Excuse me?* How dare you talk to me like that? I don’t appreciate you ignoring—” She suddenly stopped talking and stepped back. Her big brown eyes widened, and her cheeks turned bright red.

“Your cock is um..” Her voice was a whisper. “You’re completely naked right now.”

“How perceptive of you,” I said flatly. “What do you want?”

Her gaze lingered on my cock for several more seconds, then she cleared her throat. “I’m Dr. Cox with Personnel Affairs for Elite Airways.”

“I’m aware.”

“I know that this weekend marks your final flight sequence with Signature Air, but seeing as though Elite and Signature will now be one airline as of next Monday, you still need to complete some paperwork with us,” she said. “You’ve had ten months to get this done, and you’re the only pilot who hasn’t completed the personality profile. Not only that, but I could’ve sworn we told you that we were flying into Dallas on *your* stopover just to get this done, Mr. Weston. We flew here for you, and we’re still waiting for you to join us in the meeting room. Would it kill you to take this seriously?”

“I’ll be able to take you seriously when you realize that my eyes are *up here*.”

Flustered, she blushed again and finally looked up at me. “We told you to be downstairs at seven.”

“I told you I’d get there at *eight*.”

“Well,” she said, looking at her watch, “It’s now seven thirty, and the reason we insisted you join us an hour early is because we wanted you to have time to read over some of our new policies. We *insisted*.”

“No, you *suggested*. Two completely different terms with two completely different expectations.”

“I guess I can add ‘human dictionary’ to your list of unique profile qualities.” She rolled her eyes.

“I’ll be very careful with my wording the next time I send you an email.”

“You should.”

“So, we’ll see you downstairs at eight?”

“*Eight thirty*. Someone interrupted my shower with her bullshit, so I need to make up for lost time.”

“Mr. Weston, I swear to God, if you’re not downstairs within the next hour, I will *suggest* to my superiors that we pack up and leave. And I can promise you that this weekend will be the last time you set foot on an aircraft.”

“I’m not a fan of empty threats, but for the record, the word ‘insist’ actually would’ve worked a lot better in that sentence. I’ll get there after my goddamn shower.” I shut the door before she could say anything else.

I walked through the bedroom suite once more—picking up a couple of empty condom wrappers and tossing them into the trash. Then I pulled my captain’s hat and navy blue uniform out of the closet and set them on the bed.

For over a decade, I’d flown for respectable airlines and companies, more than earned the four gold stripes that were sewn onto the shoulders, and I honestly thought that the remainder of my career would be spent flying for the beloved Signature Air. But the moment Elite Airways became the number one airline in the country, with its “steal everything from the incomparable days of Pan Am and just make it seem new” approach, I knew there was a chance that it would find a way to take over my favorite airline. Just like it took over most of the others.

I picked up my phone from the nightstand, hoping to see a new acceptance email from any of the charter airlines I’d applied to work for last week, but there were none. There was only a text message from the woman I’d fucked earlier, Emily.

She was listed as ‘Dallas-Emily’—city first, then name. That way, I wouldn’t confuse her with ‘San-Fran-Emily’ or ‘Vegas-Emily,’ so I could easily keep track of the other women I slept with in other cities.

Dallas-Emily: Did I leave my earrings in your room?

J. Weston: You did. I had someone from the front desk come get them. You can pick them up from there whenever you get a chance.

Dallas-Emily: You could’ve just told me that I left them there, Jake...

J. Weston: I just did.

Dallas-Emily: You know what I mean. Maybe I left them on purpose because I wanted to come back up and talk to you.

J. Weston: That’s exactly why I gave them to the front desk.

Dallas-Emily: Can I ask you something personal? There’s something I need to say.

J. Weston: I can’t prevent you from sending a text message.

Dallas-Emily: The next time we meet up, would it kill you to start our night with something other than, “Get on your knees,” or “Open your mouth?”

J. Weston: I’m not opposed to saying “Hello” from here on out.

Dallas-Emily: That's not what I mean, Jake! I mean that there's something palpable between us. Something real... And I just...

J. Weston: Are your ellipses (...) implying something significant or do you just enjoy abusing grammar for no reason?

Dallas-Emily: I want more from you, Jake. More for the both of us.

J. Weston: More fucking?

Dallas-Emily: More of YOU. I like you A LOT and I know that with your career, you're alone a lot (as am I) and I feel like the two of us have a real connection.

J. Weston: We do not have a connection, Emily.

Dallas-Emily: If we don't, then how come the last time you were in town, we talked for HOURS and you treated me to a five course dinner?

J. Weston: We spoke for twenty minutes and I bought you a taco.

Dallas-Emily: Same thing...Every time we see each other, even if it's only a couple times a month or so, I feel something and I know you do, too. I think we'd be really good together if we decided to pursue a relationship...What do you say?

I turned off my phone and made a mental note to block her later. There were plenty of other options in Dallas, plenty of other women who wanted nothing more from me than a shared fuck and a short, meaningless conversation. And the second she typed the word 'connection,' I should've ended our conversation.

In my world, a connection was a temporary lull in an itinerary, a short-term flight that eventually led to a final destination and nothing more. The word itself was fleeting, never final, and it never applied to relationships.

Walking into the living room, I searched for my tie—stopping when I saw the headline that was scrolling across the bottom of the television.

A New Future, a Forever Beginning for #1 Elite Airways Starts Monday

A blonde anchor was interviewing one of Elite's perfectly groomed and robotic employees. He was wearing the standard blue and white tie, an "I Love Elite" pin on his right breast-pocket, and a smile that never faltered. No matter how many lines of utter bullshit that streamed from his mouth, his smile remained the same.

"Well, we're the number one airline in the country for a reason, Clara." The Elite representative couldn't have been any older than twenty-five. "That's why we're excited about the acquisition of Signature Air and Contreras Airways."

"That's right!" The blonde clapped. "Earlier this morning, you all announced that you just bought Contreras Airways! What an amazing time your airline is having!"

"Thank you, Clara. It's like our team motto says: We will do whatever it takes to be the best, no matter the costs."

No matter the costs...

As the headline scrolled across the screen again, I felt my blood pressure rising. For most viewers, I was sure this was another business segment, another young interviewer's big break on the airline industry

and the American Dream, but to me, those words meant more than just the end of an era. They meant something I'd never forgive or forget.

Livid, I forced myself to walk away and returned to the shower. I turned the water on its highest setting, trying to focus on something else, anything else, but it was no use. That ugly headline was all I could see.

Fuck it. I'm not going downstairs until I feel like it.

Three hours later...

“Thank you so much for arriving *on time*, Mr. Weston.” Dr. Cox glared at me as she opened the door to the meeting room. “Did you purposely arrive here with only limited time to spare before your scheduled flight to Singapore, or is that just a coincidence?”

“A *convenient* coincidence.”

“I'm sure.” She groaned and led me inside the small room. “You can have a seat at that table over there.”

I stepped inside and noticed that they'd transformed the sparse space to look like an actual orientation session. There were Elite policy posters tacked onto the walls, a projector screen, and a stack of Federal Aviation law books stacked high in a lone chair. There were two large boxes marked “J. Weston” in the corner, and the table was littered with huge binders, notebooks, and pens.

As I took a seat, I spotted two glasses of water labeled “For Mr. Weston” dripping onto the table's wood.

Dr. Cox sat across from me seconds later, and another Elite executive, a grey-haired man donning a familiar blue and white tie, took his place next to her.

“This is my colleague, Lance Owens,” she said, placing a digital recorder on the table. “Since you took your precious time getting down here today, my videographer left. So, I'll have to record the audio of the interview and Mr. Owens will serve as a visual witness. Also, we managed to fill in most of what we were missing from your file as we waited, so this won't take too long. Do you have any questions before we begin?”

“None at all.”

“Good.” She hit the start button on her recorder. “This is the final interview for employee #67581, senior captain, Jake Weston. Mr. Weston, can you state your full name for the record please?”

“Jake C. Weston.”

“What does the ‘C’ stand for?”

“Can't remember.”

“*Mr. Weston...*”

“It doesn't stand for anything. It's just C.”

“Thank you.” She slid a blue file toward me. “Mr. Weston, can you confirm that the previous job listings in the file in front of you are correct?”

I flipped the file open and saw my professional career compiled into a sparse black list. United States Air Force. American Airways. Air-Asia. Air-France. Signature. No accidents, no infractions, not a single tardy.

“This is correct.” I closed the file and returned it to her.

“It says here that you've earned thirty awards in aviation since you graduated from flight school. Is that true?”

“No. It’s forty-six.”

“You know,” she said, reading from a sheet of paper. “Most pilots don’t earn these particular types of awards until they’re in their fifties and sixties, when they have at least twenty-five to thirty-five years of experience under their belt. You have almost twenty years of experience, if I count your high school aviation achievements, and you’re only weeks away from turning thirty-eight.”

I blinked.

“Are you going to say anything about what I just mentioned, Mr. Weston?”

“I was waiting for the question. There’s usually some inflection in your voice when you ask one. You only stated a list of facts.”

The witness at her side cracked a smile.

“Moving on.” She clicked her pen. “We’re having some problems verifying the people you listed as next of kin. The phone numbers that are listed for them go straight to payphones in Montreal. We need the updated information from you, okay? My ‘okay’ is a *question*, Mr. Weston.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s start with Christopher Weston, your biological father. What is his current place of employment and contact number?”

“He’s a magician. He disappears and reappears into my life every few years. I’ll try to catch him next time and ask for his number.”

“What about Evan Weston, your biological brother?”

“Also a magician. His talent is in erasing things, making things appear differently than they are.”

“No phone number?”

“No phone number.”

“Your mother?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Your wife?”

“*Ex-wife*. I’m sure she’s *still* ruining lives wherever she is. Look up the number for Hell.”

She took off her reading glasses. “Every Elite employee is required to list at least four next of kin contacts. Every. Single. One.”

“Then I’ll be the first exception.”

“I don’t think so.” She looked at the witness. “Since Mr. Weston wants to play games, we’ll need to use our data team to find his family members. Make sure we tell the hiring board how uncooperative he was today when you do that.”

The witness nodded, but I said nothing. I simply picked up a glass of water and took a long sip, knowing there was no way in hell they’d find anyone outside of my ex-wife. It’d all been buried decades ago, and it would never come to the surface again.

“In the meantime,” she said, “surely you can order your next of kin in order of closeness so we know who to contact first in the event of an emergency?”

“Surely.”

“Okay, then. On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the closest, how close are you to your biological father?”

“Negative eighty.”

Her brown eyes immediately met mine. “I’m sorry, what? What did you just say?”

“*Negative eighty*.” I enunciated every syllable. “Do you need to rewind the tape and play it back for yourself?”

She shook her head, and for a second she looked as if she regretted even asking, as if she was going to stop this line of questioning and move on to something else, but she didn’t.

“Mr. Weston, on the same scale, how close are you to your biological brother?”

“Negative sixty.”

“Your biological mother?”

“No comment.”

“Mr. Weston,” she said, her voice a little harsher. “Could you please answer the question in regards to your biological mother?”

“I could, but I won’t.”

“Mr. Weston—”

“It’s a *no*.”

“It’s not a yes or no question.” She raised her voice. “Every question today is mandatory, especially since you waited until the very last minute to deem us ‘worthy’ of your time. If you wish to continue flying after your final trips for Signature this weekend, you need to answer me. Otherwise, we can stop this session right now.”

“It’s undefined.” I clenched my jaw. “In regards to my mother, it’s fucking undefined.”

“Thank you.” She let out a breath. “Last question in that set. On a scale of one to ten, how close are you to your wife?”

“*Ex-wife*.” I corrected her again. “She shouldn’t be included in any files related to me, but she’s ranked right between my father and brother for a negative seventy.”

“Well, enlighten me, please.” She looked up and scratched her head. “In the event of something unfortunate happening to you, who would you like us to call first?”

“A funeral home.”

Silence.

She looked away as if she was unsure of what to say next. Seconds later, she slid a standard employee agreement to me, along with a pen. “You’ve signed this before, but please sign it with me as your witness...And wait. I actually have one last question. Are you aware that you have an ‘FCE’ on your employment file with us?”

“No.”

“Would you like to know what an ‘FCE’ means?”

“I assume it means I’m capable of counting and you’re not. You said the previous question was the last question.”

“It was.” She frowned. “Do you, by chance, have any questions for me?”

“Never.”

“Very well, then. This concludes the completion of Jake C. Weston’s profile with Elite Airways.” She hit stop on the recorder and tucked it into a white box labeled ‘active pilots.’ “You can leave now, Mr. Owens. Thank you for your time.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, standing. “Best of luck to you with our airline, Mr. Weston.”

“Thank you.” I started to stand as well, but Dr. Cox motioned for me to remain seated.

“I thought this was the end.” I looked at her. “I’m not interested in speaking to you or anyone else any longer than I’m required to.”

“That makes two of us,” she said, her tone far darker than it was at first. “I just have one final, off the record question, and then you can leave and return to whatever shell of a life you think you have.”

She waited until Mr. Owens left the room, and then she slammed a massive red folder on top of the table and glared at me. “I need you to tell me how the hell you passed your psychiatric evaluation six weeks ago.”

“I studied.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Weston.” Her face was red. “The average score for a competent and sane pilot on the PILA test is a five. You scored a *nine*. “

“Maybe the test was measuring something else of mine.”

She ignored my comment. “A nine means damn near deviant. It means you shouldn’t have passed any of the remaining psych tests at all. Yet somehow, the doctor passed you with flying colors.”

“How very generous.”

“A little *too* generous.” She plucked a business card from her pocket and tossed it to me. “I won’t deny that your career thus far has been nothing short of outstanding, but—Well...I’m just going to be frank here. You have the most fucked up psych results I have ever seen.”

“It’s an honor, thank you.” I looked at my watch. “I’d like to receive my award via mail.”

“I don’t think you understand how serious this is,” she said. “According to the *real* test results—not the ones you scammed somehow, you’re exceedingly below the average in three out of four emotional areas. You’re socially detached, yet somehow manage to function in social environments.” She clasped her hands together. “I haven’t personally tested you, but I think you use your career as a means to get away, to cope with some type of issue you’re internally suffering from. Not only that, but your sleep tests showed high levels of...”

I tuned out her voice as she continued to talk, only catching a few words like “psychotherapy” and “threshold” but my attention to her sentences waned with every word that left her lips.

Leaning forward, I flipped through the binders on the edge of her desk, thumbing through the thick pages. I lifted the file baskets and the notebooks, setting them down when I saw nothing underneath.

Still ignoring the sound of her voice, I stood up and walked over to the wall of taped airline policies. I stood in front of the one that announced the ‘100% No Employee-Fraternization’ rule and grabbed the paper’s edges. I slowly peeled it from the wall, glancing at the drywall behind it.

Nothing...

I put it back and checked behind another policy, then another. I was checking the wall behind the fourth one when I heard the sound of her heels clacking closer to me.

“Mr. Weston?” She waited for me to turn around, finally stopping her long-ass spiel. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m searching for the point of this conversation, since it’s clearly not going to fall out of your mouth anytime soon.”

Her jaw dropped.

“Is it attempting to come out now?” I asked. “How much longer do I need to stand here and wait for it?”

She took a step back and narrowed her eyes at me. “The point is, since you have an ‘FCE’ on your profile, I can’t force you into the mandated therapy we offer our pilots here on the health plan. But based on the results of your tests, I think it would greatly help if you saw a professional at least two or three times a month. Hell, five to ten times, if you can manage it.”

“See how brief and concise that was?” I walked toward the door. “You could’ve summed that shit up ten minutes ago.”

“I’m going to find out how you passed that test, Weston.” She followed me. “I *refuse* to swallow the results as they are, and I promise you, when I figure out how you managed to get our best doctor to give you a clearance—”

“How about just asking me what you really want to ask me?” I interrupted her as I twisted the doorknob. “*Ask me.*”

“Fine.” She crossed her arms, hesitating. “Did you proposition our lead doctor and trade a sexual favor in exchange for passing clearance results?”

“First of all,” I said as I opened the door. “I’ve never had to proposition anyone. *Ever.* Second of all, if by ‘sexual favor’ you mean, did I fuck her against her office window until she couldn’t breathe, or did I ask her to get on her knees so she could suck my cock until she swallowed my come, then yes. But not in exchange for clean test results. She’d already promised to pass me after the way I ate her pussy.”

All color left her face. “I don’t—I don’t believe you. No one here on this airline’s staff, let alone someone that high up, would do that.”

“If you’d like to re-test me in the same way,” I said, returning her business card and tucking it into her front pocket, “Let me know. However, contrary to what you so adamantly said seconds ago, you *will* swallow every result...”

GATE A2

JAKE

New York (JFK)

“This is the final boarding call for Flight 1487 with service to San Francisco.” “Passenger Alice Tribue, please return to Gate A13 for your passport as soon as possible.” “American Airlines Flight 1781 with service to Toronto will now depart from Gate 7.”

The familiar sounds of John F. Kennedy International welcomed me home as soon as I stepped off the jet bridge a week later. Despite two sixteen hour flights, I hadn't slept well since my interview in Dallas, and I didn't feel the slightest hint of exhaustion.

I walked through the terminal, pulling my luggage close behind as the most cliché song in the history of aviation sifted through the speakers. A cover of Frank Sinatra's “Come Fly with Me,” complete with an orchestra, was inspiring the most tone deaf of passengers to sing along as they rushed past the gates.

Pilots from other airlines walked on the other side of the hallway in their freshly-pressed uniforms, giving slight nods as they passed me by. The flight attendants at their sides blushed and smiled, offering me small waves and winks that went unanswered and ignored.

All I could think about right now was how today officially marked the lowest of lows in my career. A fresh start of all the bullshit I thought I'd escaped.

When I first started flying gliders at sixteen, everything in regards to aviation was an art. Every facet, from the engineering of a plane, to the actual flying itself, held intrigue, creating a perfect balance of craftsmanship and allure.

Newly designed aircrafts were something to clamor over, new routes were planned and praised for pioneering the unthinkable, and each move an airline made received its rightful due in the press. Spectators stopped and stared at the new Boeings and Airbuses in complete admiration from below, passengers acted like they actually gave a fuck, and flight attendants were more than pretzel serving waitresses at thirty thousand feet. For pilots, there was even an art to effortlessly jetting from city to city, landing in hotel after hotel, and fucking a different woman every night.

Yet, somewhere between new regulations, greed, and even with the advanced technology, all of that changed. Now, a pilot was nothing more than a bus driver who shuttled ungrateful-ass passengers across the sky. And that perfect balance of craftsmanship and allure was no longer seen; it wasn't even remembered.

“Excuse me, Captain?” A man wearing an ‘I Love NY’ shirt suddenly stepped in front of me. He held up his cell phone, extending it toward my face. “Would you mind taking our picture? We've tried to do it ourselves, but I keep cutting my head off in the frame.” He laughed and pointed to his family—two young boys and a woman in a yellow dress. They were laughing and posing in front of a blue “Welcome to New York” sign.

I didn't take the phone from him. I stared at his family, their laughter becoming more and more unbearable with each passing second. One of his sons waved at me, holding up a toy plane in his other hand, smiling and waiting for me to smile back.

"Captain?" The husband looked at me. "Can you please take our picture?"

"No." I stepped back. "No, I can't." I noticed a flight attendant walking toward us and nodded in her direction. "But I'm sure she'd be happy to help you."

I didn't give him a chance to respond. I walked away and headed straight for the parking garage.

I needed to get the fuck home.

Later that night...

I parked my car in front of my condo, The Madison at Park Avenue, and waited for one of the valets to approach the window.

"Good evening, sir." An attendant dressed in a grey tuxedo opened my door. "How long do you expect to be in town this time?"

"Four days." I stepped out of the car and tossed him the keys. "Keep it close to the front, please."

"As you wish, sir."

I walked up the stone steps that led into the building and glanced up at the night sky. For the first time in as long as I could remember, the stars weren't shrouded by a film of grey clouds. They were bright and blinding against the darkness, probably giving false hope to some optimistic dreamer who was falling in love with this city.

"Welcome home, Mr. Weston." The doorman, the one constant in my life, opened the door for me. "How are the skies treating you these days?"

"The same as always, Jeff. The same as always."

"Coming back from anywhere interesting this time?"

"Singapore." I pulled a small satin bag out of my pocket and handed it to him. "Currency. For your collection."

"Thank you, sir," he said, smiling. "By the way, there were five business class tickets to Belgium in my mailbox here last week. I don't recall ever mentioning my birthday wish to you, so would you know anything about this secret gift? Who I need to thank, perhaps?"

"I have no idea," I said, moving past him. "But those should have been *first class* tickets, not business, so whenever you figure out who gave them to you, tell him he needs to make the airline fix that mistake."

"I will." He laughed. "Have a great night, Mr. Weston."

"Thank you." I walked into the lobby and stopped, slowly letting my eyes adjust to the harsh light from the new chandeliers. The owners were always renovating or unnecessarily adjusting something different every month, and that was the main reason why I never felt like this place was truly home. The popular chain hotels I spent nights in during stopovers always seemed far more familiar and welcoming.

I headed straight to an open elevator and swiped my key card at the panel. When I was sure no one else was coming onto the car, I held my card against the panel once more and pressed "80," the penthouse suite.

Every resident in this building was one of New York's esteemed elite—judges, politicians, doctors, lawyers, but they were all paying exorbitant prices to simply rent one of the four massive units offered on each floor. My floor, however, was mine and mine alone. It had a long history and had always been

owned. Although I hardly ever used it, I refused to sell it back to the building's owners, no matter how large and lucrative their offers grew year after year.

The second the elevator doors opened, I stepped off and disabled the security cameras that were hidden in the hallway vases. I double checked their wires to make sure they hadn't been tampered with and returned them to their hiding spots.

Unlocking the double doors that led inside my apartment, I took off my jacket and hit the lights. For the most part, everything was just as I left it—except for the usual shit the housekeepers insisted on rearranging.

Annoyed, I realigned the collectible Coke cans on my counter, returned my chilled wine bottles to their original positions, and re-latched the windows that lined my living room and parlor room walls. I tossed a few misplaced “Welcome to The Madison” tour brochures into the trash, and turned the air on high to tone down the new strawberry scent they sprayed onto every single surface. Then I moved my parlor chair far away from the window where it belonged.

I walked through room after room, already knowing what was out of place since I went through this routine every few weeks.

When I was sure everything was alright, I walked into my private library and damn near lost it. All five hundred of my books were now rearranged by color instead of alphabetically. To make matters worse, my favorite three books were spread wide open on my desk, with several of their pages folded and creased. An unforgivable offense.

I pulled out my phone and sent an email to the housekeeping manager.

Subject: My Goddamn Condo.

To whomever this may fucking concern,

For the umpteenth time, I don't appreciate your incompetent and defiant staff rearranging my things while I'm away. I also don't appreciate you continuing to use my unit as a tour site and “test suite” for potential renters—letting people pretend like they live here whenever they please.

Stay the hell out of my space if you're not cleaning it. (And stop using that strawberry spray shit. Go back to lemon.)

J. Weston

The manager's response was immediate.

Subject: Re: My Goddamn Condo.

Mr. Weston,

With all due respect, and for the *umpteenth* time, we have only used your suite for a tour once, with your permission. We do not use your unit as a “test suite” and we would never let any potential renter pretend as if they lived there.

We've given in to every single demand you've requested for your privacy—extra cameras, ensuring that no one on the housekeeping staff outside of myself knows your name, and private parking. In fact, just for you, we've recently installed an additional set of cameras above your exterior entry door to ease your worries, and per our security team, there has been no access to your space (outside of cleaners) while you've been away.

However, we have noticed that over the past few weeks, YOU have come back more frequently than normal, and during odd hours of the night.

I am not insinuating that you don't remember these times, but perhaps you've moved things around your apartment during those hours and are simply forgetting how you left them?

I apologize if anything I've said is offensive or out of line.

We truly enjoy having you as a resident here at The Madison, and if you need anything more, or anything else, let me know. (I will be sure to remind the staff, once again, to stop using the "strawberry spray shit" in your place. We no longer have lemon, though...Would you like fresh linen instead?)

Mr. Sullivan

Head of Housekeeping

The Madison at Park Avenue

I didn't answer. I needed to think.

The last few times I slept here, I hadn't really "slept" at all. I'd woken up in a cold sweat and stumbled out of bed and downstairs. Damn near sleepwalking, I'd staggered around a near desolate Times Square, staring at the bright and blinking billboards, listening to the late night conversations of straggling tourists.

Each time I found my way home, I did move things—but not in a rearranging type of way. In a shattering whatever I could get my hands on type of way. Whatever I broke, I quickly replaced the next day so no one on the staff could be blamed, but I couldn't remember ever having the patience to mindlessly rearrange simple shit.

The few other times I returned at odd hours of the night were the result of me coming back after meeting a woman in a hotel. Those nights always ended in sleep, not senseless redecorating.

At least, I didn't think so.

I took a seat on the sofa that faced the window and mentally rewound the past few months again and again, slowly recalling a few more wandering, sleepless nights. I started to send the manager a "My apologies for the miscommunication" email, but I spotted an open crossword puzzle tucked under my seat cushion. A completely filled out, not-in-my-goddamn-handwriting, crossword puzzle.

I flipped through the pages of the booklet, noticing that not only was the top page completed, but every single puzzle was marred and solved with someone else's blue and black ink.

I knew he was full of shit...

I started to type a far more appropriate response for him, but another email popped onto my screen.

Subject: An FCE.

Dear Mr. Weston,

My name is Lance Owens, and I'm the Chief of Personnel Affairs at Elite Airways. I served as the witness last weekend at your final profile interview.

Although you told my colleague that you didn't want to know what an 'FCE' was, and have yet to answer her follow-up email regarding its definition, I really think you should know.

An 'FCE' means that the executive board has unanimously deemed your previous record of service to be in such high regard, that you're now an invaluable asset to Elite Airways. I'm attaching the specifics of what this means in a document, and perhaps when you're up to talking, you can tell us how you, a transfer pilot, could possibly receive something like this when it normally takes our pilots ten years of consistent

service with Elite to even be considered. Although, given your stellar record and your achievement awards, I'm sure it's well-deserved.

I truly hope you'll enjoy flying for us.

Dr. Owens

Chief of Personnel Affairs, Elite Airways

I opened the attached document and only managed to read through the first paragraph.

Son of a bitch...

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Six years ago...

Oh, New York!

New York, New York, New York!

Everyone in my family warned me about you, this city. They said you'd lure me here with your dazzling lights and glittering billboards, with the sweet scent of success that wafts through every open window on Wall Street, and with the high hopes and dreams that flow up and down the Hudson River.

Then they said you'd pull me deep into those waters and drown me...

"You won't survive a month there," my mother said. "It's only for the people who actually have something going for themselves."

"You don't have what it takes and you never will," my oldest sister said.

"Just don't get mad when we say, 'We told you so,' when you beg us to come back." My father sent me those words via text message the day I left. Then he added, "You'll definitely be back, Gillian. After a month at most."

Well, I've survived more than a month. It's been SIX MONTHS, and I've proved the three of them (and everyone else in my discouraging family) wrong. Dead. Ass. Wrong.

At only twenty-three years old, I'm living my wildest dreams. I'm staying across the street from Central Park in a fully furnished Lexington Avenue apartment, having weekly coffeehouse dates with nice guys who actually believe in chivalry and romance, and working at one of the most revered places in all of Manhattan. (Yes, I'm mainly making very lengthy coffee runs and drowning in endless hours of grunt work, but this is the place I've wanted to work since I was thirteen years old, so I don't care.)

And if that isn't enough, just this morning, I received some amazing 'this-can't-be-my-life' news that I can't share just yet. Nonetheless, I have a feeling I'll be writing about that soon.

Until then, I simply wanted to start anew with a fresh blog since my previous one died from neglect. What better way to begin than by saying life couldn't be any better right now?

I hope this never changes.

Write later,

Gillian Taylor

Gillian

G.T.

T.G.

TayG

****Taylor G.****

No comments posted.

GATE A3

GILLIAN

New York (JFK)

Present Day

I think I hate my life...

“Have a great day in New York City!” I smiled as the first class passengers walked past me and stepped off the plane. “Thank you so much for flying with Elite Airways! Enjoy the Big Apple!”

“Hope you enjoyed flying with us today!” The other flight attendant onboard, Christina, joined me in the farewells. “We sure enjoyed having you!”

One of these days, I was actually going to believe the gleeful words that came out of my mouth at landing, but today was *not* that day. Even though all of the passengers on this flight were quite polite, today’s trip was nothing more than a repeat of every flight I’d been assigned over the past year. It was a reminder that I wasn’t a ‘real’ flight attendant yet, that I was still on ‘reserve.’ Still trying to figure out when the promises in the monthly employee magazine would come true for me.

Every third Sunday, like clockwork, that glossy “How We Fly” magazine arrived in my mailbox—taunting me with broken promises and pretty pictures, reminding me of all the reasons I’d first applied. It was the idea of traveling to places like London, Milan, and Tokyo within the same month. The high possibilities of traipsing across vineyards and countryside roads on my days off. And also, the slightly vain wish of walking through the airports in one of their famous blue uniform dresses and custom airline-issued Louboutin heels, looking just like the glamorous women in the commercials.

Alas, I missed the fine print. There was only a “chance” of flying to beautiful places night after night. The only “traipsing” occurred in the five steps from the airport shuttle van to the stopover hotel. And until I was off reserve status, I would continue to receive last minute, short trips while the flight attendants with seniority picked all the best routes first.

“Is it me, or is this the slowest group of passengers you’ve ever seen?” Christina muttered under her breath.

“They’re definitely the slowest.” I noticed that rows fifteen through thirty had yet to open their overhead bins.

I am definitely going to be late tonight...

“Have the schedulers finally allowed you to bid on lines or are you still on reserve, Gillian?” she asked.

“Reserve.”

“Really?” It’s been a year since I last saw you and you’re *still* on reserve?” She looked as if she didn’t believe me. “Don’t tell me they’re still giving you that, ‘Wait until we finish all of our mergers’ excuse.”

I gave her a depressed look and she laughed.

“Sorry. If it makes you feel any better, at least you actually live in New York. You don’t have to share a crash pad with a bunch of other reserve attendants that you don’t know.”

“I guess...” I said dryly, and she shot me a sympathetic smile.

We remained at the front of the plane for what felt like forever, keeping our voices cheery and light as the hockey team at the rear continued to move like molasses.

When the last player finally exited the plane, I grabbed my bag, said a quick goodbye to the pilot and Christina, and raced through the jet bridge. I had exactly twenty minutes to catch the next bus to Manhattan.

Emerging into Terminal 7, I rushed past gate after gate, dodging hordes of travelers with every step. As I ran, the numerous restaurant signs, gift shop displays, and coffee stands all became a bright blur. The conversations between tourists, the arguments between gate agents, and the announcements from the speakers were all background noise. All I could hear was the sound of my heels clacking against the newly buffed floors.

My dress inched up my thighs as I neared the no re-entry zone, but I couldn’t waste any time trying to pull it down. I continued running, bypassing the moving sidewalks until I made it to baggage claim.

With a few minutes to spare, I slipped into a restroom and locked myself inside a stall. Unfastening my flight wing pin and nametag, I tossed them both into my purse. I pulled my navy blue dress over my head, quickly replacing it with a vintage black cocktail dress and a strand of faux white pearls.

Leaning against the door for support, I took off my grey heels and slid into a pair of glittering red pumps.

Frantic, I stepped out of the stall—nearly tripping over my shoes as I took my place in front of the mirrors. I blinked a few times and saw that my eyelids were still evenly coated in the “friendly light pink” that was mandated by the airline, and my lips were still stained in a dramatic, sexy red.

It’s good enough...

I yanked my hair out of its chignon bun and let the black curls fall past my shoulders. I ran my fingers through them a few times and rushed outside to the transportation dock.

Pushing my way through waiting travelers, I ran as fast as I could to the bus stop. I waved my hands frantically, screaming “Please stop! Wait!” when my bus began to pull away from the curb, but it was no use. It pulled off before I could catch up.

Ugh...

Cursing, I pulled out my phone and ordered an Uber car. As I stepped back to wait, I spotted a group of women pointing and staring at something in the distance. They were blushing like little schoolgirls, giggling as if they were catching sight of a celebrity.

I followed their line of vision, but all I could see was a pilot. The back of him, anyway. He was walking toward a black car while staring at his cell-phone. His fingers were tapping away on the screen, his four gold shoulder stripes gleaming and commanding attention. From the very way he walked, I could tell he was cocky as fuck—the type of man who thought the world revolved around him and him alone. The type who probably never had to ask anyone for a goddamn thing. As he slipped inside the waiting car, I strained to catch a glimpse of his face—knowing that there was no way in hell that he could be as attractive as these women were making him out to be. Pilots were typically much older, and they didn’t come in the attractive package. Only cocky, arrogant, and philandering. Mostly philandering.

“Are you Gillian?” A man shouted at me from the open window of a red SUV. “You waiting for an Uber?”

I nodded and he stepped out of the car, opening the back door for me.

“233 Broadway,” he said as he returned to the driver’s seat. “You’re going to The Woolworth Building, right?”

“Right.”

“Alright, seatbelt.” He pulled away from the curb, right into the warm rain of New York City.

The car’s windshield wipers squeaked as they swiped back and forth, as the crammed pack of cars outside honked at each other for control of the road.

Knowing it’d take longer than normal to get to Manhattan, I sent a quick text to my boyfriend, Ben.

Gillian: Just landed not too long ago. Caught an Uber, but slight traffic.

Ben: An Uber? Jesus, Gillian. I don’t know why you won’t just use my family’s driver. We really wouldn’t mind.

Gillian: Maybe next time. How’s your mom’s launch party so far?

Ben: Great. Anyone who’s anyone is here, no nobodies anywhere, and the press can’t get enough.

Gillian: Right...Are you still taking me to Hemingway’s after it’s over? I was serious about wanting to talk to you tonight.

Ben: Of course, babe. Whatever you want :-)

I didn’t text back.

“Of course, babe. Whatever you want” almost always meant, “Probably not” because Ben hated confrontation. He also hated the fact that over the past few months, I’d begun to painfully point out the numerous changes in his personality. Even though he refused to admit it, he’d transformed from the sweet, down to earth guy I fell in love with years ago into a man of appearances, a man obsessed with wealth.

The simple dates we used to enjoy were no longer good enough for him, and since we hardly ever saw each other, the burning passion we once shared was now a flickering flame. Our conversations were now short and redundant—downgraded to “How are you?” “How was your day” and “See you soon.” We were like two lovers locked into a complacent marriage—hanging on for the sake of holding on, constantly trying to get on the same page. Problem was, we were in two completely different books.

Sighing, I leaned my head back against the headrest. Before I could completely doze off, I felt my phone buzzing against my fingertips. A phone call from my mother.

I debated whether I should answer it since her previous twenty calls were sent straight to voicemail, but I gave in on the final ring and answered.

“Hello?” I said.

“Hello? *Gillian?*” She actually sounded concerned. “Where have you been? I’ve been calling you for weeks now.”

“Sorry. I’ve been really busy with work lately.”

“You can’t be *that* busy.” She clucked her teeth. “I’ve even called your office phone and it just rings all day. Did your work number change or something?”

“Not to my knowledge. I’ll have it checked out by the IT department this week, though.”

“Good,” she said. “Anyway, now that I’m sure that you’re alive, I wanted to give you some great news you’ve missed about everyone back here at home.” She cleared her throat. “Amy and Mia are soon to be inductees in the National Health Science Hall of Fame. They’re the youngest scientists to ever be invited. Do you have any idea how proud that makes me? How good it feels when my children actually achieve something significant?”

I bit my tongue, now wishing I’d sent this call straight to voicemail without a second thought.

“Claire is about to be published in next month’s *Scientific Journal*, and your big brother Brian won his hundredth case over the weekend. How amazing is that?”

“*So amazing....*”

“Isn’t it? Don’t you wish you’d accepted that scholarship to MIT like everyone else in the family? Who knows who you could’ve turned out to be?”

“You’re saying that like I turned out to be a drug dealer.”

“Are you a drug dealer?”

What the fuck... “What? No! Why would you ask me that?”

“I can never be too sure when it comes to you.” She sounded dead-ass serious. “The way you dodge phone calls and whisper talk from time to time gives me pause, honestly. Not only that, but the fact that you’re still living in New York and never call home to ask for money is quite—”

“Surprising?”

“Disappointing.” She paused. “Either you’re too proud to ask us for money because you know we were right about you moving to that city, or you’re engaging in some illegal activities to stay afloat until they inevitably catch up with you. When it happens, I’m sure you’ll *have* to call and ask us to post your bail.”

I shook my head, unsure of how to address that comment. I simply gave her my usual, “I’m sorry for not picking up as often as I should. I’m still working fifty plus hours a week since we don’t have any new interns” excuse since it was the truth. Well, it *would’ve* been the truth six years ago.

“Are you sure that’s all that’s happening?” she asked. “My motherly senses tell me that something is off.”

“I’m sure.” I rolled my eyes. If she actually possessed any ‘motherly senses,’ they would’ve told her that something was off a long, long time ago.

Changing the subject, she droned on and on about the “new and exciting” studies she was conducting, hardly ever stopping to catch her breath. I only halfway listened, looking outside my window as the city rain fell harder.

“Can I still expect you at home in a couple months for the big surprise?” she asked moments later.

“What big surprise?”

“Brian is proposing to his girlfriend, the mayor’s daughter. He’s planned this huge party and he told me that he texted you about it months ago.”

“Oh, right.” I remembered that, and I remembered telling him that I *wasn’t* coming. “I’ll try my best to be there. I’ll look up plane tickets tonight.”

“Great! Well, I don’t want to hold you up from doing—what exactly are you doing right now?”

“Copy-editing. Fact checking a few articles for the week.”

“Of course. That sounds like...That sounds interesting.”

“It is.”

Silence.

“Well...” She cleared her throat. “Feel free to call any time you happen to remember that you have a family, or whenever you want to talk to me.”

“I always do. Goodbye, mother.”

“Goodbye, Gillian. Love you.”

“Love you, too.” I hung up before she could say anything else, before my heart could sustain another strain. Our phone conversations were always brief and awkward. They were harsh reminders that no matter how many years passed by, I would always be the black sheep of my family. Literally.

At first, me being born as the only brunette in a family full of sun-kissed blondes was treated as a running joke—a “Ha! The youngest daughter came into this world making sure she stood out!” type of thing. But over time, and as the youngest of five, nothing I ever did quite measured up to those who came before me.

My brother and all my sisters were valedictorians of their respective high school classes; I was salutatorian. Each of them handily won every single science fair they ever entered; I received honorable

mentions. And all of them, just like my world-renowned neurosurgeon parents, accepted scholarships to MIT; I never considered it as an option. I agreed to an early acceptance to Boston University instead.

Our family dinners and get-togethers throughout the years were all marked with praise for all of their endless achievements and a “Well, Gillian is...being Gillian,” when it came to me.

I wasn't sure why they even tried to invite me home anymore, especially since I'd done everything possible to avoid going back. If I could stay away until I was eighty years old, I was going to give it a try. *I'm definitely not going home for that proposal...*

The car came to a sudden, jerky stop and I looked ahead through the windshield. Several police cars were flashing their blue and white lights, and an ambulance was speeding down the emergency lane.

Since it looked as if it was going to take even longer to get to Manhattan, I leaned against the window and drifted to sleep.

An hour later, I woke up to see the car coasting its way down Broadway, still blocks away from the Woolworth Building.

There were three new texts from Ben on my phone, all concerned with appearances, not me.

Ben: If the Uber car you're in isn't a luxury car, tell him to drop you off at the back entrance so you won't look like a caterer or something.

Ben: The senator and his wife just arrived, so it's settled. My girlfriend can't be seen getting out of anything less than a luxury car.

Ben: Please tell me you're wearing one of the dresses your roommate bought for you. One of the designer ones.

I rolled my eyes as the car pulled in front of the building, not caring anything about his ridiculous requests. From what I could see, the only people standing outside were valets and doormen, and the luxury cars and limousines were long abandoned.

I handed the driver a five and stepped out, holding my umbrella over my head as I walked up the steps to two waiting doormen.

In unison, they uttered, “Good evening,” and opened the doors, letting me inside a glittering, gold lobby. To my surprise, the grand space was completely empty.

Before I could ask where I was supposed to go, a white-suited bellman stepped off the elevator and motioned for me to step inside.

“You're the girlfriend of Ben Walsh, correct?” he asked.

“Supposedly. Depends on what day of the week it is.”

He laughed and hit the button for the top floor. “I'd say it's more than ‘supposedly.’ He's asked me about your arrival six times tonight. Described you to a T.”

“How so?”

“I'll quote him verbatim,” he said. “Beautiful woman with long, wavy black hair and the prettiest set of emerald green eyes you'll ever see. That's how I knew it was you.”

I blushed, feeling somewhat guilty for being so upset with Ben. “Thank you. I'll tell him how sweet that is.”

He nodded and faced the front, watching the lights above the doors flash as we passed every floor. When it reached '57', the doors suddenly slid open, letting in the blinding flashes of photographers.

"Anyone famous?" Someone yelled as the cameras clicked consistently. "Is she *somebody*?"

"We'll figure it out later. Just get the shot!"

Holding my hand over my eyes, I moved out of their line of fire and into the ballroom's main event, the re-launch of *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

The room was drenched in beautiful silver and white decorations, and previous covers of the magazine were standing atop mini stages throughout the space. Waiters weaved through the guests with champagne trays held high, and almost all of New York's elite were putting on perfect smiles for the press. Dressed in thousand dollar gowns and impeccably tailored suits, their astonishing wealth could be sensed from miles away. These were the type of people who looked for any occasion to show it off, the type of people who would show up to the opening of a gift bag if it meant there was a chance their face would make it into the papers.

I smiled as I moved through the guests, saying hello to a few familiar faces as I searched for Ben. After several minutes of looking, I sent him a quick "Where are you?" text, but he never responded.

Knowing that he was probably posing for endless pictures with local celebrities, I grabbed a glass of champagne from a waiter's tray and walked toward the windows that faced the Brooklyn Bridge.

I was halfway there when his parents, Mrs. Editor in Chief of *Cosmopolitan* and Mr. Wolf of Wall Street, stepped in front of me. As usual, his mother's red hair was perfectly curled and coifed, her dress a slimming shade of blue that complemented her eyes. And his brooding father, with his copper-colored hair and dark brown eyes, looked as if he'd just stepped off the set of a political drama. Ben was a clear, carbon copy.

"Good evening, Gillian." His mother extended her perfectly manicured hand. "You look rather radiant tonight."

"Thank you, Mrs. Walsh."

"My pleasure. Ben was just circling the room looking for you. Have you seen him?"

"Not yet."

"You'll run into him eventually, I'm sure." His father shook my hand. "He told me you were secretly interested in applying to work at my firm. Is that true, Gillian?"

Hell no... "Maybe, Mr. Walsh. I'm not telling."

"Ha! I knew it! Apply this week and I'll hire you whenever you want to start. No questions asked. I've told Ben from the very beginning that you were a great catch. I know you love working at that nonprofit and your technology start up, but if you joined the family business, I think you'd love it a lot more."

"What nonprofit?" I asked.

"*What nonprofit?*" He laughed. "Oh, you're so modest, Gillian. I love that about you." He lowered his voice. "There's no shame working for the less fortunate. I enjoy the few pro bono consults I do every year. It puts everything in perspective...Also looks very good on my taxes."

"I bet." I forced a smile, wondering why the hell Ben had fed his father so many lies about me and my jobs.

"Oh, oh, oh!" His mother grabbed a glass of champagne from a tray. "That's the pop culture editor from *The Wall Street Journal*. I need to make sure she gets a few lines directly from me." She gave me one last smile. "Enjoy the party, Gillian. Make sure you join us for the official toast in an hour." She and Mr. Walsh walked away, disappearing into the crowd.

I checked my phone to see if Ben had finally texted me back, and when I saw that he hadn't, I was more than determined to find him and insist we step out of this party to talk. Now.

Circling the room, I checked every cocktail table, every champagne fountain, and every cheese and wine station. I even checked the bathrooms. I was almost tempted to have the DJ call for him over the

music, but out the corner of my eye I spotted him standing in the corner by the windows. With another woman.

I stepped closer, hoping my eyes were playing a trick on me, but with every step, his distinctive features came into clearer focus, and the same hands that touched me were caressing the ass of a brunette in a way-too-short grey dress. He was whispering into her ear as she leaned against his shoulder, as her bony fingers combed through his hair.

“Am I interrupting something?” I stopped right next to them. “*Ben?*”

They immediately tore apart, looking at me with wide eyes. The girl was a girl I’d seen several times before, one of Ben’s coworkers at his father’s firm.

“Um...Hi, Gillian,” she said, red-cheeked. Without waiting for me to respond, she rushed away—leaving me and Ben alone.

Ben cleared his throat. “I was looking for you.”

“Did you think I was hiding up Allyson’s ass?”

“It’s not what you think,” he said. “How was your day today, babe?”

I didn’t answer.

“Well, I’ll go first. My day was okay. I secured two new deals, thank you very much for asking. I also found a few new vacation places I’d like us to see next summer. Now, how was *your* day??”

I blinked.

“Okay, then.” He looked completely oblivious. “What took you so long to get here?”

“You can’t honestly think that we’re simply going to bypass the fact that you were damn near fucking Allyson in public.”

“I wasn’t fucking her, Gillian. If I was fucking her, trust me, you would know.”

“Ben—”

“I think I would know better than to do something like that in public, don’t you think?” He scoffed. “There’s a Hilton down the street for Christ’s sake and I get free rooms. I’m pretty sure I would take her there and not here.”

I stared at him, completely taken aback.

He laughed, stepping closer and putting his hands on my shoulders. “Lighten up, Gill. Learn how to laugh a little.”

“Learn how to tell a joke.” I jerked away from him. “Why were you touching her like that?”

He shook his head, looking as if I was being bothersome. “I told you I’d take you to Hemingway’s after this to discuss whatever the hell you wanted to talk about. Do you really want to have an unnecessary conversation like this now?”

“*Right now.*”

He groaned and grabbed my hand, tugging me past a group of suits and up a small flight of stairs. He opened the door and led me onto the half-covered roof.

The rain had slowed to a light sprinkle, and the winds were whipping against the both of us. A man in a white tuxedo was sitting on the far side of the roof, singing aloud and lightly fingering the keys of a grand piano as if we weren’t around.

“*Lovers in New York...*” He crooned. “*Trying to find a place alone in New York...*”

“Okay, Gillian,” Ben said, standing in front of me. “I’m not going to argue with you because we’re above that. But whatever you want to talk about now and at Hemingway’s, I’m game.”

“Are you cheating on me?” The question escaped my lips before I could completely think it through. It was a question I would’ve never even thought to ask until mere minutes ago.

“Am I *what?*”

“*Are you cheating on me?*”

“Gillian...”

“It’s a simple yes or no question, Ben. Are you?”

He was silent for several seconds, slipping his hands in and out of his pockets, all while looking at me as if he wasn’t sure what to say. It wasn’t until the pianist started a new song that he finally looked right into my eyes.

“I’m not cheating on you,” he said. “Not *technically*.”

“Not technically?”

“Let me explain.” He stepped closer and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “It’s just sex, Gillian. Just sex.”

“We have sex, Ben. Lots of sex. Have you been sleeping with Allyson?”

“I haven’t slept with Allyson...yet.” He looked as if this was no big deal. “And you and I do not have ‘lots of sex.’ That’s the problem. Five to six days is a long time for people our age to go without sex. Not to mention that sometimes I don’t see you for weeks at a time while you’re out being a so-called flight attendant or working at that other ridiculous job that I won’t even call by name right now.”

“Executive housekeeper,” I said it for him. “And what do you mean ‘so-called’ flight attendant?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. *I’ve* flown more than you have over the past year and a half, and to places that are more than one or two hours away.”

“Is that why you’ve lied to your dad about where I work?”

“No, I lied to him so he wouldn’t team up with my mother and pressure me to dump you. Having a girlfriend who cleans apartments and serves pretzels in the sky isn’t something that will necessarily go over well in our social circles.” He looked into my eyes. “All of that aside though, I really like you—damn near love you. I don’t want a little white lie and a few senseless fucks with a few girls I care nothing about to get between us.”

I felt a tear rolling down my face, felt my naive heart beginning to break. “How many girls, Ben?”

“You’re focusing on the wrong thing.” He rubbed my arm. “I just said that I damn near love you. This is where you say that you love me back and we go find somewhere to get reacquainted. Preferably someplace private and quiet.”

“How many girls have you fucked behind my back, Ben?” I nearly yelled.

“*Lovers in New York...*” The pianist’s voice carried against the wind. “*Lovers fighting in New York...*”

“Ten or so,” he said flatly. “But I always come back to you, see? I don’t take any of them on dates, I don’t have long conversations with them on the phone like the two of us have, and I definitely don’t let any of them spend the night at my place like I’ve let you. That’s because I only use them for sex. I like you for you, and I actually care about you.”

More tears fell down my face as he continued to explain his twisted logic, as I silently cursed myself for somehow missing all of the signs. The late night meetings across town, the buzzing of his phone coming in the middle of the night, the sudden growing obsession with wealth and “looking good for whoever else might see me today.”

I started to wonder about all the dinner parties I’d attended with him, if the smiles and waves from other women meant far more than a casual hello. If he’d paraded me around as a part-time girlfriend who knew all about his side affairs.

“Why are you looking like a deer in headlights, Gill?” he asked, his tone suddenly soft.

“Because I honestly feel like one...Was there *ever* a time when you weren’t sleeping with other women behind my back?”

“The first few months we were together,” he admitted. “I only slept with you then.”

“We’ve been together for *years*.”

“And we can be together for many more...If you can agree to let go of your current blue collar jobs and maybe go back to your old job—the actual, impressive one, or agree to work at my dad’s firm. Maybe

we can be on the same schedule and I won't have to resort to sleeping with other people. We've both had a hand in this, Gillian. *Both of us.*"

I stepped back and held back a cry. I refused to let him see me break down.

"*Lovers in New York...*" The pianist sang ten times louder than before. "*Lovers crying tears of—*"

"Please shut the fuck up!" I shouted at him, misdirecting my anger and hurt. I took a deep breath and started to apologize, but he ignored my outburst and continued singing anyway.

"Oh, babe." Ben held up his arms and stepped toward me for a hug. "Don't cry, it's okay. Come here."

"Don't touch me. Don't you dare touch me."

"Fine. Let's at least get on the same page before we go back inside to the party," he said. "I don't need you causing a scene in front of all my parents' friends. How would you like to compromise on our issues?" He paced back and forth. "I'm willing you listen to your ideas, although I must admit, if you want to ensure that I only sleep with you, you'll have to make some major changes and give me time to adjust to that again."

I didn't say a single word. The last word wasn't worth it. Not now, not *ever*.

We were finished.

I turned around and walked away, ignoring his pathetic, weak calls after me. Without looking back, I weaved through the party guests, plastering a fake smile on my face as they smiled and nodded at me. Not wanting to come face to face with the throng of photographers near the elevators, I took the stairwell down a few floors and caught the elevator from there to the ground level.

Hot tears fell down my cheeks and my chest heaved up and down with every step. Each one was a reminder that I was abandoning a one-sided relationship that once seemed so promising. That the issues I'd planned to bring up later were minor footnotes compared to the pages of problems Ben revealed.

When I reached the lobby's doors, I noticed the rain's sudden return. It was falling harder now than it was when I first arrived.

"Miss Taylor?" A deep, masculine voice called from behind. "Miss Taylor?"

"Yes?" I turned around and found myself face to face with the Walsh family's driver, Francis.

"Are you leaving the party now?" he asked. "Alone?"

I nodded.

"Will Mr. Walsh be joining you?"

"No, and I don't need a ride," I said. "I don't want to accept anything else from Mr. Walsh ever again."

Ignoring me, he grabbed a black umbrella and opened the front door. He let the umbrella up against the rain and gestured for me to go with him.

"I was ordered to take you home, Miss Taylor." He wasn't going to let me leave on my own terms. "I was told this was my priority hours before you arrived."

"If you insist..." I held back a sigh and walked with him to a waiting black town car.

As he settled into the front seat and adjusted the air settings, I looked at my phone and saw an influx of text messages.

Ben: Instead of going to Hemingway's, I'll have Francis take us to your place so we can have a real discussion about this later.

Ben: I'm willing to come to your apartment in Brooklyn, Gillian... BROOKLYN! If that's not trying to compromise and get on one accord with you, I don't know what is.

Ben: Did you leave the party? Did you REALLY leave before we could get a photo together?

Ben: Answer my phone calls, Gillian. Now.

Ben: Gillian...?

Francis steered the car down Avenue of the Americas and I wiped away fresh tears. The last thing I wanted to do tonight was wake up to Ben knocking on my door for a conversation.

The car approached a yellow light, and as it came to a complete stop, the perfect way to avoid Ben tonight hit me.

“Francis?” I asked.

“Yes, Miss Taylor?”

“Would you mind dropping me off somewhere else instead of my apartment?”

“Depends on how ‘safe’ this alternate location is.” He looked at me through the rearview mirror and furrowed his brow. “A bar is not an acceptable option.”

“It’s not a bar. It’s The Madison on Park Avenue.”

“Ah,” he said with a smile. “Yes. Your other place of employment will be safe enough. Should I assume you won’t want me to tell Mr. Walsh that’s where I dropped you off?”

“Yes. Please don’t tell him.”

He nodded, and when the light turned green, he made a U-turn and headed toward the other side of Manhattan. Passing the grand front entrance, he parked near the rear of the building and stepped out to open my door, once again holding the umbrella up for me.

As if he could tell that he probably wouldn’t be seeing me again, he handed the umbrella over to me and shook my hand, wishing me the best of luck.

I knew he wouldn’t get back into the car until he actually saw me go inside, so I pulled out my employee badge and held it against the door. I gave him one last wave before slipping inside and letting the door shut.

I grabbed a Madison tour brochure and held it up to my face, pretending to read as I walked past my supervisor’s office. I was grateful that only the night crew, people I hardly ever worked with, were too busy working on files and handling phone calls to look up.

Keeping my head toward the ground, I headed down the hall and across the lobby, all the way to the freight elevators.

The second the doors opened, I stepped inside and hit “80,” knowing that the floor and the condo it contained would be completely empty like it always was. Ironically, whoever lived there—well, *barely* lived there, was overly insistent about having the highest level of privacy. All for a unit that was never used.

There were cameras in the hallway, cameras above the door, and an additional passcode to the floor itself. But since I was always assigned to clean this particular unit, I knew how to get around every security measure.

Stepping off the elevator, I held the doors open for a split second, waiting until the hallway camera rotated to the left so I could have a full ten seconds to slip by unseen. I quickly disabled the hidden cameras in the hallway vases, double-checking to make sure there weren’t any new ones. Then I hit the blackout button on the newly installed doorway camera, giving myself an extra five seconds to slip inside without notice.

I knew that doing this was wrong, that if management ever found out just how often I did it, I would be fired on the spot, but I’d become somewhat attached to this condo. Since I always went the extra mile for the invisible tenants who lived here, I sometimes felt like it was mine. And admittedly, whenever I worked late or wanted to escape the pathetic excuse of an apartment I lived in, I always came here.

Out of all the units in the building, this one was the best by far. Its panoramic, floor to ceiling windows stretched across the entire back wall and gave way to a stunning view of downtown with a glimpse of the Hudson River.

There were five guestrooms, three bathrooms, and a master bedroom that still made my jaw drop each time I saw it. The floors were a cool, white marble, and the furniture that filled all of the rooms were either beige or black or some combination of the two. They all looked as if they'd been handpicked out of a designer's wet dream.

I walked into the state of the art kitchen and hit the lights, overturning all of the collectible Coke cans out of habit. Then I opened one of the cabinets under the sink and pulled out the blue overnight bag I kept hidden behind the cleaning supplies.

"Welcome home." The speaker system suddenly sounded, echoing throughout the space. "You have four new messages. Please say the password."

"No," I answered back.

"Please say the password."

"No."

"Okay." There was a beeping sound. "Some other time."

I took out a bottle of wine from the massive chilled collection and tossed back gulp after gulp, attempting to numb the aching pain in my chest. As soon as I finished the bottle, I slipped into the master suite and undressed, stepping into the pristine stone-walled shower.

As the warm water rushed over me, I shut my eyes and allowed myself to cry. I heard my phone ringing in the other room and knew it was Ben calling with more painful things to say, but I didn't make a move to answer it.

I turned the water temperature to a much hotter setting, and I stood there until my skin was red and raw, until I could barely feel my fingertips.

When I couldn't take anymore, I turned off the water and reached behind the hanging rack of shampoo bottles and grabbed my strawberry lotion. I smoothed it all over myself before changing into my pajamas and covering my tracks.

I tucked my lotion and body wash back into their hiding places, stuffed the empty wine bottle at the bottom of the trash can, and made sure the cameras in the kitchen were still running on the loop I'd wired them on during my last stay.

After making sure everything was in its rightful place, I walked into my favorite room in the entire condo, the private library.

The tenants owned at least five hundred books, and they updated their study every four months with the bestsellers and a fresh edition of the classics. As I ran my fingers across the book spines, I spotted something odd on the desk across the room. Something I hadn't noticed when I cleaned the other day.

Normally, just like every other space in this house, the desk was completely bare. But today there were copies of *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* spread open. They weren't recent editions, though. Their pages were yellowed and frayed from age, and a few headlines were highlighted in blue or circled in red. There was even a small notepad tucked beneath the papers, with neatly scribbled notes: *How did no one put this together years ago? These can't be misprints...They can't all be misprints...*

From the dates on the papers—1993, 1987, and 1975, I was pretty convinced my first ever assumption about the tenants who lived here was definitely correct. An elderly couple who shared a passion for literature, or perhaps an esteemed historian.

I left the papers as they were and walked to the library's windows.

Pulling the curtains open, I watched as sheets of soft rain fell over the city, blanketing everything in sight. I pushed a sofa closer to the panes and crashed against the cushions, curling my body under a blanket.

So I could be sure to slip out unseen in the morning, I set my phone alarm for six thirty. Then I opened the brand new crossword booklet that was on the coffee table.

I flipped the cover over and read the title theme for all the puzzles inside:

Trespassing: Even the Smartest Criminals Get Caught

Interesting...

I worked on puzzle after puzzle until I couldn't focus for another second. When I finally rolled over and started to drift to sleep, I caught the time on the clock above the bookshelves.

Ten minutes after midnight.

Happy Birthday to me...

GATE A4

GILLIAN

New York (JFK)

My Brooklyn apartment was unit one of four in an aging brownstone nestled between two busy streets. The front door was warped from the slumlord's lack of maintenance, the steps leading up to the building were cracked and uneven, and the windows were cheap and thin—letting in brutal drafts of cold wind during the winter months. Despite its many drawbacks, there was one amazing feature the brownstone offered: A large window in my bedroom and easy access to the black iron fire escape.

Carefully walking up the dilapidated stone steps, I jiggled the front door's handle a few times and pushed hard on the wood to let myself inside. Then I rushed up four flights, kicking up dust with every step.

As soon as I opened the door, I was met with array of white and blue balloon bouquets and a “Happy Birthday, Gillian!” streamer strung high above the makeshift living room.

Smiling, I walked over to a massive silver gift box on the kitchen table and lifted its top. The handwritten card inside read:

Dear Gillian,

I need you to go through the gifts inside this box first. Then read the card that's attached to the balloons by the sink.

Happy Birthday, and I love you!

—Your favorite (and best) roommate ever, Mer'

I set the card down and pulled the first item from the box—a short, red, one-shouldered Diane von Furstenberg dress that looked as if it would barely cover my thighs. Underneath it was a sparkling pair of silver Jimmy Choos. Four bottles of white wine stood at the bottom, and wedged in between them was a glittering charm bracelet with a plane and a New York taxi already attached.

I walked over to the sink and opened the larger card, but before I could read the first sentence, the sound of loud banging came through the walls.

Thump! Thump! THUMP!

“Oh god! Oh god!” Meredith called out. “Oh godddd! Yes! Yes! YESSSSS!”

Thump! Thump! THUMP!

“Hell yeah, babe.” A deep voice grunted. “Hell yeah...”

The sound of skin slapping against skin and wet lips colliding again and again filled our hallway. The wall that separated her bedroom from the kitchen shook repeatedly, and the flimsy floorboards creaked with every bump of the bed.

I set down my birthday card as the moans and wall knocks became damn near deafening. Taking a seat at the bar, I made myself a cup of coffee and opened my email account.

From Ben. [Subject:] Open this message! You're the one with the most to lose...

From Ben. [Subject:] I know you see this email, Gillian. We belong together.

From Harry Potter. [Subject:] Free trip to Orlando inside!

From Sherlock Holmes. [Subject:] Urgent! Open me!

From Kennedy B. [Subject:] Checking in... [Open me]

From Nancy Drew. [Subject:] Surprise inside! Free unpublished story!

Groaning, I sent Ben's messages to spam and deleted the other four emails. The numerous bill collectors I owed had grown quite creative in their efforts to reach me, and I knew that the paper versions of their notices were probably awaiting me in my mailbox.

Before I could log off, two emails from Elite Airways popped onto my screen. Their subject lines read, *Exciting Elite News!* and *New Routes & Changes Announced!* so I deleted them as well. I was done getting my hopes up about receiving the ever elusive, 'Urgent: An Update to Your Employee Status' email.

I poured another cup of coffee and a final, loud and resounding "Ohhh my godddd!" tore through the walls. There were a few more knocks afterwards, a few more slaps against bare skin. And then, the sudden sound of shuffling—shoes, belt buckle, keys, confirmed that the tryst was now over.

Seconds later, Meredith and her flavor of the day stepped out of her room.

Jet black-haired and brown-eyed, he looked over at me and winked, and I tried not to stare too hard at the beautiful tattoos that snaked up and down his arms.

"See you soon," Meredith whispered, opening the door for him.

"I hope so." He returned the whisper and gave her one last slap on the ass before heading down the steps.

"Well, that was a very fulfilling four star!" She walked over and turned on the stove. "You're home early. I thought you were going to spend your entire birthday with Ben."

"I thought so, too." I felt a lump forming in my throat, but I forced it back down. "Until he decided to tell me that he's been cheating on me."

"You're *kidding*."

"I wish I was." I said. "But he said he only 'uses' the other girls for sex. He 'damn near loves me' he claims."

"Ugh." She rolled her eyes. "Well, you know I'm biased because I've always hated him, but if you do choose to go back, I'll still be willing to be your shoulder to cry on. Although, I will definitely judge the hell out of you."

I laughed for the first time today. "I'm not going back, and I'm not going to cry anymore. I'm going to treat myself to an art show and try to meet someone new tonight. Somewhat smart, witty, and funny. Someone—"

"You can fuck." She cut me off, crossing her arms. "Do you not see the issue here? Can you not see the pattern?"

“The pattern of me wanting to find a nice guy?”

“Yes. Your exes all fit into the same boring box. Art show lovers, coffee shop sitters, sweater wearing Wall Street boys. The cookie cutter, All-American, ‘we-don’t-fuck-until-the-tenth-date’ types and they have yet to work out for you.” She pulled out a box of pancake mix. “You need to switch it up and maybe attempt having sex with no strings attached. Get a few notches under your belt to see what you like, what you don’t like, and then you can start looking for love again.”

“So, in other words, I should be more like you.”

“No, you couldn’t be like me if you tried. I don’t even think you could handle a single one-night stand, let alone no-strings attached sex.”

“I can *definitely* handle a one-night stand,” I said, turning around in my chair. “I’ve just never wanted to have one.”

“Ha!” She suddenly burst into loud, uncontrolled laughter, holding her hands over her stomach. She didn’t stop for several minutes, and when she finally had her laughter under control, there were tears in her eyes.

“Gillian,” she said, letting out a breath, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but having a one-night stand means you can’t expect anything afterwards. I don’t think that lifestyle is for you, no offense.”

“None taken. But since I’m newly single, and never going back to Ben, I think I’d like to prove you wrong.”

“Oh?” She raised her eyebrow. “Really?”

“*Really.*”

“Okay, then.” She walked over to the refrigerator and plucked a beige card from a magnet, tossing it to me. “How about tonight?”

“On my birthday?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “On your effin’ birthday. Worst case scenario, you’ll still be helping me out if you decide not to go through with it. This party conflicts with a runway dress rehearsal I have to go to tonight, and I need to drop something off.”

I flipped the invitation over and realized that the word “party” was nowhere on the card. There was only an address.

“It’s a secret party,” Meredith said as if she’d read my mind. “A lot of high profile people will be there, so the less words on paper, the better. All I need you to do is find the host—Mark Strauss, and hand him this.” She unclipped a USB drive from around her neck and set it on the table. “Tell him it’s on behalf of me, and he’ll know exactly what it is. And while you’re there, because you’ll be in great company of several eligible, sexy-as-hell bachelors, try to find someone to go home with. Say, ‘Hello, my name is Gillian,’ lie about what you do for a living, and then lie about everything else because it never matters, and get some great sex.”

“That’s such a cliché.”

“It’s an *amazing* cliché.” She smiled. “I have a five star picking me up for a rendezvous two hours before my runway assignment, but if you bail on the party early, walk down to the Waldorf Astoria. We can ride home together.”

“Meredith...” I set the invitation down. “I thought we agreed that you were going to stop rating every guy you sleep with.”

“I never agreed to that, and I’m not ‘rating’ them. I’m *categorizing* them so I know exactly who to call when I’m in the mood for a certain type of repeat.”

I gave her a blank stare.

“Like, sometimes,” she said, stirring a bowl. “I’m in the mood for a 3.5 star cock. Something good, but nothing too taxing that’ll keep me up late at night.”

“You know what? Forget I ever said anything.”

“Sometimes, I’m in the mood for a 4-star cock. Something that will hit all the right spots, get me there without a serious hangover, but something that will leave me thinking about it for at least half a day.”

“Please stop talking.” I threw a straw at her.

“And then, of course, sometimes I desperately need that undeniable, unforgettable 5-star cock that will rock my world, leave me breathless, and render me completely confused about what the hell my name is all at once.” She bit her lip at the thought. “There are a few 6-star and 7-star cocks in my contact list, but I can’t call them too often. Or else I’ll get addicted and I can’t have that. Not my style.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you might be a sex addict?”

“No, but I’ll take it as a compliment. I can’t accept being broke as hell *and* miserable. We both need to have something in life that makes us feel alive, you know?”

“Right...” I tossed another straw at her.

I completely understood her logic in regards to sex, but even though our apartment left us feeling miserable from time to time and *I* was “broke as hell,” Meredith Alexis Thatchwood was far from that.

Born drop dead gorgeous with deep brown eyes and wavy auburn hair, Meredith was an heiress in a long line of Thatchwoods—a historic staple of New York real estate tycoon royalty who owned some of the most exclusive properties in the state. Her father, Leonardo Alex Thatchwood, was constantly being mentioned as one of the most philanthropic men in the city, but to Meredith, he was simply a wealthier version of a dead beat dad. She didn’t want anything to do with him or his money.

“A few last things.” She slid my gift box toward me. “Wear everything in this box tonight and you’ll stand out. The party starts at eight, but if I were you, I wouldn’t get there until ten. No one is ever on time to these things, so it’ll look strange if you are. And I must say, I’m really looking forward to winning this bet. One hundred dollars says you’ll be meeting me at the Waldorf Astoria later tonight and telling me how chicken shit you were.”

“Well, as a non-heiress with not that much money to bet, twenty dollars and breakfast in bed says I’ll be texting you my rating of the sex.”

“I’ll draft my menu later today.” She laughed and leaned against the counter. “Okay, in all seriousness, let’s get you prepared for your first potential one-night stand.”

Later that night, I stood outside an abandoned black building on 7th Avenue, shivering as the winds whipped against my exposed legs. I was wondering if I’d somehow misread the party’s address. There was no one around, all of the windows were covered in plywood boards, and there was a FOR LEASE sign tacked to the front door.

I pulled my phone out of my clutch to call Meredith, but she’d already sent me a text message.

Meredith: Ignore the front entrance of the building when you get there. Go down the alley. Blue door. Knock six times. Mark Strauss will be dressed in gray. (I’ll have French toast, eggs benedict, and hand squeezed orange juice in the morning when you end up going home alone tonight. Thank you in advance.)

I laughed and walked down the alley, wincing as my feet adjusted to the height of my new heels. When I made it to the blue door, I knocked six times as Meredith instructed and a man in a beige suit opened the door.

“Elevator is down the hall,” he said. “Rooftop level. The host asks that you don’t take pictures or record any videos while you’re here. If caught doing so, you’ll be escorted out. Clear?”

“Clear.” I stepped past him and boarded the elevator, taking it straight to the roof. When it came to a complete stop, I found myself thrust into a sea of expensive black and grey suits, and colorful designer dresses.

Twinkling lights shone brightly against the roof’s railing, white leather couches cornered glass coffee tables that were lined with Cuban cigars, and waitresses in black V-neck dresses weaved in between guests to serve drinks.

Out of nowhere, a hostess walked up to me and handed me a glass of dark, red wine.

I took a quick sip and coughed as it burned its way down my throat.

Remembering the first thing I needed to accomplish while I was here, I walked around the roof in search of Mark Strauss. It didn’t take me long to find him at all. Dressed in all grey with a black hat, he was alone and leaning against the railing, staring at the captivating night view of the city.

“Excuse me.” I cleared my throat as I approached him. “Are you Mr. Strauss?”

“Depends.” He turned to look at me. “What are you offering?”

I took the USB from my purse and handed it to him. “From Meredith Thatchwood.”

“Ah. The Thatchwood girl.” He smiled. “So the anti-heiress rumor is true after all. Tell her I regret that I couldn’t meet her tonight. In the meantime…” He looked me up and down. “*You* can call me Mark. What’s your name?”

“Gillian.”

“Nice to meet you, Gillian.” He sipped his drink and his eyes landed on my exposed cleavage. “Full disclosure: If my wife wasn’t here and watching my every move, I’d tell you that you are, hands down, the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen. And then I’d beg you to come home with me so we could fuck each other until sunrise.” He turned around and waved at someone in the distance. “But since that’s not possible, do me a favor and wave to my wife so she won’t come over and interrupt my few minutes of freedom.”

Confused, I turned around and waved in the same direction as him, meeting the gaze of a pretty woman in an ivory dress. She raised her glass in our direction, continuing to talk to the women who surrounded her, and then Mr. Strauss turned to face the city again.

“What type of plane do you think that is?” he asked, pointing to a black and white aircraft that was flying high above the Hudson.

“If I had to guess, I would say it’s a Boeing 737.”

“*What?*” He looked at me.

“A Boeing 737,” I repeated. “What would *you* say?”

“I would say nothing.” He laughed. “I wasn’t expecting an answer like that. I meant like, jet plane, turbo plane, but wow. That’s pretty impressive.”

“What’s so funny, darling?” His wife suddenly stepped between us. “Who’s your little friend here?”

He rolled his eyes and quickly introduced us. Then he slipped his arm around her waist and looked me over one last time before stepping back.

“Very impressive, Gillian,” he said, winking. “The plane thing.”

His wife scowled at me and he smiled one last time before leading her away. I waited until they were out of my sight and turned toward the city, hoping I wouldn’t run into either of them for the rest of the night.

“The ‘plane thing’ was very impressive.” A different man, with a deeper and more dominant voice, stepped closer to the railing. “It would’ve been even more impressive if you’d actually gotten it right…”

“*Excuse me?*” I turned to my left, catching him mid-sip. “What did you just say?”

“I said—” He turned to face me. “That your plane trivia would’ve been more impressive, if you’d gotten it right. Don’t you think?”

I couldn't think at all. I couldn't even try.

This man was the utter definition of perfection, the very template of living, breathing, sex. His stormy blue eyes gleamed beneath the party's dim lights as they locked onto mine, and his full and defined lips were pressed into a tempting, sexy smirk. His hair, dirty-blond and slightly messy, looked as if someone had just run her fingers through it.

His suit, an all black three piece, clung to his body in all the right ways, and the watch on his wrist—a stunning silver, Audemars Piguet, let me know that he could afford to spend my entire year's salary on something as insignificant as an accessory.

"Should I take your silence to accept that I'm right?" He smiled a set of pearly whites and I shook my head, trying to snap out of my trance.

"You should take it to mean that you don't know what the hell you're talking about." I looked up at the plane again. It was farther away, but still easily seen. "That's a Boeing 737, and it's pretty rude to eavesdrop."

"It's pretty rude to spread the wrong information." He smiled again and stepped closer, looking up at the sky. "That's an Airbus 320, not a Boeing 737." He waited for me to follow where his fingers were pointing. "The difference is in the nose of the plane and the cockpit windows...Airbus is bulbous, Boeing is pointed. 737 cockpit windows are diagonal, and Airbus cockpit windows are—"

"Square," I said, immediately realizing he was right. "Well, congratulations. You've won the random plane facts game tonight. I hope you don't think there's a prize for that."

"There should be."

"How about the satisfaction of knowing you're an arrogant eavesdropper?"

"Or," he said, "The satisfaction of knowing you don't really give a fuck that I eavesdropped. That you're happy that I did it, and now you don't want me to leave you alone."

Silence.

His smile widened and the scent of his intoxicating cologne made me take one step closer to him. He kept his eyes on mine for several seconds, as if he was daring me to move even closer, but instead, he broke the silence.

"Jake," he said, extending his hand toward mine as the silver "J" cufflinks on his sleeve sparkled against the night.

"Gillian." The feel of his hand over mine sent a wave of warmth throughout my entire body and I drew back, completely confused as to how a simple handshake could make all of my nerves come to life. How a complete stranger could make me wet with a simple smile and a flick of his wrist.

A waitress suddenly stepped in front of us, interrupting our moment as she gave us fresh glasses of champagne. She asked me if I was enjoying myself, if I needed anything else, and as she launched into a short spiel about how amazing the hors d'oeuvres were tonight, I felt Jake's heated gaze moving up and down my body, felt him turning me on without even trying.

The second the waitress walked away, he spoke. "What do you do for a living, Gillian?"

"I'm—" I remembered what Meredith said about lying tonight. "I'm a pilot, a captain actually."

He raised his eyebrow. "You look a little too young to be a captain."

"My high number of flight hours say differently."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." I barely managed to remain standing as he took my glass from my hand and set it on the ledge.

"Are you a commercial or a private pilot?"

"Private." I needed to ask him what he did for a living, to run away from this lie and subject as fast as possible, but he leaned back against the railing and pulled me closer to him, making me lose my train of thought.

As he pressed his hands against my hips, I stood still between his legs, so close to him that I was convinced he was about to press his mouth against mine and kiss me, but he didn't.

"How long have you been flying?" he asked.

"As long as I can remember."

"Hmmm..." He trailed his finger against my bottom lip, appearing even more intrigued. He looked as if he were waiting for me to jerk back or tell him to stop, but when I didn't, his smile returned. "So, which airline do you fly for, *Gillian*?"

"It's a really small one..." The rough way he said my name affected me even more than his intense eye-fucking. "You wouldn't know it. Trust me."

"I would." He lowered his voice, his lips nearly brushing against mine. "*Try me.*"

"It's um...It's a small, private one."

"Yes," he said, his voice even deeper. "We've established that it's *private*, Gillian. However, that's not what I'm asking you. What's *the name* of the airline?"

Shit... "I can't tell you that. It's too personal." I surrendered as his hand caressed my back, as his fingers teasingly trailed the imprint of my bra. "What do *you* do for a living?"

"I'm a bestselling author."

"What?" My mind raced with questions. "Really?"

"No." His lips latched onto mine without warning and I lost all sense of time as his tongue slid deeper into my mouth—as he bit down hard on my bottom lip, making me even wetter than I was before. His hands were gripping my hips, his fingers pressing into my skin, and I let out a soft moan as his mouth continued to control mine. "I'm not really a fucking author..." He whispered against my lips, and a knowing smile crossed his face as he pulled away from me. "But since you're pretending to be a pilot, I can pretend to be whatever I want to be, correct?"

"Yes." I felt my cheeks heating. "I guess so."

"Did you come here alone?" he asked.

"I think you should've asked that before you kissed me."

"If your sexy ass mouth wasn't such a distraction, I would've," he said. "Did you come here alone?" I didn't answer. I couldn't.

His fingers were running through my hair, and his mouth was close to mine again. My panties were soaked and sticking to my skin.

"Gillian?" His smirk slid into a cocky smile. "Did you come here *alone*?"

"Yes and no."

"It can't be both."

"I came alone," I said, barely hearing my own voice.

"Hmmm." His fingers slid down to my neck, his heated touch setting my skin on fire. "Did you plan on leaving here alone?"

"What if I did?"

"Then I think you need to change your mind." With that, his hand went around my waist and he pulled me close, kissing me deeply, making me forget the people around us. His kiss was controlling my every breath, my every thought; it was the type of kiss that would never be forgotten. A kiss that was already cementing itself into my future memories.

The party around us ceased to exist—the light sounds of the piano and party chatter all diminished to a hum so soft I could only hear the two of us breathing.

His grip tightened around me and I surrendered full control of my mouth to him, letting him show me how pleasurable a night with him could possibly be.

All of a sudden, a loud applause sounded—disturbing our moment, and we both slowly pulled away. The crowd's attention was focused on a man who was standing atop a small stage and giving a speech, but

our eyes were still focused on each other.

“What will it take?” he whispered, looking upset that we’d been interrupted.

“What will it take for *what*?”

“For you to leave with me.”

“Um..” Butterflies fluttered against my stomach and my heart raced at a completely foreign rhythm.

I’d never been instantly attracted to any man I’d met in my life, never felt as if I didn’t need to talk at all, but this man was more than worthy of an exception.

“Is ‘um’ indicative of a yes?” he asked.

“No, it’s...Look, I don’t typically do one night stands.”

“Then we won’t call it a one-night stand.”

“A night of meaningless sex, then?”

“A night of *fucking*,” he said, his voice low. “A night of me owning your pussy on every single surface in my hotel room. If we make it past the alley, that is.”

I swallowed, knowing that no matter what this man said, I was going home with him.

“I’ll leave with you,” I said. “You just need to answer a few of my questions so I feel somewhat safe.”

“Okay, Gillian.” He looked amused. “Ask away.”

“Can you promise me that you’re not a psycho murderer?”

“I can promise you that I’m not a murderer.”

“What about the psycho part?”

“No comment.”

I laughed, but something told me he was only halfway joking. “Are you originally from New York?”

“Yes and no.”

“Someone named Jake once told me it can’t be both.”

He let out a low laugh. “My family is originally from New York. I was born in Missouri, but now, unfortunately, I’m back again.”

“Would you like to explain the unfortunate part?”

“Not particularly.”

“What’s your favorite type of woman?”

“What?” He raised his eyebrow in confusion.

“You know, blonde, brunette, redhead. Those types.”

“I’ve never had a type.”

“Why not?”

“Because there’s no way for me to tell what a woman’s pussy is like just by looking at the color of the hair on her head.” He ran his fingers through my hair for effect, rendering me temporarily speechless.

“I’ve honestly never had a type, Gillian. Are those all of your questions?”

“No. I have three more.”

“I’ll answer *two more*.”

“Fine,” I said, my body begging me to wrap up this conversation. “How often do you pick up women at parties like this?”

“Not so often.”

“But often?”

“No.” He looked genuine. “Not often at all.”

“Okay...” I didn’t really have any other questions. “We can leave now.”

“You’re not going to ask another question?”

“No, the ‘but often’ one was number two. I know how to count.”

“*Clearly*.” He smiled wider than he had all night and pressed his hand at the small of my back, leading me through the crowd and out of the party.

We stepped onto the elevator, making way for a couple to get off, and the second the doors closed, Jake's lips were on mine again and my back was pressed against the wall. Never wanting this moment to end, I wrapped my leg around his waist, gasping as I felt his hard cock through his pants, as I felt how huge it was.

My hands ran through his hair, and his fingers slipped under my dress and beneath the lace line of my soaked panties.

His fingers quickly pushed the fabric to the side and he whispered, "So fucking wet..." as the elevator continued to fall floor after floor. Slipping two fingers deep inside of me, he breathed against my neck. "My place or yours?"

"Mine..." I whimpered in pleasure as he withdrew his hand.

"I don't think so," he said as the doors opened on the ground level. He slipped his arm around my waist and led me outside. "I won't be able to wait that long. I live closer."

"Doubt that. *I* live closer," I said, opening my clutch to make sure the keycard to 80A was still inside. "We can walk to my place from here."

"Even if that's true, I'd prefer to drive." He pulled a set of keys out of his pocket and hit the button, causing the bright lights of a black BMW across the street to flash. "How many blocks away is your place?"

"Four." I smiled. "Closer than yours, isn't it?"

He didn't answer. He led me over to his car and opened the door for me. Then he slid behind the driver's seat and cranked the engine, causing the dashboard to light up in a bright array of blues and whites.

"Do I need to make a right or a left at the light?" He pulled onto the street and sped away.

"Right."

He stopped at the red light and looked over at me, making me even more anxious. He didn't say a single word, just simply fucked me with his eyes until the light changed.

We passed two more blocks and hit another red light.

"I take it your building is on Park Avenue?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Which one is it?"

"The Madison." I pointed at the building as we approached, thanking the universe that the managers were throwing a shareholders' party tonight. The valet was swarming with vehicles so I wouldn't have to go through the front door and be questioned by the doorman. "You'll have to park on the street somewhere. Only guests have parking passes and I've already used mine."

"Hmmm," was all he said in response. He drove through the light and made a reckless U-turn, parking on the side of the building. He turned off the car and opened my door.

"You may want to move your car elsewhere," I warned as he helped me get out. "The doorman here is really adamant about getting cars towed for people who don't live here."

"I'll deal with the risk." He looked at me. "How long have you been living here?"

"Not long, just a few months." I started walking toward the side entrance. "I prefer going this way."

He followed me and after I placed my employee card against the keypad, he held the door open.

The lights in my manager's office were off, and there were no night shift employees walking the hallways. The only noise was the laughter and chatter from the ballroom that was on the other side of the building.

As we walked to the elevator, Jake's hand pressed against the small of my back, and my anticipation rose with every step toward the elevators.

As soon as I hit the up button, the doors opened and we stepped inside together.

"Wait!" A shrill voice cried. "Hold that elevator, please!"

Jake held the doors open and seconds later, an elderly woman stepped inside.

“Thank you so much,” she said.

“What floor?” Jake asked her.

“Twenty-six. Thank you.”

He pressed “26” and then, out of a pure gentleman’s book, he pressed “50” so it wouldn’t look like we were together. “And for you?” he asked, looking at me. “What floor?”

“Eighty.”

“*Eight?*” He looked at me. “Is that what you said?”

“No, *eighty*.” I pulled the additional key out of my bag and held it against the panel. “You can’t press that floor. I have to use this to get up there.”

“Oh! I’ve always wondered who lived on that floor,” the woman said. “Good to finally put a face to a unit. You should try coming to the monthly social sometimes. Once a year wouldn’t kill you, you know.”

“I’ll try it.”

“How are the views up there, by the way?” she asked.

“*Phenomenal*.”

“I bet.” She gave me a short wave as she got off on her floor and for some reason, Jake was gently pulling at my hair, murmuring something that sounded like, “Strawberry...” but I wasn’t sure.

“How long did you say you’d been living here exactly?” he asked.

“Just a few months. Why?” The energy between us now felt completely different from seconds ago. The look on his face wasn’t lust-filled anymore. It was something else entirely.

“I’m just having thoughts.”

“Potentially murderous thoughts?”

“Potentially *curious* thoughts.” He stared at me as the doors opened.

“Wait,” I said, motioning for him not to step off. “I need to do something before you take another step.”

“And what is that exactly?”

“Hold on...” I walked over to the hallway vases and quickly disabled the cameras. I hit the disable button for the camera one over the door and placed a sticker over the new lens.

“You can come now,” I said to Jake, pulling out the second keycard. “I just have to do those security things for privacy.”

“Yes, I can tell you highly value *privacy*...” He followed me to the door.

I swiped the keycard against the doors, but it flashed red for no-entry instead of green.

What the...It worked last night...

I held it against the key pad again and again, becoming increasingly frustrated with every flash of red.

“Is something wrong?” Jake asked.

“No, the key is just being strange that’s all.” The light suddenly flashed green, saving me from embarrassment and I held the door open for him.

I hit the panel of buttons on the wall and the drapes that covered the living room windows slowly drew open, exposing the view of Manhattan.

“That’s a very nice feature,” Jake said from behind. “Did you have that designed yourself?”

“No, it was already like that when I moved in.”

“*Interesting*.” He walked into the living room and stood by the windows, looking like he belonged in this space more than I did. “It’s a beautiful apartment.”

“Thank you.”

“Would you mind giving me a quick tour of *your* place?”

“Right now?”

“Yes. *Right now*.”

“Okay...” I walked toward him. “We’re currently standing in the living room and it stretches into the parlor room and the dining room as you can see...” I walked to the left, down the hallway. “There are guest rooms on both sides of this hall with their own bathroom and...” I stepped inside the master bedroom and turned on the lights. “This is my room.”

“Impressive.” He stepped inside and looked around. “What made you pick beige and black accents for everything in here?”

“They’re my favorite colors.”

He smiled. “Even more interesting...Do you have a master bathroom as well?”

“Yes.” I walked over to the doors that led to it and showed him. “Stone shower, Jacuzzi, and sauna room.” I noticed my bottle of strawberry shampoo standing at the front of the shower rack and walked over to it as I spoke, shoving it back behind the black and blue bottles where it belonged.

“What’s on the other side of the apartment?”

“A private library and an office,” I said. “Oh, and I believe we missed the kitchen. Would you like a drink?”

“*Absolutely.*”

I made sure nothing else in the master suite was out of place before leading him into the kitchen. I pulled out a vintage bottle of wine and two glasses, and he followed close behind me.

“Should I assume that you have a love for aerial city photography?” he asked.

“*What?*”

“The photos on the wall.” He pointed to the four massive white frames that hung over the fire place. “Do you have a thing for aerial views?”

“Oh...Yes. Something like that.”

He leaned against the counter, narrowing his eyes at me, looking sexier than ever, but something was off. “Tell me, Gillian. In what cities were those pictures taken?”

“I don’t really remember...”

“You should,” he said. “They’re quite stunning, beautiful enough to be quite memorable. At least, *I* think so.”

The hairs on the back of my neck were standing up and my heart was beating erratically, but I wasn’t sure why. “Boston. The top left one is from Boston, that’s where I went to school for undergrad. The others are...” I had no fucking idea, and I’d never paid much attention to them before today. “The top right is New York, the bottom left is London, and the bottom right is Tokyo.”

“How fascinating.”

“It is...” Something was telling me to run right now, but I didn’t listen. “You don’t mind if we drink white wine, do you?”

“That’s the very least of things I mind right now.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by that, so I pulled out the utensils drawer, looking for the corkscrew. I moved the knives and spatulas around, wondering where it was and hoping like hell I’d simply misplaced it into another drawer.

I pulled open drawer after drawer, seeing nothing—silently panicking with every second that passed.

Shit. Shit. SHIT..

“Is something wrong?” Jake asked.

“No.” I opened the final drawer and saw nothing. “I just—”

“You just *what?*”

“Nothing...” I pulled out more drawers. “I just can’t seem to find the corkscrew. I remember placing it right here earlier, but I can’t find it.”

“That’s probably because I moved it this morning.” He slammed it onto the counter and my head shot up, coming face to face with his glare.

My eyes widened and I felt all the color leaving my face, felt my jaw dropping out of pure shock. For several seconds, there were no words spoken between the two of us—only anger rolling off of him in waves and complete and utter embarrassment coming from me.

This was *his* apartment. I’d just brought him here for a one-night stand and given him a tour of his own fucking apartment...

I stepped back, my heart pounding loudly against my chest as my mouth struggled to find any words to say. I debated whether I should run past him and rush down the emergency exit stairs to end this night for good. Or if I should calmly say, “Sorry,” and simply leave, as if this had never happened.

He stood glaring at me with his eyes narrowed, so I glanced toward the door, but he stepped to the left and blocked me, as if he’d read my mind.

“How the fuck did you get a key to my apartment, Gillian?” His eyes were cold.

“I...I um...”

“Spare me the goddamn ellipses.” He hissed. “How the fuck did you get a key to my apartment?”

“I didn’t actually *get* a key.”

“It just magically walked into your life one day with my address?”

“I’m trying to explain...”

“Try fucking harder.” He looked as if he was seconds away from blowing up on me.

“I work in housekeeping here during the week,” I said, swallowing. “And since I’m usually assigned to your place, I always get a key...But sometimes I keep it.”

“So, is part of your job description to steal my shit whenever I’m away?”

“No, and I’ve never, ever—” I stuttered. “I’ve never—”

“Never *stolen*?” He walked over to my side of the counter, stepping right in front of me.

“It’s true. I’ve never stolen anything from you.”

“Then you must have a very distorted definition of what that word means. You’re stealing a space you didn’t pay for, a very expensive space that belongs to someone else and is supposed to be private. Is that not what *stealing* is? Taking something that doesn’t belong to you?”

I stood completely still and silent, pinned to the spot by his hard gaze.

“I take it that the blue bag that is currently hidden underneath my sink belongs to you?”

I nodded.

“And the strawberry shampoo that you just fucking buried behind the glass bottles in my shower is yours as well?”

“Yes.” My cheeks were on fire.

“Exactly,” he said, clenching his jaw. “So, as surprising and gratifying as it is to finally come face to face with my unwanted and thieving-ass roommate, I would appreciate it if you got the hell out of my apartment and stayed out of it for the rest of your unfortunate employment here. He snatched the keycard from beneath my purse and pointed to the door. “Get the fuck out. Now.”

I stood there, staring at him, watching him clench his jaw even harder.

“Do I need to call security?” he asked. “Do you not understand what ‘Get the fuck out of my condo’ means?”

“I know exactly what it means.” I snapped, feeling heated and upset about the way he was talking to me, about how he’d so quickly flipped the switch. “And I will definitely leave, Jake—after you thank me.”

“What the fuck?” He crossed his arms. “What did you just say?”

“I said, *I will leave, Jake.*” I spoke slowly, hissing right back at him. “*After* you thank me.”

“You want me to thank you for playing fucking Goldilocks in my apartment?”

“No, I—”

“You want me to thank you for breaking and entering?” He stepped closer and closer to me, backing me onto the edge of the other kitchen counter. “For drinking my best wine and bringing strangers home to fuck you? Or should I be thanking you for using my shower and leaving your goddamn scent all over my sheets?” His face was red. “Please enlighten me about what part of this fucked up situation you think I should be thanking you for right now.”

“I want you to thank me for watering your goddamn plants every day. *Every. Day.*” I fired back. “I even make time to do it on the days I’m not assigned to your room since you bought fifty fucking perennials and you clearly don’t know how to take care of them *at all*. If you think they’ve managed to survive all this time because of your charm, you’re sadly mistaken.”

“*Gillian...*” A vein in his neck swelled.

“I’m not finished talking, *Jake,*” I said, beyond pissed and unable to stop. “I want you to *thank me* for closing the windows whenever it rains since you have a terrible habit of always leaving them open, for arranging all the books in your library by color so the sunlight won’t damage the spines, and for collecting all of your mail and organizing it by date. I bring it up from the mailroom and leave it on your counter to make it ten times easier for you. You can’t possibly think it’s the mailman who goes through all that trouble.”

“Also,” I said, crossing my arms. “I want you to thank me—*again and again*, for refilling your Coke can supply whenever it gets low. You haven’t had to buy any Coke in months. Months. And you only buy specialty cans for some reason. They’re very hard to find in this city.”

He stared at me, not saying a single word.

“You could also thank me for filling out some of your unfinished crossword puzzles, but if you want to leave that particular ‘thank you’ out, I can deal with that.”

He was still staring at me, his eyes narrowed.

“And since we’re speaking of crosswords, and you’re clearly having trouble with this concept,” I said, “a two-word phrase. Eight letters. Popular saying that expresses gratitude.”

He uncrossed his arms, and his expression slowly softened as a slight smile tugged at his lips.

“With all due respect, *Jake...*” I swallowed, glancing at the door. “Your ‘thank you’ needs to be verbal. Otherwise, I’ll be standing here until I get it.”

He let out a low laugh and picked up the corkscrew, slowly uncorking the wine. He poured one glass and handed it to me. As he poured a glass for himself, he kept his eyes on me, his sexy smile unwavering.

I downed my drink in one nervous gulp and he poured me another. Then another.

“Just so you know...” I said, feeling bolder after drinking a third refill. “A few glasses of wine are not equivalent to a thank you.”

“Trust me.” He tipped his glass back. “We’re going to get to that...” He took my glass from me and placed it into the sink. Then he clasped my hand and pulled me after him.

“For the record,” he said, gesturing toward the white frames on the walls. “That’s Dubai, The Philippines, Moscow, and...Ironically, the bottom right one *is* Tokyo.” He rolled his eyes and pulled me across the room, into the private library.

Letting my hand go, he looked at the bookshelves, then back at me. “Thank you for your attempt at trying to be thoughtful while stealing shit from me.” He picked up a crossword booklet from a chair and tossed it into the trash. “And for filling out my fucking crossword puzzles without me having to ask. I’m not sure how I’ve ever survived this long without you.”

“Thank yous aren’t typically delivered with venom.”

“They’re not typically delivered with fucking either.” He pressed me back against the bookshelf and stamped his mouth over mine, making me forget whatever else I’d planned to say.

His tongue slid between my lips, demanding full control of this kiss, and everything around me suddenly became a blur. His teeth tugged at my bottom lip as his eyes met mine.

“You’re a goddamn thief and a liar, Gillian...” he whispered against my mouth as he slid his hand between my thighs and tore off my soaked panties. “A goddamn thief and a liar.”

I started to respond to him, but I couldn’t. He pushed me back against the bookshelf again, forcing hardcovers and paperbacks to topple onto the floor, and he repeated his words again.

“Have you brought anyone else to my fucking condo?” He pushed my dress up to my breasts, pausing to unhook my bra.

“No...” I stared at him as he pulled my dress over my head, as he tossed it across the room.

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“It’s true... I haven’t brought anyone else here.” I moaned as his mouth met mine again, as he kissed me harder, not letting me go until I was nearly breathless.

He stepped back, looking me up and down, and then he unzipped his pants. “Turn around and grab the shelf.”

I didn’t move. I was too captivated by the sight of him unzipping his pants—the sight of him pulling out his cock. Holding back a gasp as I saw how huge it really was, I watched as he pulled a condom out of his pocket and put it on.

“Gillian...” His eyes met mine and he moved close again, gripping my waist and spinning me around. “Grab the shelf,” he whispered harshly into my ear. “Now.”

My hands gripped the shelving and he pressed his mouth against the back of my neck, keeping his hands against my hips as he spread my legs wider.

Slapping my ass cheek, he pressed his cock against my soaked slit, and without warning, he slid all the way into me—stretching me and making me scream.

I gripped the shelves even harder, crying out as instant pleasure rushed through my veins. I tried to move, to adjust to the length of him, but he held my hips hostage and began pounding into me.

I’d never been fucked like this, never even thought it could feel this fucking good.

“Oh...Oh god...” I shut my eyes and moaned as one of his hands skimmed up my stomach and to my breasts—harshly pinching my nipples.

“You’re so tight...” he breathed against my skin. “So fucking tight...” His cock continued sliding in and out of me, hitting spots I never knew existed, and as I moaned again, he slowly released my left hand.

“Touch your clit.” He bit my ear, grabbing my wrist once more and moving my hand to my pussy.

I pressed my finger against my clit, feeling how sensitive and swollen it was, but I froze. As if he was upset that I wasn’t following instructions, he pressed his own finger against it—torturing me, as he sensuously rubbed it in circles.

My breath caught in my throat as my legs began to go weak, as the strokes from his cock became too much to handle. I was screaming, on the verge of coming, and he suddenly pulled out of me and pulled me down to the floor.

My bare back burned as my body slid against the carpet, as he entered me again and wrapped my legs around his waist. The feeling of him in this position was too intense, too much.

“Jake...” I begged as his eyes locked onto mine. “Jake...”

“Yes?”

“I...I’m about to...”

A cocky smile came to his lips, but his fingers dug into my skin and he sped up his rhythm. His mouth covered my hardened nipple, and he sucked it into his mouth—pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

My hands fisted handfuls of his hair and I couldn’t resist any longer. My legs convulsed and I screamed, coming harder than I ever had in my life.

Jake pumped into me a few more times, cursing as he found his own release.

I lay back on the carpet—his cock still deep inside of me, his mouth inches away from my lips. I struggled to catch my breath, as he rubbed his hands against my chest.

He whispered something I couldn't understand, and then he slowly pulled out of me and stood up to throw away the condom.

I tried to stand, but the muscles in my legs were too weak.

Sighing, I shut my eyes and felt him wiping a warm cloth between my legs minutes later. I murmured, "Thank you," and tried to get up again, but he placed his hand against my stomach—pinning me still.

Then he buried his head between my legs and sucked my clit into his mouth. Without saying another word, he slipped two fingers inside of me and ran his tongue up and down my pussy. Toying with my pleasure, he brought me close to a second orgasm repeatedly—his warm mouth pulling away each time I got close, his fingers pushing deeper each time I cried out.

I writhed beneath his dominant touch, begged for him to slow down, but he only went faster. As he sucked my clit between his lips again, my hips jerked against the floor and I screamed louder than ever, coming even harder the second time.

He caressed my legs as I came down from my high, but he continued to blow torturous, wet kisses between my thighs. Then I lost count. One mind-shattering orgasm blended with the next, and I lost my voice. My muscles wouldn't still, my entire body convulsed again and again.

"Gillian?" he asked when I'd finally stopped shaking.

"Yes?" I didn't even attempt to stand up. I simply looked up at the clock above the bookcase, gasping when I saw what time it was. Four in the morning.

He fucked me for three hours?

"Are you okay?"

I blinked, unsure of what to say. I was still recovering from bliss. By the time I finally came to, I looked up and found him staring at me.

"Thank you," he said, a smile in his eyes.

"For fucking you?"

"No." He slipped his arm behind my back and helped me to my feet. "For the windows and the mail. The latter was actually quite convenient."

"You're welcome."

He led me back into the living room where he'd placed my blue overnight bag and strawberry shampoo onto the coffee table.

"Is there anything else you have hidden here?"

I shook my head.

"Are you sure?" He tilted my chin up with his fingertips. "Because I'll be making sure you're never able to get inside of here again."

"I'm sure."

His fingers left my skin and I felt disconnected.

"Where do you actually live?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it," I said, grabbing my things. "I'll have my roommate pick me up."

"That's not why I was asking." He prevented me from walking to the front door and led me down a hall and to what appeared to be a closet.

Taking a key out of his pocket, he unlocked the door and I realized it was a small elevator.

"I had this installed years before your housekeeping company was contracted to work here," he said, pulling me inside.

"So, why don't you ever leave this open so you won't have to use the public elevator?"

"It's only operable from the inside." He hit the only button on the pad. "And since my unit isn't rented like the others, I didn't want strangers being able to access my apartment from below. Although, it seems

like I encountered that problem anyway.”

I blushed and the doors glided shut. He stared at me as the car descended down, making me yearn for his touch all over again.

“I have a question,” I said. “How did you know I wasn’t really a pilot?”

“Simple.” He smiled. “Any real pilot would’ve jumped at the chance to talk about flying. I wouldn’t have had to ask you anything beyond commercial or private. You would’ve waxed poetic for at least five minutes.”

Very true... “I take it you’ve met a few pilots in your life?”

“You could say that.”

The elevator stopped at the ground level and he walked me to the curb where a driver and a black SUV were waiting. The lettering underneath the door handle read, New York’s #1 Private Driver Service.

“They’ll take you home and charge the fee to me,” he said.

“Thank you.” I climbed inside and set my things on the seat.

He looked at me as if he wanted to say something more, as if he wanted to taste me one last time. Instead, he pushed the strap of my dress back onto my shoulder and let his fingers linger against my skin for a few seconds before shutting the door.

“Where to, Miss?” The driver looked at me through the rearview mirror.

“Brooklyn,” I said. “16 Hampton Street.”

He gave me a slightly confused look, but he sped off toward the borough.

I turned my head toward the window, noticing Jake was no longer there.

As the car rolled over the city’s potholes, my bare ass slid across the seat—reminding me that he’d never returned my panties. Leaning back against the headrest, I shut my eyes as my nipples hardened, as I thought about the way he’d both harshly and gently bit them in turn. I knew it’d be a very long time before I met another man who could ever have such an effect on me, a long time before someone else could ever live up to that level of sex.

I caught the time on the car’s dashboard and realized I never told Meredith that I was leaving the party. I pulled out my phone and saw she’d called me four times, sent two “Where the hell are you?” texts, and left a voicemail, so I sent her a response.

Gillian: You owe me a hundred dollars.

Gillian: 7 stars.

GATE A5

JAKE

New York (JFK)—> Dubai (DXB)

“You sure you want to completely cancel your housekeeping services, Mr. Weston?” The manager sounded confused. “Even after we’ve both concluded that nothing strange has been happening?”

“Absolutely.” I hung up and poured myself a shot of bourbon, the fourth one I’d had since escorting Gillian out of the building. Tossing it back, I gritted my teeth as the liquor burned its way down my throat.

I was still trying to figure out what the hell had happened tonight—how the hell a simple one-night stand had turned into an encounter with a modern day Goldilocks. The second she left, I’d walked through every room of my apartment again, trying to see how the hell I’d missed all the signs. How the hell I’d blamed everything on a team of people instead of one.

The first time I saw my Coke tins overturned months ago, I assumed it was me who’d done it in a rare bout of fidgeting. But when I returned from an international flight a week later, I noticed that the tins had been arranged into the shapes of small pyramids, something I would never have the patience to do.

I even installed a small-interior system right after that—a series of motion sensors that were supposed to send notices to my phone if someone ever entered when I was away, but all I ever saw was a quiet, still apartment. It wasn’t until hours ago that I realized that the “intruder” had managed to rig my system to run on a loop.

Just this morning, I’d found white cotton slippers tucked under my sink, a black and lace thong entangled on the rung of my dryer, and a pink coffee mug hidden at the rear of my cabinet. The second I’d spotted that terribly hidden bottle of shampoo in my bathroom, I vowed to bring the manager up next week to see this shit for himself.

Until tonight, that is.

After seeing Gillian, fucking her and grabbing fistfuls of her hair while I held her against my bookcase, that strawberry scent that often pervaded my space made perfect sense.

It was the one and only thing that lingered, no matter how well the staff attempted to clean. Airy and intoxicating, it clung to all of my pillows and sheets, so deeply ingrained in the fabric that I smelled hints of it for weeks.

I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved that the intruder wasn’t an annoying neighbor who preferred my views of the city over her own, or pissed that it was a sexy-ass employee who thought she was doing something worthy of my gratitude.

I couldn’t help but picture her perfect, pink lips pressed into an angry line for a “Thank you,” couldn’t help but see the way her deep, green eyes gazed into mine when we damn near fucked inside the rooftop party’s elevator.

The way she screamed when I had her pinned against the floor...

Before I could call the housekeeping manager and tell him that I wanted to change my mind about canceling, my automated voicemail system made a loud beeping sound.

“Welcome home,” it said. “You have three new messages. Please say the password.”

“No.”

“Please repeat the password.”

“I said no.”

“I’m sorry. That’s not the password. Please repeat the password.”

Jesus... “One. Eight. Seven. Four.”

“Password accepted. Message one.” There was a beep and a long moment of silence.

“Good evening, Mr. Weston.” It was a female voice. “This is Alyssa Hart in Elite’s Human Resources Department. I was calling to discuss the salary form you submitted. I’m not sure if you know the actual salary maximum for a senior captain, but you’re going to have to redraft this and ask for something *a lot* more reasonable, if you want to continue—”

“Next,” I said, and the automated message came to an abrupt halt.

“Next message. Playing now.”

“Jake...” A deep male voice. “Jake, why do I have to hire a private investigator just to get your home number? And why do you keep changing it every month while continuing to ignore my calls to your cell phone? We’ve been trying to reach out to you for years. *Years*, Jake. Please let us—”

“Next.” I clenched my jaw.

“Final new message. Playing now.”

“Hello, this is Charlotte.” It was a throaty, female voice. “I’m not sure if I have the right number or not, but I’m simply calling to see if this is Blanket Manufacturing? I’d like someone to call me back so I can place an order, if so.”

I sighed and made a mental note to change my number once again at the end of the month.

“No more new messages,” the system said proudly. “Would you like to hear them again?”

“No.”

“Okay. I will play them again. Message one.”

“Good evening, Mr. Weston. This is Alyssa Hart in Elite’s Human Resources Department.”

I groaned and walked into my library, shutting the door. I picked up the books that fell while Gillian was here and stuffed her tattered lace panties into my pocket.

I pushed the desk away from the wall and unlocked a hidden panel, waiting for the walls to slide open.

As always, they took several minutes to slide apart—a safety precaution to convince a stranger that this was simply a wall and nothing more. When they finally made a beeping sound and gave way, I unlocked another panel that revealed all the things I hardly ever wanted to face.

On the top shelf stood every model plane I’d ever built as a child. From the simple five piece wooden types to the intricate, three-hundred-piece metal constructions. Dated postcards from countless countries sat untouched in a plethora of bound notebooks, and trinkets from nearly every airport gift-shop sat in the order that they’d been received.

I picked up the navy blue photo album from the bottom shelf and flipped through the first few pages. I wanted to believe that enough time had passed that I would feel nothing, but the pain and betrayal still cut deep, no matter how happy the memories. There I was at four years old, playing in an open field with a collection of paper planes. Me and my older brother at fifteen, playfully arguing about whose turn it was to drive our father’s Cadillac. My mother smiling against the sunset for no reason, and my father—

I shut the book.

I didn’t want to consider remembering what he was doing. I was sure it wasn’t what I thought it was anyway. I tossed the album onto the floor of the hidden case and locked it up as a familiar, haunting voice

played in my head.

“*He lied to you, Jake...He lied to all of us...*”

I needed to focus my attention on something else.

I returned to the kitchen and flipped through the mail. All of this weeks’ newspapers were neatly stacked and waiting to be read. There was *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the most ruinous one of them all—*The New York Times*.

All of them were running variations of the same story across their front pages, harping praise and acclaim toward Elite Airways. The accompanying pictures were all white and sky blue, the words all written in a bloated black with phrases like, “Elite Ascends to New Altitudes!” “CEO of Elite Airways Flies High, Soars!” and “Elite Brings Back the Glory Days of Flying!”

There was no criticism, no journalistic analysis, not the slightest hint of critique. It was all an infallible farce, and after reading through all their bullshit, I knew there was no way I was going to get through my first full month of flying for them without fucking losing it.

A week later, I sat across from the Chief Hiring Director at Emirates Air in Dubai, watching him tap his pen in annoying fashion as he looked over my paperwork.

“Very impressive, Mr. Weston...” He flipped a page. “Even more impressive...” He’d repeated those same five words over the past hour and I was considering getting up and leaving the room.

“Well, Mr. Weston—er Jake.” He finally looked up. “Can I call you Jake?”

“*Mr. Weston* will suffice.”

“Fair enough.” He set the papers down. “I’m honestly in awe of your previous service, sir, but I have a few reservations about hiring you here.”

“I’m listening.”

“Well, for one, we’d have to pay you on a senior captain’s salary which is far less than what you were earning at Signature.”

“How much is far less?”

“It would be half,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “And Emirates is the highest luxury line in all of commercial travel right now. Well, we *were* until Elite, but you honestly don’t strike me as the ‘do anything and everything to make the passengers happy’ type.”

“That’s because I’m a pilot, not a goddamn customer service agent.”

“And lastly.” He slid the papers back to me. “As much as I despise Elite for being what they are, I respect them for what they’re doing.”

“What exactly *are* they doing?”

“Getting people excited about flying again,” he said, turning on the massive TV screen on the other side of the room. “The aviation industry has never been better.” He pointed to the TV. “Have you seen their newest commercial? It’s very vintage and very original.”

I looked at the TV screen, watching it unfold. In grey scale, several flight attendants dressed in navy blue dresses and blazers walked arm and arm with a captain in the center. They all laughed and smiled as Frank Sinatra’s “Come Fly with Me,” played in the background.

Onlookers waved at them as they walked through the terminal hallways, down the jet bridge and onto a plane. The commercial cut to the flight attendants serving a five course meal in first class, then to the pilot flying over a sparkling blue sea.

Seconds later, the CEO of the company—a man with graying hair and a soft smile, stood outside of LaGuardia International with a white Boeing 737 in the background.

“Fly with the best fleet!” He waved his hand across the sky. “Fly with Elite!”

Then the words, “Bring back the good days of flying” appeared.

The screen went black and the hiring director stood up and clapped as if he hadn’t just watched a commercial from his competitor.

“That was actually pretty good, don’t you think?” he asked. “It was a perfect pitch.”

“Look.” I’d had enough of this shit. “You don’t strike me as the stupid and gullible type, and I know damn well you’re aware that everything Elite does is a twisted rip-off of the old Pan Am.”

He was silent, but he smiled.

“That said, I hope *I* don’t strike you as the stupid and gullible type either, so you need to tell me the real reason you’re not hiring me on the spot since I know you’re lying about the pay grade, and I’m more qualified than most of the people who are currently flying for you.”

“Okay...” He looked slightly uneasy. “It’s because you’re overqualified.”

“Try again.”

“Did I give you the budgeting reason yet?”

I stood up and took my paperwork. “Thank you for wasting my time.”

“Wait, wait.” He walked over to me. “Look, as much as I want to stick it to Elite and take half of their staff like they did to me ten years ago, the rules are different now.” He opened the door. “Besides, the second I had my assistant call to get your records, they sent over your employment contract.”

“I’m not following.”

“You have a five year non-compete and non-transfer clause. Every new pilot they hire does.” He shrugged. “Not only that, but I received a not-so-nice email from the director herself minutes before you arrived here today. She said that meeting with you would be a waste of *my* time. Something about an ‘FCE’? Whatever the hell that means. There’s nothing I can do for you, Mr. Weston. I’m sorry.”

“As am I.” I shook his hand. “Thank you.” I walked away before he could say another word, heading out to the parking lot and into my rental car.

Emirates was the final airline on my list of last-resort transfer options, the last place on my upcoming schedule of stopovers I planned to visit. There was now no one else I could call.

Refusing to think about it for the rest of the day, I pulled out my phone and noticed I had four new text messages from women on upcoming layovers. Messages that promised sex that I surprisingly didn’t feel like entertaining.

The only woman I honestly wanted to fuck right now was Gillian and that was a problem.

I’d never thought about a woman for more than a few minutes after sex. Even if I walked them back to their hotel room or saw them the next night due to an extended layover, the thoughts of our sex ended as soon as we were done.

So, I had no idea why my unwanted thief of a roommate was still on my mind days later. Regardless of the fact that she was undeniably stunning with jet black hair, almond shaped eyes, and sultry smile that sealed the deal, my current thoughts of her weren’t adding up.

Then again, maybe it had something to do with her smart ass mouth and backward logic. The way she actually believed she was doing me a favor by sneaking into my apartment.

Unable to shake the thought of her away, I scrolled down my list of contacts and called the Housekeeping Director’s direct line.

“Yes, Mr. Weston?” He answered on the first ring. “Are you calling to tell me that we need to search for ghosts in your apartment?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m looking for someone.”

“Have you tried Facebook?”

“It’s one of your employees.”

“Oh.” His tone immediately went soft. “Well, you know I’m not allowed to disclose names on my end, so do you already know which one it is?”

Something told me to hold back on her name. “The green-eyed girl.”

“Sir, we employ quite a few green-eyed girls.”

“This one has a smart ass mouth and a tendency to steal things.”

“One of my employees stole something from you?” He gasped. “Give me the dates and times you first realized that things were gone. I can cross check every past schedule and make sure that whoever it is, is punished severely. Can you tell me exactly what was stolen?”

“No...” I realized this wasn’t going to go anywhere. “Thank you for your time.”

“Mr. Weston, what exactly—”

I hung up and started the car. I needed to get a grip on myself. I didn’t chase women, ever. I never had a need to, and I wasn’t going to start now.

Our fucking was simply memorable, and I’d forget about her eventually.

I always did.

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Two years ago...

I got fired today.

F.I.R.E.D.

F.I.R.E.D.

The second I walked through the revolving glass doors, I spotted my boss standing at the main desk with his arms crossed, biting the stem of his glasses. Some of my coworkers were staring at me in disgust from the glass doors above, and a security guard was holding a box of all my belongings.

“Well, I honestly never thought I’d say these words to you, Miss Taylor,” my boss said the words slowly, as if they were causing him physical pain. “I’m going to have to let you go.”

“For *what*?”

“You know for what.” He shook his head. “You know exactly for what. I need you to hand over your badge, and know that, as of today, you’re no longer welcome on this property.”

I stepped back and held my hand over my laminated namesake, not willing to give it up.

“You don’t think I have a right to be pissed off about what happened?” I asked. “A right to be angry?”

“You have a right to feel however you want to feel, Gillian. You don’t have the right to react the way you did. Do you have any idea the damage you’ve caused?”

“The truth is *never* damage...”

“It is when the lie is more compelling.” He clenched his jaw. “And when no one asked you to insert your feelings—regardless of how you think this situation affects you.”

“It more than affects me.” My throat constricted and I tried not to cry.

Warm tears fell down my face and I begged him to reconsider. I said that I was sorry, that I didn’t mean to do what I’d done. I promised to make it up to everyone. I even offered to demote myself to the lowest of interns, but it wasn’t enough.

His mind and his boss’s boss’s mind had already been made up.

“We had to report it to other institutions,” he said softly. “I wouldn’t waste my time applying to our competitors, if I were you. At least not for the next five to ten years, okay? It takes a while for people to forget this type of thing.”

“Did you at least report the other person? The other person who’s actually at fault?” I was sniffing, trying not to cause too big of a scene.

“No, Gillian.” He gave me a short hug. “The only person in the wrong was *you*.” He wished me all the best, and then ordered the security guard to take my badge and escort me out of the building...

I’m currently typing this post inside of a Park Avenue Starbucks—shivering and soaking wet from a sudden summer rain, and I’m trying my best to figure out where the hell I’m going from here. What I’m going to do next.

My final paycheck has been expedited and is supposed to arrive in my mailbox tomorrow. My name will be delisted from the company's website, and everything I contributed will be washed over and repurposed.

So, just like that, at age twenty-five, my so-called dream of a life is over.

I'll need to find some new dream to obsess over and pursue, and maybe one day I can go back to my old dreams.

The only things I know for sure are that my days of living in an apartment on Lexington Avenue are long gone, that daily espressos and lattes are now unaffordable and absurd, and that I'm going to have to find a new job (or two) ASAP if I want to stay afloat in New York City.

Write later...

Actually, no. I won't. This is the last post I'll write here for a very long time.

Gillian
GT

****Taylor G.****

1 comment posted:

KayTROLL: What you did was not only hurtful, but it was also selfish, immature, and incredibly STUPID. Did you really think that you wouldn't get fired for doing something like that? I saw what you were plotting before you deleted it Tuesday, and I thought you'd know better than to go through with it. At least you're only 25. You have plenty of time to grow the fuck up. Grow. The. Fuck. Up!

GATE A6

GILLIAN

New York (JFK)

Jake's demanding words played in my mind for the umpteenth time as my fingers strummed my swollen clit, as I orgasmed for the third time since the night he fucked me. My nipples hardened as a cold draft of night air blew against them, so I pulled the blanket over my body and rolled over. I tightened my grip around my pillow, envisioning Jake taking me all over again, but just as I was about to replay our night all over again, my cell phone rang.

I didn't bother looking to see who it was. I groped its frame and hit the side key to silence it.

Minutes later, it rang again and I groaned—silencing it once more. It was no use. It rang again—sounding even louder this time, and I forced myself to look at the screen. Unknown number.

“Hello?” I didn't attempt to hide the annoyance in my voice.

“Why aren't you at the airport, Miss Taylor?”

“*What?*” I sat up. “Who is this?”

“This is scheduling with Elite Air.” She hissed. “And unless I have the wrong number for Gillian Taylor, which, I'm sure I don't, I need you to answer me. *Now*. Why aren't you at the airport?”

“I'm not...” I hit my lamplight and glanced at my alarm clock. It was only five in the morning. “I'm not scheduled to fly out until Thursday. A turn to Philly and then Reagan International.”

“No, you *are* scheduled.” She snapped. “For a very important meeting. We sent you two emails this weekend, updated your employee portal, and left a voicemail yesterday regarding the change.”

I swallowed. I'd thought nothing of those normal update emails, deleting them as soon as they appeared. I started thinking of possible excuses I could give as to why I hadn't listened to them or bothered to check my status for an entire weekend, but the woman on the line beat me to it.

“You have an hour to get to JFK,” she said, “Come in uniform to the conference room in terminal six.” She hung up without another word.

Fifty minutes later, I pushed my way to the front of the city bus and nearly ran into a family of four attempting to get inside the airport. I headed straight for the crew line at security—holding up my badge as the TSA agents waved me through.

Please don't let me be late. Please don't let me be late...

I rushed from terminal to terminal, adjusting my neck scarf with every step, frantically counting down the seconds in my mind. By the time I made it to the conference room, I had exactly one minute to spare.

There were twenty other flight attendants inside, all dressed in the same Elite Airways issued navy blue blazers and skirts. Every set of lips was stained in the same shade of Chanel red, every bun was

perfectly coifed and positioned to the right, and every wrist bore the official glittering bracelet with the company's signature charms: A white dove and a globe.

I spotted an empty seat near the back of the room and made my way over. Before I could ask the girl next to me if she'd received a phone call this morning as well, the door opened and a beautiful African American woman walked into the room.

Dressed in a form fitting navy blue dress and dark grey heels, she flipped her long, wavy hair over her shoulder and glanced at her watch. Her hazel eyes scanned the room as she took her place at a centered podium. Her lips were stained in a light pink, and from the way she smiled her set of pearly whites, she reminded me of the picture perfect models in all the Elite Airways commercials.

She took a folder out of her bag and looked directly at us. "Good morning, welcome to the meeting, and shut the hell up."

The room fell silent.

"My name is Alicia Connors and I am a fifteen-year veteran and senior purser for Elite Airways," she said. "I've been flying for the airline since I was fresh out of college, and although I enjoy it very much, this is honestly the one part of my job that I couldn't care any less about. That said, since I am the only flight attendant here who has ever—" She suddenly stopped talking and stared at something across the room.

Taking a deep and exaggerated breath, she walked over to a woman in the front row and tapped her on the head. "Excuse me. You. Yes, *you*. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I was..." The woman's face turned red as she looked up. "I was sending one last text to my boyfriend."

"In the middle of me talking?"

"I..."

"Does your boyfriend cut your checks at this airline?" Miss Connors asked. "Is he the one holding this meeting right now?"

"I'm...I'm sorry..."

"Yes, you *are* sorry." She snatched the woman's cell phone and held it up to her face, reading the text aloud. "Hey, baby. As soon as you get out of your meeting, have your pussy ready for me. Make sure it's soaking wet..." She shook her head. "Yes, I can definitely see why this message was far more important than what I had to say."

She tossed the phone into the trash can and rolled her eyes. "You are on my shit list for the rest of this session," she said. "And since your sexting was so important, you've just cost this entire class my very interesting and in-depth background story that would've landed you on my good side. At least, temporarily."

"I really am sorry."

"*Save it.*" She rolled her eyes. "Mindless repetition does not impress me." She returned to her place at the center of the room and silently counted us, writing a few words down on her clipboard. "Does anyone have any idea why you were asked to be here today?"

She looked around the room, but no one raised a hand. "Interesting. You're here because you're the least important employees we currently have on the payroll. You are the bottom feeders and the trolls, but since we have successfully completed the buyout of three mid-sized airlines, we are finally upgrading last year's pond scum from reserve attendants to full time flight attendants."

There was a brief buzz of excitement that filled the room—a couple of whispered yeses, a few murmurs of "Finally..."

"Within the next ten days," she said, "If you're interested in staying with us, you'll receive an updated line, i.e. your new schedule that will tell you when and where you'll be flying over the next few weeks. And before you ask, yes, I'm more than aware of how scheduling is done at other airlines, but this is *not*

other airlines, so spare me your thoughts and unwanted opinions. If you have another job, I suggest you put in your notice to quit it ASAP. You won't have time to hold it anymore. Any questions?"

A few hands flew into the air.

"Good. No questions." She shrugged. "Unfortunately, due to some recent events and incidents I'd not care to discuss, all flight attendants are being retrained on every single aircraft in our fleet. To streamline this process, each of you will be paired with a designated senior flight attendant for the next few months who will share your same line. These months will serve as your full-time probationary period. Any questions about that?"

More hands flew into the air.

"Good to know." She hit the lights and tapped the wall, forcing a screen to slowly drop down from the ceiling. The airline's white globe logo appeared onscreen, and then the words, UNOFFICIAL REMINDERS, appeared in bold.

Without prefacing anything, she clicked through all of the slides—speaking so fast that I could hardly understand what she was saying.

"Skip, skip, skip," she said, passing slide after slide. "This rule is common sense, this one should be common sense, and this one is not common sense, but if you're foolish enough to break this rule, you deserve to be fired. Skip, skip, skip."

Uneasy murmurs filled the room and the girl next to me whispered, "Is she being serious right now?"

"And lastly," Miss Connors said, pausing as she skipped through at least twenty other slides. "Don't shit where you eat. This goes for affairs with the baggage boys, trysts with the gate agents, and *especially* the pilots. We have enough Cockpit Connies and cheaply made Hallmark Channel movies about that sad little scenario to last us a lifetime. And besides..." She hit the lights and the screen slowly returned to its position. "As you should already know, it's against company policy as of eight years ago. No relations between employees are ever permitted, and if you don't like it, go fly for Southwest Airlines. In closing, you can read the file you'll receive via email later for all the fine print on that. Last chance, are there any questions?"

Everyone raised their hands, including me.

"Wow..." She looked around the room and raised her eyebrow. "After that entire, informative presentation, no one has anything they want to ask? Nothing at all?"

Our hands were still clearly in the air.

"Well, that's all I have to say today," she said, looking at her watch, "Please be sure to check your employee portals later today for a file that recaps everything you learned today. Also, sign this clipboard on your way out. You will be paid a four hour per diem for today's meeting, even though we're leaving early. "

No one made a move, and she crossed her arms. "Hurry up and sign my damn paper so I can go home and enjoy the rest of my day."

We quickly pushed up our chairs and formed a line.

I overheard a few people asking her questions as they signed the clipboard, and she sounded as if she was actually answering them. When it was my turn, I grabbed the pen and cleared my throat—attempting to make eye contact.

"Miss Connors?" I asked.

"Sign the paper."

"I have an important question." I waited until she was looking at me. "My other job has been great and really flexible with me, and I really think that I owe them a full two weeks' notice. I know you said we start within the next ten days, but is there any way I could have a four-day extension on starting full-time so I can do the right thing?"

“Of course.” She nodded. “I will do everything in my power to tell a billion-dollar airline that we should hold off on the final process of a years-in-the-making merger for one replaceable employee who wants to do the right thing for her *other* job.”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m just saying that I feel like I owe them a more advanced notice.”

“Sign the paper and step out of the room. *Now.*”

“Miss Connors, I’m just—”

“You have half a second to sign my paper or else I’ll be giving you an advanced notice about your loss of *this* job.”

I signed the paper and quickly left the room.

“Well, I can honestly say that I’m going to miss having you as an employee, Gillian.” Mr. Sullivan shook my hand hours later. “You’re always welcome to pick up flex hours on the weekends if the airline decides to give you inconsistent hours again.”

“Thank you very much.”

“You’re still working today though, right?” His glasses slid down his nose. “Jacqueline and Maria are still out sick.”

“Absolutely.”

“Good.” He opened his drawer and handed me a brown paper gift-box. “This is for you. The resident in 80A said he wanted to ‘express his gratitude’ to the employee who cleaned his room the most.”

“Really?”

“Really.” He shrugged. “But right after bringing me this, he signed off on banning our services from ever entering his unit again.”

“I’m sorry.” I tugged at the thin, pink ribbon that was tied around the box. “I hope it wasn’t something I did.”

“I highly doubt that, Gillian,” he said. “Anyway, the assignment lists were redone over the weekend, so be sure to take a look. I need you on mailroom duty for an hour or two. Then floors 65 and 72. Oh, and —” He paused as his office phone rang. “Don’t forget to tell HR what your official last day will be before you go.”

I gave him an understanding nod as he answered his phone, and walked away. I locked myself into the employee changing room and quickly slipped out of my Elite uniform and into The Madison’s required khaki pants and short-sleeved white polo shirt.

Stocking my cleaning cart with supplies, I glanced at the new assignment board and noticed that a huge red “X” had been marked over unit 80A. There was a note written next to it: *Resident will be hiring his own private service. Was adamant about canceling ASAP for some reason. DO NOT CLEAN.*

I shook my head and set the brown gift box on top of my cart. I debated whether I should wait until I was off to open it, but I couldn’t resist.

I tore off the paper and saw a box full of my belongings, small things I’d left at his place: A pink coffee mug, white slippers, a hair brush, and a romance novel. The only new things inside were a brand new crossword puzzle titled, “Gratitude” and a small white envelope.

Opening the envelope, I pulled out the small white index card and read the handwritten note:

You’re welcome.

—Jake.

I rolled my eyes and pushed my cart out into the lobby. I waved to the staff at the front desk as I passed by and headed toward the mail room.

Even though I was somewhat sad about leaving this job, I was ecstatic to finally have a job that could offer me a full forty hours a week. Even more ecstatic that I would finally get a chance to work flights that were more than an hour or two and stay at much nicer hotels.

I pressed the “up” button on the elevator and leaned against my cart as the numbers on the overhead lit up on the way down.

Is it stopping on every floor?

Groaning, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and noticed there was a new notification. A new comment on the blog I hadn’t written on in years. I opened it and saw it was the same asshole who always commented, KayTROLL.

KayTROLL: No more blogs? No more interesting tid-bits from your woe-is-me life? I was hoping to hear a “I’ve finally grown up years later” post...That or a grand apology. Unless you’ve died...Have you died?

Ugh...

I put my phone away, not wanting to engage in that part of my old life. Even though I’d never received a single positive comment from whoever that person was, I regarded him as a distant friend. A distant friend who took pleasure in treating me like shit, but at least he read everything I once wrote.

The elevator doors ahead suddenly opened and a group of residents walked off all at once. I waited for the last person to step off, until I realized he wasn’t getting off at all.

He was staring at me, looking at me exactly how he’d looked at me that night, beckoning me with his gaze.

I felt every nerve in my body instantly come to life, but I didn’t let it show.

“Are you getting on?” Jake asked, his voice low.

“After you get off, yes.”

“I’m not getting off.” He held the doors open, waiting for him to join him, but I didn’t.

“No, thank you,” I said. “Wrong elevator bank.” I quickly turned away and pushed my cart toward the western elevator bank. I felt him following me, but I didn’t look back.

I hit the up button and kept my gaze forward. When the elevator doors opened, I pulled my cart inside and he stepped right next to me. I pretended to glance at my clipboard and hit five, the floor for the mailroom.

Jake didn’t hit eighty, and the doors closed.

It took everything in me not to look toward him, to keep my face forward the entire ride up, especially since I could feel him staring at me. Especially since I could feel that undeniable, palpable energy between us.

The doors glided open on five and I got off with my cart, telling him, “Have a good day,” but he didn’t stay. He stepped off and followed me down the hallway and into the mailroom.

I picked up a stack of magazines, tossing them into their appropriate bins—feeling Jake on my heels.

“What are you doing?” I finally turned around to face him. “Do I know you?”

His smirk slid into a full blown smile. “Yes, I believe we’ve met pretty recently.”

“I’m not sure sure about that.” I stuttered. “If we did, it must not have been a memorable encounter because I can’t seem to recall it.”

“Would you like a reminder?” He lowered his voice and his gaze veered to my lips. “I’m in a particularly giving mood today.”

“No,” I said, inhaling the scent of his cologne as he stepped closer. “There’ll be no need for a reminder.”

“What about the need for a repeat?” He closed the gap between us. “Surely that answer would be different.”

“Actually, it wouldn’t be...”

“And why is that?”

“It just wouldn’t be.” I immediately walked away from him, to the side of the room that held the individual mailboxes. I started checking off the boxes that had “package arrived” stickers and I felt him step behind me, felt him gently tugging my hair and mimicking the rough rhythm of when he’d tugged it that night.

“Turn around,” he whispered, and I spun around without any hesitation.

He stared at me with those smoldering blue eyes and pressed a hand against my cheek. “Did you get my present?”

“That wasn’t a present.”

“Me not pressing charges was the present. The box was a reminder of how generous I’m being about not reporting you.”

“Well, thank you for returning all of the things that originally belonged to me...Although, now that I think about it, you didn’t return my panties.”

“I’m keeping those.”

“As a souvenir?”

“As a reward. What time do you get off today?”

“I’m sorry, sir.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’m not allowed to give out my employee information, and since I get paid by the hour, I really need to get to work.”

“Then whose room are you stealing today?”

“No one’s. I’m a changed employee.”

“I highly doubt that.” He smiled, ignoring my poor attempt to blow him off. His lips brushed against mine and slowly leaned forward, using his hips to pin me against the mailboxes.

He trailed his finger against my lips. “You haven’t thought about me fucking you?”

“No.”

He stared right into my eyes. “Tell me you haven’t gone to sleep dreaming of me filling your pussy with my cock for hours and I’ll leave you alone right now.”

I swallowed, unable to say a word.

“I thought so.” He leaned forward to press his lips against mine—to render me helpless all over again, but I turned my head and moved out of his grasp.

“Today is one of my last days working here, so regardless of the fact that I may have thought about having sex with you again, I would like to spend my final hours without seeing you. And since the resident in 80A cancelled his services, I’m pretty sure that’s possible.”

“It’s not.” He stepped in front of me again, calling my bluff. “Where are the cameras in this room?”

“What?”

He looked like he was seconds away from fucking me on the spot. “Where are the cameras in this room?”

I stood still, completely blank, trying to avoid the fact that my panties were wet and my nipples were tender—begging to be sucked between his lips again.

“Gillian...” He glared at me. “Where are the cameras?”

I tilted my head to the side. “Top corner and above the door.”

“None on the right side?”

I shook my head and he grabbed my hand, pulling me past the mailboxes and into the corner.

My back slammed against the wall and he yanked the elastic band from my ponytail, forcing my hair to fall to my shoulders. Our mouths met in a frenzy—lips wet and fighting for control.

As he bit my bottom lip, he grabbed my hand and placed it on his belt, silently commanding me to unbuckle it. His hands quickly unfastened my khakis and he let me go for a few seconds, long enough for him to whisper, “Step out of your pants.”

I managed to get one pants leg off and watch him roll a condom over his cock before his lips crashed against mine again.

Shutting my eyes, I surrendered all control to him—letting his mouth tame mine.

He grabbed my right leg and lifted it around his waist, biting the skin of my neck. His cock was right at my entrance when the sound of the metal doors opening filled the room.

“Jake...” I tried to put my leg down, but he held it taut.

“What?”

“Someone’s about to come in here.”

“And?”

“They might see us.”

“Good.” He pushed into me with one deep stroke, making me cry out in a mix of pain and pleasure.

“Ahhh...” I whimpered, clawing at the skin of his neck. “Fuck.”

Ignoring my moans, he squeezed my ass and lifted my other leg around his waist—gripping my thighs to move me up and down his cock.

“As you can see...” A female voice suddenly filled the space with the sound of shoes against marble not too far behind. “If you choose to stay here, you’d have access to countless amenities.”

I bit Jake’s shoulder, trying to make him aware, but he kept thrusting into me, squeezing my ass even harder.

“I hear them...” he whispered against my mouth. “I don’t care.”

His mouth briefly covered mine in a searing kiss, and I dug my nails into his skin.

“Our building—every unit actually, is cleaned and maintained by Spring Clean Associates, and if you live here, you’ll have a direct line to them whenever you need something. You’ll also have access to this private mail room.”

My pussy throbbed against Jake’s cock and I felt myself seconds away from losing control, seconds away from screaming out.

“Do you hear something?” A male voice said behind the package counter.

“No, not really.” The realtor said flatly. “What does it sound like?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Ah...” I let a small murmur escape my lips and Jake stamped his mouth over mine as my body shook against his. He muffled every moan—holding me taut as I came and gave in.

The sound of the footsteps walking in the opposite direction came next, and when we heard the sound of the doors closing, Jake pumped into me a few more times and found his own release.

“Fuck, Gillian...” He breathed. “Fuck...”

Still entwined, the two of us stared at each other, me still soaking wet, his cock still hard and slightly jerking inside of me.

Shaking his head, he kept his hands on my hips and gently pulled me off of him, setting me onto the floor.

Panting heavily, I looked into his eyes for a reaction—searching for what he may have been thinking, but I saw storms swirling in his irises, saw dark grey specks of uncertainties in his bright blue. I saw

potential moments like this one, words spoken that meant nothing, and most importantly, I saw pain. For the both of us.

Without saying a word, he pressed my elastic band into my hand and stepped back.

Avoiding his gaze, I slipped my left leg into my khakis and picked up one of my fallen earrings. I leaned against the corner and waited for him to walk away, but he simply zipped his pants and stared at me.

“This can’t happen again,” I said finally.

“I’m sure.”

“I’m serious. You can’t have my phone number.”

“I don’t recall asking for it.” He tilted my chin up with his fingertips. “I was saying I’m sure because I definitely agree with you. This doesn’t need to ever happen again.” He stepped back and adjusted his belt, keeping his eyes on mine.

I stared at him as he smoothed his shirt, as he walked back into the sight of the cameras. Then, as if he hadn’t just fucked me against the wall, he uttered a mere “Goodbye, Gillian,” and headed out of the room and toward the elevators.

All of a sudden, something came over me and I followed him into the hallway.

“Wait,” I said, and he immediately stopped and looked over his shoulder.

“Yes?”

“I have a very good reason as to why I said this can’t happen again, but…”

“But *what?*”

The elevator doors opened.

“What’s yours?” I asked.

“My reasoning?” He crossed his arms. “I actually have three.”

“Care to share?”

“One, no pussy is that good for me to want to continue to fuck it more than a few times in a row. Including yours. Two, you strike me as the ‘want a boyfriend’ type and three, see my previous number one.”

“Fuck you, Jake.” I stepped closer to him as he stepped into the elevator, hating that he made me so argumentative. “For the record, the sex with you was just okay. I’ve had much better, so much better.”

“No, you fucking haven’t.”

“I have, and you know what? Now that I never have to see you in person again, I think I should bring someone back to your place tonight so you and your excess of security cameras can have plenty of video footage for how it’s really done.”

“Fucking try me, Gillian.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Bring someone up to my condo and fucking *try me.*”

“I will, Jake. *I will.*”

“Stop talking.” His lips touched mine. “Stop talking right now.”

“You first.” I moved back as the elevator doors began to close. “I hope to never see you again, Jake.”

“You *won’t*, Gillian.”

**TERMINAL B:
BOY CHARMS GIRL**

GATE B7

JAKE

New York (JFK)—> Montreal (YUL)—> Dallas (DAL)

Four weeks later...

Out of all the cities I'd flown to over my lifetime, New York was the only one that managed to look different every time. No matter the season, no matter the time of day, its grey and imposing skyline cut through fog, rain, and snow, forever changing. And as I looked at Manhattan's glittering buildings from my window tonight, I wondered what would change next.

Utterly restless, I was bullshitting—laying in my bed and attempting to occupy my mind with something other than Gillian. For nearly a month, she'd managed to leave an imprint on my mind with her smart-ass mouth and argumentative ways. With her undeniable, addictive sex.

Thoughts of her were invading my nights and crossing my mind at the most random moments. They were getting so out of hand, that last week I could've sworn I saw her in Terminal A at Atlanta-Hartsfield International, but I'd walked away, knowing that it was simply my imagination getting the best of me.

Instead of meeting up with the various women I knew in layover cities, I was changing my mind at the very last minute—canceling hotel reservations and avoiding scheduled rendezvous. My nights in stopover hotel rooms were spent filling crossword puzzles instead of pussy, pursuing google searches instead of orgasms. All because the one woman I *needed* to fuck was somewhere I couldn't find, because I wanted *that* type of sex again.

With the women in my phone, I knew exactly what I was getting—knew exactly how the sex would begin and end, but the two times with Gillian were far more unpredictable. Far more memorable and enjoyable, too.

Groaning, I got out of bed and walked down the hallway, stopping once I caught sight of my living room. My television was flung across the floor, face down; the metal on its sides completely twisted and mangled. Shards of my shattered glass coffee table glistened from the grey area rug, and a few shot glasses lay in pieces on the couch.

I sighed and stepped around the crime scene carnage, immediately dialing Jeff.

"Yes, Mr. Weston?" he answered on the first ring.

"I need a replacement television and a coffee table brought here tomorrow."

"You broke them again?"

"No, I woke up and they were already broken. I may need to file a police report..."

"Very funny, sir. That's the sixth time this month, twelfth time this year."

"You're counting?"

“Someone has to,” he said, heaving a sigh. “I take that to mean that your sleeping problems are not getting better like you claimed last week?”

“This phone call is about the TV and the coffee table, Jeff. Not my sleeping problems.”

“I’ll have them fix the material things as always, Mr. Weston. But I’ll have you know that as your doorman and personal confidante, I sent you some helpful therapy brochures via mail. I would like you to consider them, for me.”

“Fine.” I rolled my eyes and walked into the kitchen, thumbing through a stack of envelopes. “When exactly did you send them? The only thing I have is junk mail and bills from a while back.”

“Three weeks ago.” He sounded confused. “You should’ve received them by now. They weren’t in your mailbox?”

I stopped thumbing through my mail and sighed. I hadn’t returned to the mailroom since the time I ran into Gillian.

“You can’t possibly think it’s the mailman who goes through all that trouble...”

“I’ll take a look at them tomorrow, Jeff. Thank you.” I hung up.

I knew the cold sweats and the need to wake up and break things was intensifying by the week, but I didn’t need a therapist to tell me the obvious reason why they were getting worse. The diagnosis was quite clear: Lack of fucking.

I opened a Coke and poured it into a glass, waiting for the fizz to settle. But before I could take a sip, I spotted a row of death out the corner of my eye.

My perennials.

Jesus...

Forcing another thought of Gillian and her long rant out of my mind, I filled a tea kettle and watered all of them—making a mental note to hire someone to do this for me whenever I was away flying. Someone who wouldn’t illegally stay the night.

When I was finished, I grabbed my phone, determined to meet up with someone, *anyone*, this week to finally get her and her pussy off my mind. I swiped my finger across the screen and noticed a slew of unread text messages that were more than two or three days old.

Atlanta—Nina: *You flying my way at all this month?*

Memphis—Penelope: *You never showed up Friday...You okay?*

Los Angeles—Sarah: *Did you stand me up on purpose? I thought we agreed to meet here six weeks ago...*

Dallas-Nicole: *Hey, it’s been awhile. You still flying?*

I started to respond to all of their texts with new dates and locations, estimated times I would be in their respective cities, but I couldn’t do it. At least, not right now, anyway.

I gave in and dialed Jeff.

“Hello again, Mr. Weston. What do you need *now*?”

“I need your help.”

“That’s a given, sir. You are a sad, sad soul. I take it you opened some of my brochures.”

“Fuck your brochures.” I heard him laughing. “I need you to help me find someone who used to work here as a housekeeper, but I don’t want to go through the manager. I need to know where she currently works.”

“Should I assume that this person is a woman?”

“Since I said the word ‘*she*’, I think that would be a pretty accurate assumption.”

“Should I also assume that this woman’s name is Gillian?”

“No.”

“I thought so.” He laughed. “I’ll tell you exactly where she’s working now. I think I can do that.”

“Right now is a good time to start.”

He laughed harder. “There’s a catch.”

“Do tell.”

“You’ll have to agree to go to at least one consult with a professional therapist, and then I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

I hung up.

I’ll figure this shit out myself...

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

One year ago...

If you ever want to know how to crush someone's spirit, the recipe is fairly simple: One-part unemployment, two (part-time) jobs that won't officially begin for thirty days, and three parts moving into a rundown Brooklyn apartment with a random girl you met off Craigslist.

Stir well. Serve cold.

I never thought I'd say this, but New York City has officially lost its luster for me. That blinding brightness I once admired is now tainted with the darker shades of hopelessness everyone tried to warn me about.

I can't walk down Fifth Avenue without feeling like a failure, and those dazzling dreams I used to dream don't feel like possibilities anymore. They're all daunting delusions of grandeur.

For a split second, I considered returning home to Boston—telling my family that they were right. I thought I could sit in my old room and figure out another direction for my life, all while ignoring their incessant put downs and relentless repeats of 'I told you so'. But yesterday, when my older sister called me and said, "I just bet Dad another thousand that you'll be back by this Christmas."—I decided I'd rather deal with my new hand in life instead of folding.

All of that said, I'm deactivating this blog today. There's no point in blogging for an audience of trolls, or posting things that will only be seen in the far, unvisited corners of the internet.

I probably won't have time to blog anyway. Between being a "domestic engineer" (a nice word for housekeeper) and a floating reserve flight attendant (a nice word for "flying waitress"), I'll be laughing at the irony in all this.

And since my college degree is now practically worthless, and I'm blacklisted from most of the places I'd actually *want* to work, I leave this blog with this:

FUCK YOU.

Fuck you, New York City.

Fuck you, *New York Times*.

Fuck you, you know who you are.

And fuck you, Kennedy.

Fuck. You.

~~Write later~~

Write never,

****Taylor G.****

1 comment posted:

KayTROLL: Who is this audience of "trolls" (plural) that you speak of? I'm still your only fucking follower..

GATE B8

GILLIAN

Portland (PDX) —> Dallas (DAL) —> London (LHR)

The alarm clock in my hotel room sounded at exactly 6:00 a.m., and it took everything in me not to cry and wish that this was some type of joke. With every muscle in my body still aching, and my feet so numb and sore that I could barely feel them anymore, I would've killed for a few more hours of rest. Or at least another assignment...

Being assigned to work the first class cabin at Elite was the ultimate prison sentence, and unless there was some type of divine intervention soon, I was certain I wasn't going to last too much longer.

For four weeks, I'd completed all the over the top wine and cheese services, the five course meals, and the 'check on the first class passengers every twenty minutes' rule as I flew from Portland to Ft. Lauderdale, Seattle to Los Angeles, Atlanta to Beijing, Beijing to New York. Not to mention the numerous stopover and layover cities in between.

I'd rushed through the terminals in the newest set of mandated heels—a full inch higher than before, and forced myself to smile as I encountered the rudest of passengers. Adjusting to the constant time zone changes, I was shocked that I'd managed to keep my frustration under wraps, especially since I'd been paired to work with the one supervisor everyone told me was the worst.

"The Hawk." Miss Connors.

Obsessed with perfection, she scrutinized my every move, monitored my every breath. According to her, the bobby pins in my hair were always "too aligned to the left," my beverage pouring skills "resembled those of a blind waitress," and I was not "worthy" of sharing her line that featured so many "trips of luxury."

She was always around. *Always*. And no matter how many times I tried to do things "The Elite Way," she would insist that I was doing things "the wrong way."

My only reprieve from her came when we checked into our separate hotel rooms. While most of the crew hung out at the hotel bar or left to explore the city, I stayed in my room and collected as many hours of sleep as possible. And no matter how many nights I vowed to dream about something other than Jake, my mind always overruled my intentions.

Images of his kissing and fucking me intruded on my most innocent thoughts, and I still dreamed of the way his lips owned mine. I tried to move on, to take Meredith's advice and "try someone else," but no other man quite compared. The attraction was only half as intense, the sexiness of the conversations never came close.

After my alarm sounded for a full five minutes, I rolled across the mattress and turned it off. Then I grabbed the room phone and dialed zero.

"You've reached the front desk at the Dallas Airport Marriott!" a woman answered on the first ring. "How may I help you this morning?"

“Could I have a few more coffee pods?”

“Absolutely!” She was too cheery for this time of day. “Decaf or regular?”

“Regular.”

“I’ll have someone send it right on up!”

I wrapped myself into one of the hotel’s robes and sat in the corner chair, preparing to slowly wake up and spend the few hours before my next flight watching mindless television, but my older brother’s name suddenly came across my phone’s screen.

I hesitated before answering, not sure whether I should talk to him this early or not.

Brian wasn’t as bad as my sisters or my parents, but he never stood up for me either. He would laugh at their put-downs, but offer me a sympathetic smile right after. He’d fill me in on his life—with no air of arrogance at all, but he would never even try to act as if I was working toward something good in my own life.

Before his call could go to voicemail, I took a deep breath and answered. “Hey, Brian, what’s going on?”

“What’s going on? What’s *going on!*”

Ugh...

It wasn’t Brian at all. It was my oldest sister, Claire.

“I’ve called you two times a day—every day for the past two weeks, Gillian. And not only have you refused to return the calls or even considered the thought of texting back, you answer right away for Brian. I wonder why that is...”

“Probably because Brian isn’t a bitch...”

“What did you just say?”

“Nothing.” I cleared my throat. “Is something wrong?”

“Brian changed his mind about the proposal. Instead of doing it here at home, he’s going to propose to her in New York since that’s where they met, and he really wants you to be there. So, make sure you’ve taken off from your little job, if you haven’t already, and if we can’t find a suitable hotel, we’ll need to stay in that Lexington Avenue apartment you brag about so much. Have I already mentioned that you need to take off from your little job?”

“My job is not *little*, Claire.” I snapped. “It’s quite important.”

“Is it?” She laughed. “Because if it’s *that* important, why isn’t your name listed on the website anymore? Why is it that when I searched for it last week, you weren’t on the list?”

I gritted my teeth, halfway believing the concocted lie myself. “Like I told you before, I was—” I coughed. “I *am* the fifth junior editor in my department. They only list the top three, and for the umpteenth time, being the youngest junior editor in history at *The New York Times* is far from being little.”

“You’re right,” she said, somewhat genuinely. “Me and Amy are studying and searching for cures to well-known viruses, Mia is setting milestones in medicine, Ben is winning every case the courts throw at him, and you...” She sighed. “You’re getting paper cuts and making red-lined marks on articles no one reads. So, I guess you’re right, Gillian. Your job is far from ‘little’ after all. It’s *nothing*.”

“That’s enough, Claire.” My mother was suddenly on the line and I blinked back the angry tears that threatened to fall.

“Gillian, I’m sorry,” my mother said. “We’ve been calling you nonstop once again and we just thought using Brian’s phone this morning was a way to get you to answer. Will it be okay if we have to spend a night or two at your place during his proposal weekend?”

“Depends.” That awful ache that only came when talking to my family resurfaced. “It depends on if you all will stop acting like I’m some type of disappointment.”

“Oh, Gillian...” Her voice was soft. “You *are* a disappointment. But that’s okay. Everyone can’t be great and I love you all the same. It’s not the end of the world if—”

I hung up and blocked all of their numbers. I knew I'd have to unblock them eventually, to also find a way for them not to say at the Lexington Avenue apartment that was mine no longer, but I didn't want to let them ruin my day before it could even begin.

I turned up the volume on the television as a knock came to my door.

"One second!" I stood up and unwrapped my coffee cups before heading toward the door. But when I opened it, I realized it wasn't hotel services with the additional coffee pods. It was Miss Connors.

Fully dressed in her uniform and looking absolutely flawless as always, she was glaring at me as if I was committing some type of crime.

"Um. Good morning?" I double-tied my robe. "Is something wrong?"

"Something is *very* wrong, Miss Taylor." She glanced at her watch. "It is almost seven o'clock."

"Are you upset that hotel breakfast doesn't start until seven thirty?"

"It's almost seven o'clock and you're not downstairs with me, ready and waiting to go to the airport," she said, ignoring my comment. "It's almost *seven o'clock* and you're dressed in a bathrobe and looking as if you have yet to start putting on your makeup."

I was officially confused as hell. "We don't have to be at the airport until ten today, right?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"Telling you..." I tried to keep my voice calm. "The flight isn't until eleven forty-five. And with the airport being literally right down the street, if we left now we'd be four hours early. Three hours ahead of everyone else in the crew."

She stared at me.

I wasn't sure if I should say, "Okay, I'll see you downstairs when it's time," or continue looking rightfully confused.

"Miss Taylor," she spoke before I could come to a decision. "I'm not sure why I have to keep stressing this with you, but I'm going to say this one last time. *I am not everyone else, and since this airline has decided that you are working with me for the next few months, that means that you are not like everyone else. 'On time' is late, early is on time, and getting there when I get there is perfection.*" She crossed her arms. "*I am perfection.* And now, since I've wasted five minutes of my morning on you, you have fifteen minutes to meet me downstairs. Or else I'll write you up and you'll be downgraded to working with another supervisor who only flies to places like Detroit, Chicago, and West Virginia."

I bit my tongue, trying my best to hold back my true feelings about her too-damn-early timing and "perfection."

"Is there something you want to say to me, Miss Taylor?" She tilted her head to the side. "Something other than, 'I love working for Elite,'?"

"No." I forced a smile. "I *love* working for Elite."

"I thought so." She looked at her watch. "Oh, wow. Now you only have thirteen minutes. See you downstairs."

She walked away without another word and I slammed the door closed, screaming all of my frustration into a pillow.

Later that morning, the smell of freshly brewed coffee and bagels wafted through the terminal hallways at Dallas/Ft. Worth International. Passengers stood in long lines, awaiting an early breakfast, and the blue signs that hung high above every gate shone brightly beneath the stark white lights.

I rolled my bag across the floors for the second hour in a row, still searching for random ways to kill the time since the crew lounge was full. With another hour to spare, I darted in and out of various shops, picking up things I had no intention of buying, staring at things I wished I could afford to buy.

I watched passengers as they posed for pictures in front of Dallas Cowboys memorabilia, took the Sky-Link tram around all six of the airport's terminals, and when I couldn't take anymore, I decided to buy something to read.

I slipped inside the Hudson Booksellers in Terminal B and headed straight for the books on the back shelf, the bestsellers. Over the past few weeks, I'd torn my way through tons of them, even trading copies with some of the passengers on the long-haul flights.

Grabbing the latest Grisham, I picked up an overpriced bag of potato chips and stood in line. As I was pulling out my wallet, my phone rang. Meredith.

"Hello?" I answered, handing the cashier a twenty.

"Well, hello there, stranger!" Her voice was unusually high-pitched. "How's life in the skies this week?"

"Exhausting, but I did get you something from Beijing last week. I think you'll like it."

"I'm sure I will. Is The Hawk treating you any better?"

"No." I rolled my eyes at the thought. "She's somehow managed to get even worse. How's the fashion world?"

"Heartless and cutthroat as ever," she said. "I'll fill you in on that later, though. I'm calling because Ben came by last night looking for you. He left a small bouquet of roses and a card. Would you like me to open the card and read it to you?"

"Not really."

"Too late. Already opened it." She cleared her throat. "Dear Gillian, it's been a month since we last spoke and I know that you're upset with me for cheating, but the fact that you haven't even tried to understand my side is a bit unfair. That said, I'm willing and ready to compromise. You can sleep with other people as well (two at most) and we just won't talk about it. We'll focus on us when we're together and leave everyone else out of it when we're apart. Love (Yes, you're reading that part right: LOVE), Ben. PS—What time can I pick you up for makeup sex this weekend?"

"How romantic." I couldn't believe him. "Was that the entire card?"

"Unfortunately." The sound of water running was in her background. "The roses are quite lovely though. I'll keep them in my room. Anyway, have you finally had hot sex with the men in first class yet?"

"No, can't say that I have." I slipped out of the bookstore and headed up the steps to catch the Sky-Link tram. "I'm still getting used to traveling so often, so I haven't had the time."

"Bullshit, Gillian... You're still stuck on that guy you met at the rooftop party, aren't you?"

"What? No, no, it's definitely not that." I didn't even attempt to sound convincing. "The time zones and the first class service is taking a toll on me. That's all."

"Oh, I'm sure." She laughed. "I'll give you one more week to hang on to your fantasies of that guy, but since you're going to be back in New York next week, we're going to get you laid by someone else. ASAP."

"You know, I am so grateful to have a friend like you who keeps my vagina's visitors in her weekly thoughts. Thank you, so, so much."

"You are so, so, welcome," she said. "Oh and one last thing. Your mail is starting to get out of hand again. Winnie the Pooh Bear, Anne of Green Gables, Kennedy B., and Katniss Everdeen sent ten letters *each* this week. I took the liberty of stuffing the envelopes in the corner with the hundreds of others you never open, but seriously, Gillian... There has to be at least a hundred letters all over our place. When are you going to finally do something about that?"

"Depends. When are you going to stop bringing guys home and waking up all of our neighbors with your over the top sex?"

She immediately ended the call, her loud laughter coming right before the beep.

“Now heading to Terminal A. Gates 1-21.” A soft voice came over the speakers as I boarded the tram. “Please hold on and step away from the doors.”

The doors glided shut and the tram lunged forward against the tracks, forcing all aboard to grip the handrails a little tighter, to look up at the gate map and pinpoint how many more stops we’d need to make until we could get on the ground again.

Outside the windows, several airplanes stood still in preparation for a turn on the runway, and ground controllers waved their bright sticks in the air to assist pilots with parking at the gates. Across from me, two lovers held hands and laughed as they complained about airport security, and next to me, a woman shouted into her cell phone about “rude ass gate agents.”

“Now stopping at Terminal C. Gates A21-39.” The tram stopped and I let go of the handrail so I could move to the other side, but as the doors opened, I stopped dead in my tracks.

The man who was now boarding, the man who’d earned the starring role in all of my latest wet dreams, was turning the head of every woman who looked his way. He was staring at his cell phone, completely oblivious to the blushing cheeks and whispers from the onlookers, and I took several steps backwards, moving back to where I’d been.

Confused, I kept my eyes on him, realizing that he looked even sexier now than I remembered. His full lips were pressed into a firm, angry line, and as he tapped his phone’s screen, I couldn’t help but think about how those same fingers had caressed me, how he’d slipped them inside of me.

There was only one problem with how he appeared right now, though. He was a pilot. An actual *pilot*. Dressed in a navy blue uniform, his four gold captain’s stripes stood stiff and bright on his broad shoulders. His blazer was perfectly tailored to his build, not completely hiding the chiseled abs he possessed underneath. And as his free hand gripped a handrail, his hat fell forward, obscuring his beautiful blue eyes.

I blinked a few times, trying to make sense of this, refusing to accept that this wasn’t some sort of mind trick. The more I thought about it though, the more it seemed to add up: He was never home in his condo, didn’t invest too much time into making his space feel too personal outside of those aerial photography pictures, and our first conversation on the rooftop party about the planes made so much more sense now. I just didn’t want it to.

The tram came to a jerky stop when we reached another set of gates, and his eyes remained glued to his phone.

I tried to tear my gaze away from him, to look outside the windows again, but as he clenched his jaw and swiped his screen, I couldn’t help but stare just a little while longer.

More passengers boarded the tram, and as I stole one last glance at him, he looked up and turned his head toward me.

He raised his eyebrow and slowly looked me up and down, his expression shifting from stoic to confused. Then that familiar, cocky smile tugged at his lips.

He let go of the handrail and walked over—gripping the handrail next to me and letting his hand brush against mine. “Hello, Gillian.”

“Gillian?” I feigned surprise. “No, I think you have me confused with someone else.”

“Your name tag says, ‘Gillian,’ *Gillian*.” He smiled even wider, looking at it. “I was also burying my cock inside of your pussy four weeks ago, so I’m pretty sure I don’t have you confused with someone else.”

The woman standing next to us gasped and moved away.

“Did you…” I blushed, in utter disbelief that he’d said that aloud. “Did you really have to say that, Jake?”

“Did you really have to act like you didn’t know me?” He raised his eyebrow. “I rewound my security tapes back from the last time we spoke. I didn’t catch you with the other guy you mentioned, the one who’s

better than me supposedly.”

“It’s not supposedly.”

“It’s definitely *supposedly*.” He still wasn’t whispering. “And a part of me is beginning to think you made him up. In case you’re not, though…” He looked somewhat jealous. “If he was any good at fucking, you would’ve never needed to come home with me.”

The man standing on the other side of me leaned closer.

“He’s not made up, and we decided to meet at a hotel,” I said, lowering my voice. “I decided I didn’t want an audience, decided you didn’t *deserve* to watch.”

“What a shame. I was looking forward to learning what *not* to do.” He stared at me, narrowing his eyes as the seconds passed. “You really need to work on lying, Gillian. You’re not very good at it.”

“I take it that’s your specialty?”

“Lying?”

“*Denying*,” I said. “You’re too cocky to believe that anyone else could possibly be better than you.”

“Only when it comes to one particular department.” He stepped closer as passengers pushed by us to get off at Terminal C. “I would’ve never guessed you to be the flight attendant type.”

“Is that an insult?”

“It’s a compliment.” He paused as the tram rolled on once more, finally whispering. “Your attempt at impersonating a pilot makes perfect sense now.”

“I could say the same about you. You never told me you were a pilot.”

“At what point, between eating your pussy and taking you against the wall, was I supposed to bring that up?”

My cheeks warmed as he closed the gap between us, as he trailed his fingers against my silver flight pin.

“How long have you really been flying?” he asked.

“A year, maybe two. And yourself?”

“Twenty.”

“What?” I swallowed, silently doing the math in my head. He didn’t look any older than thirty, and even that was pushing it. “So, you’re in your early fifties? Late forties?”

Another smile. “Late *thirties*. Where are you headed?”

I didn’t answer. He’d stopped touching my flight pin and was looking at me with the same intensity he did when we first met.

“Do you need to look at your schedule, Gillian?” He leaned forward, whispering into my ear. “I asked where you’re heading.”

“Overseas.”

“Surely you can be more specific than that. What city?”

“London. Where are you headed?”

“*London*.”

The tram rounded the curve as it approached my stop and I checked his blazer for where a tell-tale Elite pin should’ve been if he flew for the same airline, but there wasn’t one. I let out a small sigh of relief.

“Well,” I said, clearing my throat. “My stop is up next. It was *interesting* seeing you again, Jake.”

“Only interesting?”

“Yes. Only interesting.”

He didn’t say anything else, he simply continued staring at me, making me wet without any effort at all.

“Now stopping at Terminal D. Gates 1-22.” The speaker system announced. “Please watch your step.”

Jake walked past me and suddenly stopped, looking over his shoulder. “There’s only one Elite flight heading to London this morning. This is where we need to get off for it, correct?”

My jaw dropped. I couldn’t think or get a single word to fall out of my mouth. I just stared at him as his signature, sexy smile crossed his lips, as he looked at me in the same way he did when he pushed me against his bookcase.

“Since you’re not getting off right now,” he said, stepping off and looking amused. “I’ll see you aboard.”

GATE B9

GILLIAN

In flight—> London (LHR)

“Mimosa on the rocks for 3B, mineral water for 4B, and an orange juice for 4A...” I muttered under my breath as I opened an ice drawer.

I was standing in the galley closest to the cockpit, mixing pre-take-off drinks for the first class passengers. I was trying to pretend that Jake was not the pilot on this flight, that he hadn’t purposely brushed his hand against my waist when we boarded and winked at me, setting my nerves on fire all over again.

This is not happening. This is not happening...

To make matters even worse, when I ventured into the cockpit to ask him and the first officer what they wanted for lunch, I was pretty sure he said, “Is your pussy on the menu?” before coughing and asking for steak and a Coke.

“Miss Taylor?” The sound of The Hawk’s voice made me drop a stack of napkins. I turned around to face her and she frowned, motioning for me to fix my hair.

“Yes, Miss Connors?” I asked.

“Would you like to explain why the passenger in 12C has a glass of Sprite in his hand before takeoff?”

She says this like I have a choice...

“Feel free to answer me any time between now and *right now*, Miss Taylor.”

“He told me he was having stomach pains after eating something spicy,” I said. “I was simply going above and beyond and handling things The Elite Way.”

“No, you were not.” She glanced down the aisle and then narrowed her eyes at me. “Because in The Elite Way, there’s no way in hell that someone in economy has a *glass* before takeoff.”

I gave her a blank stare.

“*Glasses* are for *first class* and they’re not given until we’re in the air. Always. Passengers in economy get a bottled mini water, a smile, and a vomit bag if they’re having ‘stomach problems’ before takeoff. During flights, when we do offer them beverages, they receive *plastic* cups. Surely you learned this in flight attendant training and you’ve shockingly never made this mistake before, so do I really need to go into the numerous safety reasons behind glass and plastic cups during pre-take-off?”

“No, Miss Connors.”

“Good.” She snapped her fingers and pointed down the aisle. “Go get my first-class glass back. *Now.*”

I rolled my eyes and headed down the aisle. With her on this flight, maybe, just maybe, I wouldn’t have too much time to think about Jake at all.

I kindly asked for the glass of Sprite from 12C, replaced it with a plastic cup and finished serving the remaining drinks for first class.

I double checked the manifest for the passengers' dinner requests, made sure the overhead bins were locked shut, and watched the other two flight attendants take their time doing their jobs.

They were supposed to be assisting the last boarding passengers in business and economy, but they kept finding random reasons to come to the front of the plane to step into the cockpit. To ask Jake meaningless questions or "make sure" it was a Coke he wanted to have for a lunch beverage.

"You've flown with him before?" The blonde, a woman who'd introduced herself to me as Elizabeth, whispered.

"I wish." The redhead, Janet, stared straight ahead. "I would *definitely* remember him. Trust me."

"Is he wearing a wedding ring?"

"No. First thing I noticed."

"No tan line where one should be either, just in case?"

Before she could answer, Miss Connors appeared and loudly cleared her throat. "When the two of you get done playing Cockpit Connie, would you kindly return to doing the job you get paid to do?"

The two of them blushed and quickly walked away.

I glanced toward the cockpit as Jake and the first officer looked over their weather reports and vowed not to look anymore once the door was locked.

The second boarding was complete, I completed my checklist and strapped myself into a jump-seat, grateful that this was one of the newer, more luxurious planes. There was no need for all of the flight attendants to stand in the aisle and demonstrate the safety procedures, since every headrest held its own television that played a prerecorded clip.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking..." Jake's deep, sexy voice came over the speakers as we pushed back from the gate and rolled toward the runway. "On behalf of the flight crew, let me welcome you aboard Elite Flight 1505 to Heathrow-London. Our estimated flight time is eight hours and fifty-five minutes, and we expect this to be a very smooth flight," he said. "If there's anything you need during our trip, the flight attendants aboard are here to make you as comfortable as possible. Please sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight."

I waited to hear him say the remainder of the Elite Airways spiel, especially the mandatory "I love flying for Elite and I hope you'll love it as much as I do," but it never came. The only sounds that came next were a beep and the sudden silence that always came before the plane ascended toward the sky.

Shutting my eyes, I tapped my fingers against my dress as the plane flew higher, as the sound of air pressure hitting the metal rushed against my ears. No matter how many times I flew, takeoff was always the most nerve-wracking part for me.

When the plane finally leveled and the seatbelt sign was turned off, I opened my eyes and unbuckled my seatbelt. Knowing Miss Connors would soon be critiquing my every move, I figured I might as well start the wine and cheese service early.

Stepping into the galley, I took out a tray of wrapped gourmet cheeses, nearly dropping them to the ground when I saw Jake standing in front of me. He was staring at me intently, those stark blue irises playful, yet watchful.

"May I help you with something, Captain?" I asked. "It's a bit early in the flight for you to be out here."

"You don't need to call me that." He took the cheese tray from my hands and set it on the counter.

"Are you here because I didn't bring you your Coke yet, *Captain*?" I needed to remain professional. "I'll have to bring it you after the wine and cheese service, or my supervisor won't be happy with me."

"This will only take five minutes."

"I can only give you five seconds."

"Fine." He looked at me. "I need to fuck you again."

"*What?*"

“You heard me.” He stepped close, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “I *need* to fuck you again. Preferably the second we land in London, but I’m not opposed to doing it after you get finished serving either.”

It took everything out of me not to say, ‘After I get done serving would be fine,’ so I swallowed, trying to get my thoughts together. “I thought we both agreed that it couldn’t happen again. Besides, now that we’re in *this* situation, it really can’t happen again. It’s against company policy.”

“You’re the last person who *ever* needs to talk about following company policy.”

“Well then, I’ll just say no thank you. Even if I *was* interested, now that I know you’re a pilot, you couldn’t pay me to sleep with you again. I’m sure you have plenty of other flight attendants at your disposal. Sleep with one of the ones you’ve slept with before.”

“I’ve only slept with one flight attendant,” he said, his eyes on mine. “Although I’m not sure she counts since she lied when we met and told me she was a pilot.”

“Maybe she was just trying to be mysterious.” I could barely hear myself. “Regardless, that doesn’t change the fact that *you’re* a pilot.”

“No, it doesn’t.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “What do you have against pilots? Something you’ve experienced?”

“Something I’ve *heard*.”

The plane shook suddenly and I braced my hand against the wall as the seatbelt sign turned on. I tried to lean forward to grab the cheese tray, but Jake held it still—looking calm as ever.

“Don’t you think you need to return to the cockpit?” I asked. “Or do you not feel the plane shaking right now?”

“It’s only light turbulence. It’ll stop once we get out of the clouds.”

As if on cue, the first officer’s voice came over the speakers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my apologies for the light turbulence you’re currently experiencing. We’re cutting through a patch of clouds, so it should only last a few more seconds at most, and I’ll turn off the seatbelt sign again here shortly. Hope you’re enjoying the flight.”

The beep sounded and Jake’s eyes returned to mine.

“So, back to our conversation about pilots—” His fingers trailed my lips. “What have you heard?”

“A lot...”

“Then tell me,” he said. “Tell me *exactly* what you’ve heard.”

“I’ve heard that pilots can’t be trusted, that your occupation practically calls for each and every one of you to cheat.” I paused as his free hand strummed against my waist. “The ones who aren’t married have a woman in every city and they fuck whoever, whenever they want. They even sleep with some of the passengers from time to time.”

“Is that all?” He pressed his forehead against mine.

“No. No, that is not all.”

“Okay.” He looked as if he was holding back a laugh. “Continue.”

“I’ve also heard that all of you—”

“*Some* of you.” He cut me off. “The word ‘all’ is a bit presumptuous.”

“Fine. *Most* of you are emotionally distant and cold. What you see is what you get. It’s *all* you get. Even the rare pilots, the good guys who almost seem capable of being faithful are...”

“Are what?” he asked. “What have you heard about them?”

“They almost always have a flight attendant for a mistress.” I moved my head back before he could lean in any further. “Is any of that true?”

“If it was,” he said, looking slightly amused, “I would’ve agreed with you. Contrary to your uneven and untrue arguments, a man’s profession has nothing to do with his degree of fidelity.”

I opened my mouth to object, but he pressed a finger against my lips.

“That’s only my first rebuttal,” he said. “Second, if a pilot is single and does have a woman in every city, that shouldn’t be a problem since he doesn’t owe anyone anything. I’ll agree with you on your last point, though. What you see is definitely what you get, but I have no interest in having a flight attendant as a mistress.”

“Too scared your girlfriend will find out?”

“We’ve discussed this.” He pulled me close. “I don’t do girlfriends.” His lips were suddenly on mine, coaxing and warm, then demanding and hot. His teeth punished my bottom lip with a soft bite and I couldn’t help but kiss him back.

Slipping a hand under my dress, he whispered against my mouth. “You don’t want this again?” He tugged at my soaked panties and pressed his thumb against my swollen clit, sensuously rubbing it in circles as he trailed his tongue against my neck.

“No...” I lied, holding back a moan.

Everything around me became a hazy blur as his fingers continued to mercilessly tease me, as his tongue swirled against my exposed skin. I wanted to give in, to admit that he could bring me to pleasure like no one else could, but I knew having him again would only affect one of us.

“Gillian.” His mouth returned to mine. “Say yes to fucking me at landing.”

“No.” I bit his lip and stepped back. “I can’t.”

He looked completely confused. “And why is that?”

“Because if I were to sleep with you again, I’d have to be your only one.”

“My only *what*?”

“The only woman you have sex with.”

“Come again?” He let go of my waist.

“Like I told you before, I don’t normally hookup...The first time we had sex was fine, because it was a one-night stand, but the second time was a mistake.”

“Having multiple orgasms is never a mistake.”

“Maybe, but I’m not the type who would be okay with having sex with you one night, while knowing that you could possibly be having sex with Sally tomorrow.”

“I don’t know any women named Sally.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I honestly don’t.”

“No matter how much you claim that you ‘need’ to fuck me again, and no matter how many times I might’ve thought about it, too...”

“You’ve *definitely* thought about it, too.”

“In spite of that, even though the last thing I want right now is a new relationship—”

“Monogamous fucking sounds *exactly* like a relationship.”

“It isn’t, but the next time I have sex—whenever that is, it will be with someone who’s fucking me and only me. So, if you can’t handle that or agree, you should just walk away.”

He stepped back, and without saying another word, he walked away.

GATE B10

JAKE

In flight—> London (LHR)

I'd heard a lot of bullshit in my life, but "I have to be your only one" might've secured itself in the number one spot.

I stared straight ahead from the cockpit, wondering why the hell this woman I barely knew was having any type of effect on me. Twice, after walking away from her, I'd ventured into the cabin for a restroom break and caught her smiling and entertaining a male passenger. Each one was a Wall Street type.

The asshole in 3A told her a joke about "the mile-high club." She'd laughed at him, and even though I could tell it wasn't genuine, I knew she wasn't lying when she told him she'd never had sex on a plane. The color on her cheeks gave her away.

The asshole in 4C kissed her hand after she brought him a glass of wine. Then he caressed it as he flirted with her for a least three minutes. (I fucking counted.)

I was seconds away from walking over to him and saying something, but I came to my senses at the last minute and returned to the cockpit—vowing to stay put for the rest of the flight.

Her demands for monogamous fucking were unfair and completely unrealistic, but as we coasted through another patch of clouds, I briefly contemplated if an arrangement like that could work. Temporarily, at least.

Yes, I'd been unable to seal the deal with most of the women in my contact list for weeks, but I didn't expect that to last forever. Before running into Gillian on the SkyLink, my London contact was texting me about "desperately" needing sex again, but she was insisting that I take her out on a real date beforehand.

I had yet to respond because I knew if we had one date, she would want two. Then there would be random "I'm thinking about you." "What are you up to?" text messages late at night, and ultimately a conversation about wanting more. It always ended with someone—always the woman, wanting more and that's why casual sex didn't need to be consistent with just one person. It didn't need to resemble anything like a relationship.

I didn't need to think about Gillian's "only one" demand any further.

She's out of her goddamn mind...

GATE B11

GILLIAN

London (LHR)

“Flight attendants, prepare for landing.” Jake’s deep command came over the speakers minutes before the descent, making me walk through the cabin one last time to make sure all the seat belts were fastened.

The two men who’d flirted with me hours ago were both thankfully staring out the windows, so there was no time for me to accept either of their offers for a date at landing.

The landing came smooth and fast several minutes later, and as the plane parked at the gate, I waited for the ground team to open the door. When all was clear, I took my place near the exit door with Miss Connors.

“We have two days of rest here,” she said. “So I suggest you soak up as much time in the hotel robes as possible, and find the time to unpack your brain so you can bring it aboard our next flight.”

I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to respond to that, so I simply nodded and turned away from her.

“Have an amazing time in London!” Her voice instantly became chirpy for the departing passengers. “Thank you for flying with Elite! Come see us again!”

I started to say farewell to them as well, but I felt Jake stepping between the two of us.

“Nice speech, Captain Weston.” She looked up at him. “Are you not saying the mandatory Elite words and being non-friendly because you’ve forgotten how to be, or are you purposely doing it in hopes that I’ll record it and have you written up?”

“I’m hoping I’ll be written up.”

“You’re lucky I’m in a good mood today.” She glared at him. “The next time we fly together, I can *guarantee* that I won’t be.”

“Looking forward to it.” He glared back at her until she turned away and resumed her over-the-top farewells.

Unlike the other pilots I’d flown with, he didn’t chime in with us to wish the passengers well. Instead, he stood there silent and brooding, as if the passengers couldn’t get off the plane fast enough.

When the final passengers departed, I expected him to say something, to at least look at me, but he addressed the first officer, then he addressed us all.

“Until next time, ladies.” He pulled on the handle of his luggage and said a few more words to the first officer before heading down the jet bridge.

I grabbed my bag and rolled it far behind him, catching bits and pieces of the lusty compliments the other flight attendants were throwing his way.

We all walked through the terminal and to the ground transportation dock where a designated white van was waiting for us. The first officer and Miss Connors shared the front row, I claimed the middle, and Jake sat behind me with Janet and Elizabeth.

“So, Captain Weston...” Elizabeth purred, keeping her voice low so Miss Connors couldn’t hear.

“How long will you be staying in London?”

“Just tonight.”

“Oh!” Janet cleared her throat. “Since you only have one night, would you like to join us at the bar this evening?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“What’s there to think about? Did you already have plans?”

“I did,” he said, and I could feel him staring at me. “But the arrangement seems a bit too challenging, so I may have to completely cancel.”

“I see. Well, that’s good for us then.”

I felt a sudden pang of jealousy as he spoke to them, something I’d never felt when seeing my previous lovers or boyfriends casually talk to women. Hell, Ben had entertained an ex-girlfriend twice a year via his polo club reunions, and back then I never even gave it a second thought. Never felt a remote sense of concern or envy.

But now, this man who had only been inside of me twice, was pushing me closer and closer to the edge of turning around and saying something.

For ten minutes, and five highway exits, I sat and helplessly listened as my coworkers laid their charm on thick. As he practically returned their charm with equal interest.

The second the van pulled in front of the hotel, I opened the door and nearly jumped out. “I’ll check us all in,” I said, rushing inside the door with Miss Connors rushing to catch up to me.

“Something wrong, Miss Taylor?” She sounded genuinely concerned. “Are you okay?”

“No, just really tired. That’s all.”

She furrowed her brow, but she didn’t say anything further.

The desk agent quickly located our crew packets and checked our IDs before handing us our room keys.

“Sunday at ten, Miss Taylor,” Miss Connors said. “If you’re so much as a millisecond late, I’ll make sure you regret it.”

“Got it.” I walked away just as Jake and the rest of the crew walked through the hotel doors. I headed straight for the elevators, but since I didn’t want to have to deal with seeing any glances exchanged or hear any sexual innuendos, I walked across the hotel’s atrium and headed toward the emergency steps.

Passing through a windowed hallway, I rolled my luggage to the first flight of steps and suddenly felt someone gripping my waist from behind, someone spinning me around.

“I need to set some rules and conditions of my own for this shit.” Jake’s blue eyes stared into mine, wanting and possessive.

My back hit the window and my luggage fell to the floor.

“If I agree to this,” he said, his jaw clenched. “There will be no late night emotional talks, no mention of the words ‘more’ ‘us’ or ‘relationship’, and I won’t be taking you out on any dates.”

“I didn’t ask you to take me out on any dates.”

“I don’t want to know a goddamn thing about your life outside of the bedroom.”

“That makes two of us.”

“I won’t be the guy you think you can call when you need to talk to someone.” He paused. “Unless it’s about how wet your pussy is, I don’t want your name on my call log, and I don’t need you thinking we’ll ever be friends.”

I started to fire back, but he kissed me roughly, preventing me from getting a single word out.

“You don’t get to ask me questions about anything more than if I can go harder, longer, and deeper, and I won’t ask you anything outside of ways I can better please your pussy.”

My nipples hardened against my bra and my panties were sticking to my skin. As if he could sense it, too, he slipped his hand beneath my dress and tugged at the silk, slipping his fingers beneath it.

“We’ll share our bodies, not our lives.” He lowered his voice as his thumb softly stroked my clit. “That’s all I can ever give to you. That’s all I *ever* will give to you.”

He slid his other hand down my waist and squeezed my ass. “Are there any other conditions on your end?”

“Yes...” I managed as he tore off my panties.

“What else could there possibly be?”

“Three things.” My gaze went to his hands as he unbuckled his pants and pulled down his zipper, but the start of my sentence hung suspended in the air as he pulled out his cock.

“You were saying?” He tilted my chin up so my eyes were on his.

“Being your only one,” I said. “You didn’t mention anything about the women in other cities. You need to promise that they won’t be in the picture.”

“It was already implied,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I agree to fuck you and only you for however long this—whatever the hell *this* is, lasts. Happy?”

“Very.”

“What’s the second thing?”

“I want you to—” I sucked in a breath as his hand slid up my back and unclasped my bra in one smooth motion. “I want you to promise not to burn me.”

“*Burn me?*” He repeated.

“Hurt me.” I nearly stuttered. “I need you to promise that you won’t hurt me, Jake.”

He was silent, looking somewhat confused, but then he circled his thumb around my nipple and spoke slowly. “Gillian, I’m not going to burn or hurt you, unless you ever want to try that type of foreplay.” He pushed my dress up my waist. “That said, since we’ve agreed to no emotional entanglements whatsoever, you would have to fall for me in order for me to hurt you.” He ran his hand up and down my sides. “I’ll be sure that you don’t, and I guarantee that I won’t. What’s the third thing?”

“The third thing is that we do need to talk.”

“I just said that we *don’t* need to talk. Ever.”

“It doesn’t have to be anything serious, just cordial and friendly. You *have* to give me that...”

“Why?”

“This is new for me, no strings-attached sex. I’ve never done this before.”

He looked completely taken aback, blinking a few times, but then he eventually nodded. “Okay, Gillian. I’ll try to give you that.”

“Thank you.”

“So, you agree to all of my terms?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Good.” He pushed me back against the railing. “I agree to yours, too.”

Without another word, his mouth was on mine—hot and heavy, reminding me of all the times I’d fantasized about it at night. Except this was better. Much better.

His hard cock was pressed against my thigh and I rubbed my palm against it, murmuring as he bit down on my lip. He suddenly tore his mouth away from mine and pulled a condom out of his pocket and handed it to me.

I tried to tear the packet open with my fingertips, but he laughed softly and took it from me.

“No.” He held it in front of me. “With your mouth.”

I hesitated, staring at him unsurely, but then I bit the corner of the foil with my teeth and ripped it open. With my fingers, I pulled the wet rubber out of the packet and rolled it over his cock, my pussy throbbing with every hard inch it covered.

His mouth returned to mine, heated and demanding once again, and he wrapped an arm around my waist and lifted me up onto the banister.

“Spread your legs.” He commanded.

I gripped the railing and obliged, feeling his hands cup my ass and pull me forward.

Without another word, he pushed his cock into me with one deep thrust—completely obliterating my walls and making me scream.

Biting my neck, he whispered harshly into my ear. “If you scream like that again, someone is going to find us. “His fingers dug into my skin, a slight punishment. “And I’m not stopping, Gillian. Audience or not.”

I bit my tongue, never getting a chance to answer as he pounded into me again and again. As he fucked me relentlessly and recklessly, making my knuckles whiten against the railing, I succumbed to his control.

I met him thrust for thrust—my nipples aching under his rough touch, my pussy dripping wet against his cock. Each time a moan escaped my mouth, he slapped my ass and punished my skin with a harder bite.

Several flights above us, the sound of hotel guests entering and exiting through heavy doors could be heard, but eventually it dissolved into the background. All I could hear now was our heavy breathing and the sound of our skin slapping against each other.

“Oh...Oh goddd...” I struggled to hold back as I felt his cock throbbing inside of me, as he fucked me deeper.

He slapped my ass—hard, and tightened his grip on me.

I bit his shoulder, trying to prevent myself from screaming, but it was no use. I cried out as my body shook and convulsed against his strong hold, and I shut my eyes as wave after wave of pleasure rolled through my body.

“Fuck, Gillian...” He pounded into me a few more times, finding his own release, and as he came, he held me still against his cock.

Slick with sweat and panting heavily, the two of us looked at each other, remaining entwined.

This is definitely going to be a problem...

After several minutes, he slowly pulled out of me and helped me off the banister, setting me on the floor. Then he turned away and began fixing his clothes, softly telling me to do the same.

I was snapping the second hook of my bra when a male voice from high above us called out.

“Hello? My son heard a scream!” He shouted. “Is everything okay down there? *Hello?*”

Jake gave me a pointed look.

“Everything is fine.” I called out. “I came to check, too! Nothing is here!”

“Alright then. Thanks!”

I finished smoothing my dress, not bothering to fix my sweat-drenched hair.

“I need your phone number,” Jake said, taking out his cell phone. “And your email address, if you actually use it.”

“I thought you said there wouldn’t be any late night phone calls.”

“There won’t be. This is so you can tell me your lines whenever you get them. I don’t think it’s fair for us to wait until we’re both in New York to have sex, so we’ll need to meet in layover cities whenever our schedules intersect. We’ll find places to meet up from there.”

I quickly recited my phone number and he saved it. Then he took my phone from my blazer pocket and typed his number in.

“This arrangement ends the moment either of us wants it to, correct?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“For any reason?”

“*Any reasonable* reason.” He stepped back and grabbed the door handle. “And just so we’re perfectly clear, Gillian…” The way he said my name made me wet all over again. “When I commit to something, even something as ridiculously preposterous as this, I expect the other person to do the same.”

“I said I would. Or did you somehow miss the part where I agreed?”

“No” he said. “You agreed to the terms, but I’m going to re-iterate them in more serious and final words for you. Until this ends, my cock is the only cock you’re allowed to have, your mouth belongs to me, and if you’re ever wet and in need of pleasure, you’ll wait until I’m available to give it to you.”

GATE B12

JAKE

London (LHR)—> Charlotte (CLT)—> Phoenix (PHX)

This is definitely going to be a problem...

“Keep your hands on the bed.” I pulled Gillian’s hair back hours after we’d fucked in the stairwell. “Keep your ass up like that for me.”

I tried to hold her taut as I slid inside of her, but she didn’t listen. She released her hands from the mattress—slipping off my cock and falling forward, screaming and shaking as an orgasm ripped through her small frame.

Grunting as I came right after her, I gripped her hips to prevent her from falling to the floor. When I was sure she wasn’t going to roll off the bed, I flipped her over and let her back hit the sheets—watching her as she continued trying to catch her breath.

I took off the fourth condom of the night and tossed it into the trash, hoping like hell that this back to back sex was simply a symptom of withdrawal. That the only reason I’d sent her a “What’s your room number?” text hours ago was because I was trying to make up for four weeks of sexless nights.

As she continued to lay on the bed bare-ass naked with her eyes shut, I stared at her and trailed my fingers against her plump lips.

Blushing, she suddenly sat up and pulled the sheets over herself. “I thought you’d left.”

“I’m about to.” I pulled a shirt over my head and double checked my pocket for the room key.

Grabbing my phone off the the TV stand, I checked the time. Four o’clock.

We fucked for four hours?

“What’s your line for the rest of this month?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. You think I know that by heart?”

“I know mine by heart.”

She furrowed her brow, but she didn’t argue further. Still holding the sheets around herself, she leaned over and grabbed her phone. She tapped the screen a few times and my phone vibrated seconds later with a series of text messages.

Gillian: HNL-JFK. JFK-MIA. MIA-PHX. PHX-ATL. ATL-SFO. SFO-LGA.

Gillian: [image]

Gillian: [image]

I looked at the dates attached to each trip and noticed we'd both be in New York City for the last four days of next month, but I didn't mention it. This needed to be pure and simple sex with a dash of her required "cordial" conversations and that was it.

"I'll see you in Phoenix on the fifteenth," I said. "I'll let you know where to meet me in the airport.

"That's five days from now."

"I'm aware. Is that a problem?"

"No." She shrugged. "It's just that...You don't strike me as the type that's capable of holding off from sex for that long. Actually, someone I dated once told me that's too long for a guy to go without sex."

"Then you need to date better people." I rolled my eyes. "With the exception of today, I haven't fucked anyone since that day I was with you at The Madison."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." I watched her sheet slowly shift, exposing her hardened nipples.

"So, you've been thinking about me all this time, too?"

"I've been thinking about *fucking* you all this time," I said. "I don't and *won't* know you, remember?"

"I'll take that as a yes." She smiled. "I didn't mention this before, but I won't be able to meet you anywhere the last Saturday of next month. Familial obligation."

"That's fine. I'll never be able to meet you on the third weekend of any month. Personal reasons."

"Would you like to talk about it? I can make coffee."

I blinked.

She really is the 'after a boyfriend' type...

"Is that a yes to the coffee?" she asked, standing up from the bed—sweat from our sex still glistening against her skin. "Caffeine or decaf?"

I didn't answer. I took one last look at her and left before the sight of her body would make me want to have her all over again.

I took the elevator to my room, took a cold shower, and lay back on my bed. Unable to sleep, I checked my email—seeing a new email from Elite at the top of my inbox.

Subject: Annual Elite Airways Gala. Last Chance to RSVP.

Mr. Weston,

We know you've received variations of this message multiple times this month, but we felt the need to send it again.

Attached you will find a formal invitation to our airline's annual gala. This year, we're unveiling a new design and celebrating our latest milestone. We'll also be honoring the lives lost on the only tragedy at our airline, the victims of Flight 1872. Whether you're able to attend this year's event or not, we'd appreciate your response.

Employee Affairs Department

Elite Air

I started at the phrase regarding Flight 1872, shocked and surprised that the truth could finally come to the light. I thought that maybe, just maybe, it would be the first step to not hating this criminal airline, and maybe another step toward sleeping well for more than a few nights at a time.

Against my better judgment, I opened the invite and selected "Yes." Then I rolled back over and tried to sleep Gillian and her pussy away.

I made it five minutes before my phone buzzed with a text message.

Gillian: What's ****your**** room number?

GATE B13

GILLIAN

Phoenix (PHX)

My fingers trembled as I sent an “I’m here” text message to Jake, as I stood in an unconstructed bathroom in Phoenix’s airport waiting for him. I’d somehow managed to lie to Miss Connors with a straight face when we landed, telling her that I would have to check into the hotel later since a “college friend” had just messaged me on Facebook saying he was nearby.

I wasn’t sure if the expression on her face was annoyance or relief, but she’d pulled out her clipboard and written me up for “failure to comply with protocol” before heading to the hotel herself.

As the sound of passengers and rolling luggage sounded outside the bathroom’s doors, I considered leaving—letting Jake know that I wasn’t cut out for this after all. I pulled up my text messages, starting to type, but he suddenly walked into the restroom.

“Hi...” I said. “Are we going to your hotel now? It’s not the same Marriott, is it?”

He looked confused, setting his carryon against the wall before walking over to me. “Who said anything about a hotel?”

“You... You said we would meet up in whatever cities our layovers intersected and decide where to go from there.”

He stared at me, and the reality suddenly dawned on me.

“You want us to fuck *in here*? Are you serious?”

“Why else do you think I would ask you to meet me in a half-constructed bathroom, Gillian?”

“So you could give me directions for the next destination, maybe?”

“This isn’t a goddamn stealth mission.” He looked into my eyes. “It won’t always be in the actual airport, but I have a flight in three hours and we don’t need to waste any time.”

“You’re *that* insatiable?”

“Yes.” He smiled, sliding a hand under my dress and gently touching my panties. “And so are you, apparently.”

I didn’t say anything. I backed up against the door of a handicap stall, trying to think this through. It was bad enough I was going to be blatantly breaking the no-fraternization rules by sleeping with him, but I had no idea the chances of getting caught were going to be this intensified.

Still smiling, Jake reached behind me and unlocked the door to the stall, pulling me inside. He lifted me up and set me on the third step of a paint ladder.

“Why are you so nervous?” he asked.

“I’m not nervous.” I was still shaking. “I just... I thought this was going to be more civilized and away from the possibility of people walking in on us.”

“Gillian, you’re what? Twenty-six years old?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“Okay, you’re twenty-nine years old,” he said, looking more content with that answer. “I think you can handle having private sex in public places.” He caressed my cheek with his hand. “I would never pick somewhere where we would be caught.”

“But—”

He pressed his finger against my lips. “Construction ends at five o’clock. It’s currently seven. We’re in Terminal 4, the international terminal. The last flight that will leave from here is currently boarding at the gate far down the hall, and airport employees aren’t allowed to enter construction zones for fear of injury.”

“So, you’ve done this before?”

“No.” He spread my legs and gently pulled my panties down to my ankles. “I’m just very well-versed in airports and I think you need to relax before we start this arrangement.”

“I can relax...”

“I’ll make sure of it.” He took my panties and stuffed them into his pocket. “In the meantime, let’s agree to start over after today. Can you do that?”

He didn’t wait for me to agree with him, though. He pushed my dress up past my stomach and spread my legs a little further. Without saying another word, he lifted my left leg over his shoulder and buried his head between thighs, devouring my pussy for so long that I went completely weak at the knees, that he had to cover my mouth to muffle my screams.

I clawed at his back as his tongue brought me to orgasm twice in a row, leaving my pleasure etched onto his skin.

When he finally finished, he had one hour until boarding so he simply put me back together and walked away, saying, “I’ll email you for where you need to meet me in Charlotte next week. And for the record, the taste of your pussy’s come is incredible...”

GATE B14

GILLIAN

Charlotte (CLT)—> Atlanta (ATL)—> Montreal (YUL)

Subject: Charlotte

How's your week going so far? (Mine is very stressful and hectic.)

Subject: Re: Charlotte

This email isn't about fucking. (Emails are only supposed to be about fucking.)

—Jake.

Subject: Charlotte (The Correct Email)

Meet me in Terminal C when you land. Gate 15.

—Jake

Subject: Re: Charlotte (The Correct Email)

Regardless of if ****emails**** are only supposed to be about “fucking,” would it kill you to say, “Hello, Gillian” or “Hope all is well, Gillian” before launching into where you want me to meet you for sex? I thought we agreed to be cordial...

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Charlotte (The Correct Email)

We also agreed not to have pointless conversations. Terminal C. Gate 15.

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Charlotte (The Correct Email)

If you don't start being cordial with me after today, I can promise you that I won't come meet you anymore.

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Charlotte (The Correct Email)

And I can promise that you have no idea who you're fucking with...

—Jake

Subject: Atlanta

You were supposed to meet me at E3 thirty minutes ago.

—Jake.

Subject: Re: Atlanta

I'm still waiting for you to ask me about my day or say hello first...

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Atlanta

Keep waiting. Get to E3. Now.

—Jake

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Atlanta

Hello. How are you? Please meet me at E3 so we can have sex today because I am addicted to having sex with you. See how easy that is? Give it a try. :-)

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Atlanta

Stop fucking with me, Gillian...You have thirty seconds to get to E3.

—Jake

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Atlanta

SERIOUSLY, JAKE? Did you just say what I think you just said over the speakers?

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Atlanta

If you're not here within the next ten seconds, I'll make sure to say "Gillian's pussy." *Try me.*

—Jake

Subject: Montreal

Hello. How are you.

Tim Horton's. Arrival Zone.

—Jake.

Subject: Re: Montreal

Fuck you, Jake.

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Montreal

Looking forward to it in three hours.

—Jake

I leaned against a chair, scrolling through Jake's latest text messages—unsure whether I could wait another week to have him again. For the first time in my life, I felt like I *needed* sex. In the past, when the sex was with my previous boyfriends, it'd felt good—sweet, even, but this was different. It was raw, no-holds-barred, and primal, and I was beginning to believe him when he claimed I was just as insatiable as he was.

“What's up with that goofy grin on your face, Miss Taylor?” Miss Connors sat across from me at the gate.

“Nothing.” I tucked my phone into my blazer pocket. “Just checking up on recent events.”

“Oh really? Because I thought for sure the reason you were looking like an idiot was because ever since you went to the bathroom a couple hours ago, you've been walking around with your dress inside out.”

What? I looked down and sure enough, the white seams of my dress were face up, something I'd neglected to check when I redressed earlier.

“Go fix it, Miss Taylor.” She waved me away. “Now.”

As I walked past her, I heard her mumble, “I swear they get dumber every year...I don't get paid enough for this...”

I slipped inside the closest restroom and quickly flipped my dress inside out. I made sure my hair was still sleek and in place, and then—still on cloud nine after today's sex, I called Meredith.

No answer. An immediate text from her appeared instead.

Meredith: Hey, Gill. Been weeks since we caught up! Are you okay? I'm at a crucial run-through right now, so I can't talk. Can I call you later tonight?

Gillian: Of course! And I'm more than okay :-)

There was no one else I could call right now, but since I wanted to get this off my chest, I logged into my abandoned blog from years ago and started a new post.

~BLOG POST~

Oh New York, New York, New York...

I finally found the cure for getting over you: Flying...and—

Write later,

Gillian

No, wait...

Taylor G.

I heard Miss Connors calling my name and posted the blog without finishing. But as I stepped out of the restroom, I realized it took all of five seconds for my only follower to comment, as if no time had passed at all.

KayTROLL: Welcome back. This should be interesting...Or not. Your writing seems even worse than before. Now, after all these years, you can't complete simple ass SENTENCES???! O_o #saddddd.

GATE B15

JAKE

Seattle (SEA)—> Minneapolis (MSP)—> New York (JFK)

I was beginning to think that sex with Gillian was the cure for a good night's sleep, the perfect distraction from the nights of breaking shit that came every so often. And despite the fact that she drove me up a wall with her need to talk, her demands of unnecessary 'Hellos' and 'How are yous,' I couldn't get enough of her. Each time we had sex was far more explosive than the last, and no matter how loudly she screamed, or how deeply she dug her nails into my skin as she came, I always looked forward to the next time.

The only downside to our arrangement was the small things she was beginning to do here or there, subtle things that seemed as if she was attempting to seep further into my life and break one of our rules. Whenever we met at certain airports, she always insisted that we stop inside a magazine shop or a bookstore together and talk. She would pick up a new book, insist on having a short conversation about either, "I wonder if this will be good," "Maybe this will last me on my next flight," or "I saw lots of passengers reading this one, but it's kind of expensive." And it would take me all of three minutes to take the book from her, pay for it, and escort her to whatever secluded place we were really supposed to be.

When we finished fucking (if we didn't go back for a third or a fourth time), she would stare at me with her big green eyes in silence for several minutes. Sometimes she'd stare at me so long that I would be forced to help her quickly get dressed so we wouldn't get caught. In those moments, she would ask about my flights, about my day, and simply say, "I'm just asking to be asking. I don't really care." I always answered her questions then, hoping she was telling the truth.

Thinking about the way she'd rode my cock in the Charlotte parking garage the other day, I smiled and finished reading the latest pompous news articles about the upcoming Elite gala and the "Amazing Era and Ambitious CEO of Elite" on my phone.

The second I finished, an email from Gillian popped onto my screen.

Subject: Random.

I need to ask you a question...

—Gillian.

Subject: Re: Random

Is this question about fucking? (And you didn't need ellipses after that sentence.)

—Jake

Subject: Re: Re: Random

No, it's about something personal. (Thank you, Professor Weston... <—How about those ellipses? Did they fit there?)

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Random

Then you actually *don't* need to ask it. (No, they don't fucking fit there.)

See you Saturday in Atlanta.

—Jake

Her response was immediate.

Subject: I'm going to ask it anyway.

I noticed you own at least six different Audemars Piguet watches. Combine that with your million-dollar condo in Manhattan and I'm quite curious: Are you a trust fund baby? How else are you able to afford that on a senior captain's salary?

—Gillian

Subject: Re: I'm going to ask it anyway.

I noticed you missed the words in my previous email. Neither of your questions are about fucking, so I'm not obligated to answer them.

—Jake

She sent a lengthier response littered with curse words, but someone tapped my shoulder before I could finish reading it.

“Captain?” He tapped my shoulder even harder. “Sir?”

“Yes?” I looked up from my phone and groaned, realizing I wasn't really in the air right now. I was sitting in a damn simulation session with a pilot-in-training. “What do you want, Ryan? Your name is Ryan, right?”

“Yes, sir. I um, I need some advice.”

“I'm listening.”

“Should I make an announcement about the upcoming turbulence or will leaving the seatbelt sign on for the passengers be enough?”

“You do realize that this is a simulator, right?” I looked over at him, noticing beads of sweat falling down his red face. “There are no passengers behind us. There isn't even *a cabin* behind us. It's just you and me in a metal box.”

“So...” He wiped his forehead. “Is that a yes or a no?”

“Just fly the goddamn tube.” I glanced at the control screen, making sure he wasn't doing anything unnecessary, and then I leaned back and read the remainder of Gillian's email.

The tube began to rock back and forth—first light turbulence, then moderate turbulence. And all of a sudden, the shakes became severe and the simulator session ended with a loud screeching sound and a sickening thud.

The final results flashed onscreen. Test flight 2102. Destination not reached. Total fatality.

“Congratulations,” I said. “You’ve killed all one hundred and forty-two passengers, all four flight attendants, me, and yourself. You also managed to land your plane so deep in the Pacific that the NTSB won’t find all the wreckage for at least three years.”

“No.” He shook his head. “This is your fault, sir. I asked you for help.”

“You asked me if you could make an announcement about fake turbulence.” I unbuckled my seatbelt and looked at the controls, noticing he’d taken the plane out of autopilot and completely deviated from the flight plan. “What you should’ve asked, is if it was okay for you to switch the settings. I would’ve said no.”

He shook his head, looking as if he was about to cry over this. “I was in a stall. I didn’t know the system would allow me to fall so low, especially without intervening.”

“Intervening?”

“Doesn’t the real version of this plane have a fly-by-wire system that steadies everything if the plane descends to less than fifteen feet?”

“Yes.” I stood up. “There’s also a hidden parachute that will automatically appear and save every soul aboard for times just like this. I’m shocked you didn’t press *that* button.”

“Wait, wait,” he said as I twisted the exit handle. “I honestly wasn’t sure what to do, sir.”

“Did you consider contacting control? Asking if you could climb to a higher altitude?”

“I could’ve done that?”

“Rest in peace, Ryan.” I opened the hatch, immediately making my way down the simulator’s steps.

“Captain Weston?” A supervisor who looked ten years younger than me suddenly stepped in front of me. “Captain Weston, are you leaving?”

“As soon as you step out of my way, yes.”

“But why? Your trainee just crashed his plane into the Atlantic Ocean.”

“No, he crashed it into the *Pacific Ocean*. The water’s much deeper in that one.”

“That’s not the point.”

“*Care to get to it?*”

“Don’t you think you should be giving him a stern but encouraging lecture right now? Perhaps giving him pointers so this won’t happen next time?”

“I think the fear of dying will be enough.”

“You know...” He sighed, crossing his arms. “If it weren’t for a certain mark of honor on your profile, I would’ve had you fired weeks ago, when you allegedly told an entire group of passengers to ‘Get the fuck off my plane’ when you thought they were taking too long to disembark.

“That wasn’t *allegedly*. The clip is on YouTube.”

He rolled his eyes. “We’re funneling a lot of money into the program under the new mergers, and I personally would love it if every pilot tried to make a positive impact. Isn’t that why you fly, Mr. Weston? Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“I’m here for the paycheck.”

“I give up. I. Give. Up.” He groaned, throwing up his hands in a fake surrender. “Speaking of your paycheck, though. Before you go, I need you to finally sign off on this. The Signature payroll officially rolls over to us in two weeks, and I assume you’ll want to continue being paid.” He pulled a folded sheet of paper from his breast pocket and handed me a pen.

I unfolded the paper, quickly read the printed words, and handed it back to him. “This is not the salary I requested. This isn’t even *a fraction* of the salary I requested.”

“No shit.” He scoffed. “The salary range for a new captain is seventy to ninety thousand. The max is one hundred twenty to one hundred forty thousand after *years* at the captain level.”

“That sounds like an unfortunate problem for the rest of the pilots here. It also sounds like you never put in my request. You simply assumed what human resources would say.”

“There was no need to assume because I know exactly what they’re going to say.” He stepped back. “And I know they’ll laugh me out of the room while doing it. Four hundred fifty thousand dollars a year to fly commercial planes?”

“Make sure you tell them that’s my minimum.”

“You’re not at Signature anymore, Weston. You’re not flying sports teams, celebrities, or small world leaders. Surely you can understand that, and surely you can see that your demand is ridiculous.”

I didn’t back down. I hadn’t flown for less than that in six years, and merger or not, I wasn’t going to start now. I wasn’t even going to entertain the thought.

“I’ll also need to continue getting every third weekend of every month off. That was promised to me before I signed the paperwork.”

“Okay. How much crack have you been you eating, Weston? I’m seconds away from demanding that you take a piss test right now.”

“Four hundred fifty thousand. Every third weekend off. No crack, just pussy.”

“If I go to them with this,” he said, finally realizing that I wasn’t joking. “And they tell me, to tell you, to go fuck yourself, what do you want me to say?”

“It won’t come to that.” I started to walk away. “Trust me.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t count it.”

“And if I were you, I wouldn’t *doubt it*.”

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day...

I'm typing this post while I'm on a rainy layover in Dallas, while I wait to head to Paris.

My life is now a montage of cities and countries that blend into a never-ending day. I fall asleep in San Francisco and wake up hours later in Hawaii. I order a cup of coffee in Madrid and buy crepes for lunch in Paris. I watch the rain fall over Seattle's grey afternoons and catch a bright, bloody sunset in Phoenix.

And somewhere in between all of this traveling—in half-constructed bathrooms, parking garages, and last-minute hotel rooms, I break my airline's number one rule: I ~~have sex with~~ fuck a pilot.

I give him every piece of me—letting his sex set my skin on fire, listening to him whisper words in my ear that continuously wet my pussy as he pounds into me from behind. And then I let him go.

Or at least I try to...

I think I'm starting to like him, and when I say "him," I'm only saying that halfheartedly. I don't really know who the hell he is because he's so damn guarded, and for every two questions I ask, he only gives me one answer.

He also disappears every three weeks, never answers his phone in front of me, and for some strange reason, I can't help but feel that he's hiding something from me.

(I've somewhat missed this writing on this abandoned blog. Somewhat.)

Write later,

Taylor G.

2 comments posted:

KayTROLL: Welcome back. Again.

KayTROLL: Now, please go away again and find some inspiration so you can post about something other than your sex life. No one cares about who you're fucking (especially since you're being dumb and breaking the rules) and as your only reader, I deserve something more than porn to read. #thankyou #dobetter

GATE B16

GILLIAN

Atlanta (ATL)—> Denver (DEN)—> New York (JFK)

“This is the final boarding call for Elite Airways Flight 1297 with service to San Francisco.” A voice floated through the Hartsfield-Atlanta restroom speakers. “If you are scheduled to be on this flight, please make your way to gate E13 now. Also...”

The remainder of the words came muted as Jake gripped my thighs and moved me up and down his cock. My fingers dug into his skin, his lips covered mine, and just as we’d done so many times before, we fought for control until our bodies finally gave in.

Briefly shutting my eyes, I collapsed in his arms—feeling him softly kiss my lips as I struggled to catch my breath. I didn’t want to admit it, but we were getting reckless. Beyond reckless.

Whenever we were in the same city, we met. Same hotel, we met. And God forbid if we ended up in the same airport for more than thirty minutes at a time.

My body now lusted for his touches, my mouth yearned for his tongue, and my pussy throbbed nightly in need for his cock. Sex with him was becoming a wild addiction and I never wanted to be cured.

And even now, knowing that we wouldn’t see each other again until Sunday when we crossed paths in Dallas, I was feeling something I hadn’t felt in a long time: Longing. Genuine longing.

“Gillian?” He suddenly looked down at me, his fingers still pressed into the skin of my thighs, his cock still buried deep inside of me. “Can I put you down now?”

I nodded and he slowly pulled me off of him, setting me down onto the floor.

He handed me my skirt and I handed him his tie. I slipped into my blazer and spotted a new, silver and black Audemars Piguet adorning his wrist. My count was now up to eight.

Knowing he was probably going to leave me in seconds, I walked over to the mirror and quickly reapplied my makeup and fixed my blazer. I took out a few wipes and attempted to soak up the scent of sex and sweat from my skin, adding a few sprays of perfume, and then, when I realized he was still staring at me, I turned around to face him.

“Did you know that the average Audemars Piguet watch costs ten thousand dollars?” I asked.

“*Gillian...*” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“I’m just stating a random fact I thought you should know.” I stepped back and he walked over to me. “Would you like to know another random fact?”

“Does this fact involve going over our rules again? The one about not asking about shit outside of sex?”

“Every now and then you’ll have to talk to me, Jake,” I said. “It’s what you agreed to give me, so you’ll need to start answering my questions.”

“I have no problem with talking to you.” He pressed me against the sink. “And I’ll answer all of your questions, as long as they’re within reason.”

“And...” I hated how his being so close to me turned me on instantly, how I almost forgot what I wanted to say. “And it wouldn’t kill you to continue trying to be civil, to ask me questions for yourself every now and then, since you never seem to ask me any.”

“I ask you plenty of questions.” He looked into my eyes, his gaze heated and dark.

“I *ask* you if you want me to fuck you against the sink or the wall. I *ask* you to stop screaming when I bend you over, and I *ask* you if you’re okay after we’re done so I can move you off my cock... That’s *more* than civil.”

He stepped back and grabbed the handle of his luggage, heading for the door. “See you in Dallas Sunday. C5.”

A week and a half later...

I stood him up in Dallas. Then I stood him up again in Atlanta. I didn’t answer his emails when he asked why I wasn’t where we agreed to be, and now, as I sat alone in my Denver hotel room, I was regretting not taking advantage of the stress relief.

My mom and sisters were back at it, calling me every hour on the hour—sending me annoying little reminders about that stupid proposal I didn’t give a damn about, and Miss Connors had just written me up for the second time. My offense? My lipstick wasn’t “red enough” and looked like “someone literally kissed it off of [you].”

Hitting ignore on my mother’s tenth call, I noticed she and Brian had sent me a few text messages.

Mom: Ben called me a few weeks ago and said you dumped him..

Mom: Gillian, we need to talk about this. Didn’t you say his Dad is a force to be reckoned with on Wall Street? We both know someone like you needs to marry well...

Brian: Hey, Gill-doll. Quick question...I’m bringing Samantha’s parents up for the celebration, too, so I need you to be completely honest with me...Is your apartment good enough for the family to stay in? I can’t afford for the mayor to think our family is nothing less than the best.

Brian: Oh, and Mom said you dumped Ben? Bad move, Gillian. Bad move.

Hurt and annoyed, I immediately called Meredith, in need of someone to vent to, but there was no answer. I called her two more times, just to make sure, and it went to her voicemail both times.

I scrolled through my list of contacts—not feeling as if any of the flight attendants I simply shared small talk with would be willing to listen, and my finger paused as I reached Jake’s name.

Not giving it a second thought, I hit “call.” It rang once. It rang twice, and before I could come to my senses and hang up, he answered.

“Hello, Gillian.” The deep, sexy sound of his voice caught me completely off guard. “Hello? Gillian?”

“Yes?”

“I believe *you* called me.” There was a smile in his voice. “May I help you with something?”

“I’m having a bad day and I really need someone to talk to.”

Silence.

“Don’t worry, you’re my absolute last resort and you technically don’t have to respond to anything,” I said. “I just need to get a few things off my chest and then you can hang up. Are you there?”

“I shouldn’t be.”

I took that as a yes.

“Well, first—” I adjusted my pillows and lay back. “I’m sorry for standing you up in Dallas the other day.”

He laughed. “Surely that’s not one of the things you need to get off your chest, Gillian.” He sounded as if he was in bed, too. “And I would be more inclined to believe that you were sorry if you weren’t continuing to text me, “Fuck you and your lack of talking,” every couple of days since.”

I smiled and held back a laugh.

“I have a flight in six hours,” he said. “Hurry up and spit out all of your unnecessary words so I can hang up and go to sleep in peace.”

“Okay...Wait. Can I ask you something minor first?”

“No.”

“Who in your family was it?” I asked.

“I’m pretty sure the word ‘no’ has a pretty standard definition...”

“Who in your family, or who close to you, was an English teacher?”

He was silent for a few seconds. “What makes you ask that?”

“The way you talk, your obsession with grammar in simple emails and texts. Not to mention the fact that you clearly have a thing for definitions. I wanted to ask you on Wednesday but—”

“You stood me up.” He cut me off, sounding slightly upset, but then his tone changed. “It was my mother.”

“Are the two of you close?”

“I’m hanging up in ten minutes, Gillian. Say whatever you have to say about your day.”

“Right...” I let out a breath. “I hate my family. Every single one of them. I literally cringe when they call me, and I wish I’d been born to anyone else, anyone else with the semblance of a soul.” I heard the soft sound of TV conversations in his background and continued. “They only call me when they want to feel better about themselves, when they want to remind me that I could’ve done something more with my life. And I hate that I wasted my first few years in New York trying to accomplish something in spite of them, all to end up being the same disappointment they first marked me to be...” I stopped right there, remembering all my hopeful blog posts from years ago, how they came to a sudden, necessary end.

“Are you finished now?” Jake asked.

“Yes. You can hang up now. I actually feel somewhat better. Thank you for listening.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. “I wasn’t going to hang up, though.”

“Were you going to give me some advice?”

“You don’t need advice,” he said. “I think you’re well aware that some families are simply poison and there’s nothing you can do about it. Although, I think you’re being slightly overdramatic and you don’t really hate them. I don’t think you have any idea what true hatred of someone could mean.”

“You got all that from *that* story? Would you like me to tell you another one?”

“No...” His voice was a demanding whisper. “I’d rather hear the story about why you didn’t show up to fuck me, why you think I’m going to continue to put up with that shit.”

“I was upset with you...I was trying to teach you a lesson.”

“Was the lesson how to piss me off? How to leave my cock hard and waiting for pussy I never got?”

“No...” I felt my cheeks reddening. “I was just angry with you.”

“Then you ‘just’ really should’ve showed up.” His voice was low. “I waited for you for an hour because I thought you were playing games like before. I was looking forward to burying my face in your pussy, tasting your clit with my tongue.”

I was silent, but my fingers were tracing the hem of my soaked panties.

“You can’t decide to randomly break our rules when you want to—especially not when it gets between me having you.”

“You say that as if you really *like* me.”

“I really like your pussy,” he said. “But seeing as though I have yet to experience your mouth around my cock, that may be subject to change in the future.”

I bit my lip as he breathed heavily over the line, as he sounded even angrier.

“You’re not going to say shit about fucking up my entire weekend for the second week in a row?” he asked. “Making it so I have to wait another full week for you?”

“I won’t stand you up again..”

“I’m aware,” he said. “Because I’m going to make sure that thought never crosses your mind again when I see you. I don’t care how dripping wet your pussy gets or how loudly you scream when you beg me to let you come because I won’t show you any mercy whatsoever, and I won’t hold back like I normally do.”

“Jake, I said I was—”

“I don’t give a fuck what you said.” He was speaking slowly. “I don’t care how mad with me you are again. You can ride my cock until you’re not mad anymore, and I can tongue your pussy until you can’t think anymore.”

“Jake..”

“I’ll be seeing you in Atlanta next Tuesday, correct?”

“Correct..” My clit swelled beneath my fingertips.

“Good. Glad we could have this conversation.”

I nodded as if he could actually see me.

“Oh, and Gillian?”

“Yes?”

“This counts as a late night phone call.”

“Okay. And?”

“Don’t let it happen again.”

GATE B17

JAKE

New York (JFK)

She can't follow rules for shit...

“Are you there, Jake?” Gillian asked me on the phone, a full week and a half later. “Are you still there?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Then what did I just say?”

Why am I still on the phone with this woman? “You said your brother seems to be acting like a bridezilla and his girlfriend isn't even aware of his plan to propose yet.” I paused. “And then, you said you realized that it's nine o'clock at night, you've been talking to me for over an hour, and you need to let me return to my life where late-night phone calls don't exist.”

She laughed her infectious laughter. “I think you like my late night phone calls.”

“I don't.”

“Then stop picking up the phone.”

“Stop calling me five times in a row.”

She laughed again, and then continued talking as if she hadn't heard me say that we'd been on the phone for over an hour. For the tenth night in a row she'd decided that “no late phone calls” meant call me anyway, and as much as I wanted to hang up and tell her that I didn't want to hear about her life outside of the bedroom, I couldn't do it. For one, the sound of her light and sultry voice—even though she rambled and asked one too many questions, was somewhat calming for my fraying nerves. For two, she was the only woman who could intrigue and enrage me all at once—the only woman who could literally piss me off one second and have me laughing at her the next.

“And that was it,” she said, finally done talking. “Thank you for listening to me again.”

“I didn't have much of a choice.”

“You could make things even with me, if it makes you feel better.”

“Make things even? How so?”

“Well, I've bombarded you with my family drama for the past few days—”

“Past *ten days*.” I corrected her.

“Okay, okay.” Her laughter came again. “Past ten days. You could tell me something about your family.”

“I don't have a family.”

“*Everyone* has a family, Jake. But you know, I bet I could fill in some of the blanks of yours myself, actually.”

I rolled my eyes, but instead of ending this call like I should've, I let my intrigue get the best of me. “Try me.”

“Well, you said you were from Missouri on the first night we met and unfortunately back in New York so...I’m willing to bet the ‘unfortunate’ part means either: A) Your family also lives in New York. B) You left your family in Missouri and New York is the only place they won’t come bother you, or C) You’re attempting to repair an estranged relationship with your New York family but it’s harder than you expected. Which one is it?”

“D. *None of the above.*”

“Well, it was worth a try.” There was a smile in her voice. “Can I guess again?”

“You can do whatever you like. I’m about to hang up.”

“Wait,” she said. “I only have one more question.”

“Somehow I doubt that...”

“Are you going to the airline’s gala tonight? Since my flight was cancelled, I’m considering going with my roommate.”

“Gillian...” I sighed. “Is this the last late night phone call we’re going to have? It really needs to be.”

“Yes.” She sounded somewhat offended. “I won’t call you again after tonight unless it’s about sex.”

“Thank you very much.”

“You could at least answer my question before you go, though...”

“I’m not sure if I’m going to the gala,” I said finally. “I’m leaning towards no, though.”

“Well, if you don’t go, would you like me to tell you all about it?”

“That’s another question. See you in Atlanta Monday.” I ended the call and leaned back—half annoyed, half aroused. I wasn’t sure if I actually liked her incessant rule breaking or not.

Not wanting to think about it for any longer, I looked outside my rearview mirror. Contrary to what I’d told Gillian, I was already at the gala, watching attendees guard their designer clothes against the light rain.

I considered driving away and acting like this event wasn’t really happening, because I could do without seeing the promised commemoration of Flight 1872 or witnessing the unveiling of a new plane, but I couldn’t get my key to turn in the ignition.

For another hour, I watched more attendees slip inside, watched the rain fall harder against my windows, and as a round of thunder roared in the distance, I stepped out of my car. I walked to the front of the line, and handing my ticket to the security guard, not even attempting to give an apology.

Inside the hangar, grand and glimmering chandeliers hung from the ceiling’s exposed pipes—drenching the room in a blinding white. Ivory clothed tables surrounded the massive stage at the center of the room, and miniature ice sculptures in the shape of aircrafts lined the back wall.

Throughout the room, massive black and white photos played on hanging screens. The pictures all featured various moments from the CEO’s past: He was standing in front of a small white glider at twenty-one years old, tinkering with plane engines and putting together model airplanes with his only son in his thirties, and sitting in a boardroom while starting his own airline at age fifty.

To add to the nostalgic effect, the screens also featured some of Elite’s best headlines, and my blood boiled as if I was reading them all for the first time. I could still vividly remember exactly where I was when each of the stories first appeared in the papers. It was how I kept up with my fucked up family throughout the years, letting the black ink of the press leave bread crumbs the entire way.

As the the final headline and the words, “Nathaniel C. Pearson, CEO of Elite Airways, Credits ‘Family Values’ for the Airline’s Stunning Success,” I felt the same way I did when I was only seventeen years old. When I finally realized that the beloved leader of this airline, my father, was a fucking fraud.

The crowd stood to its feet and applauded loudly—some clinked their cutlery against champagne glasses. As the applause reached deafening levels, my father stepped onto the stage, smiling at his flock of sheep.

I didn’t clap once.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” His deep and ugly voice calmed the room. “I’d like to personally thank all of you for coming out tonight. Before we unveil the design of our newest aircraft, I want to let you know how honored I am that our family has grown to thirty-eight-thousand employees who serve more than three hundred destinations!”

More applause.

“My only regret is that my first wife, a woman who poured her heart and soul into helping me achieve everything, couldn’t be here to see this tonight. Her final words to me were full of hope and loyalty, the two values I’ve built the foundation of this airline upon. She said she wanted me to keep dreaming, to keep believing, and to build the greatest airline my mind could ever imagine. She and our only son, Evan, have inspired me to continue pursuing the very best in aviation innovation. And several years ago, the three of us...”

The lies dropped from his mouth so convincingly, that I almost believed he only had *one* son, that I wasn’t really standing in this room. And if it weren’t for the photo-shopped pictures of him and Evan hanging around the room, I might’ve questioned if my memories were real after all.

I kept my eyes on him and his three-thousand-dollar suit, wondering how often he’d had to rehearse this speech to make it sound genuine. If he’d ever stumbled over the sickening twists and turns, if he’d ever found himself waking up in the middle of the night just like I did.

As he spoke of his make-believe past, true memories of him fastening me inside a small, white cargo plane suddenly flashed in front of my eyes. It wasn’t him and Evan in that field flying or tinkering with planes. It was me. Only me. Evan was always far away, in the back of a pickup truck or left back at home, consumed with a new math workbook.

“Now, for the main event!” My father bellowed into the mic and pointed across the room. “If you would all kindly direct your attention to the left for the unveiling of our new 747-Dreamliner!”

I stood still and stared at him as everyone else looked away.

I heard the sound of a drumroll, a collective gasp, and then loud, thunderous applause as the plane was revealed.

“Those of you who are sitting, feel free to get out of your seats and take a closer look,” he said amidst more applause. “I’ll be sure to finish the rest of my speech before we leave, no worries.”

The crowd laughed, and at once stood up from their seats to walk over for a better look. I took one last look at him and decided I needed to leave. Now.

I pushed my way through the guests and headed toward the exit. When I was halfway there, I felt someone tapping my shoulder from behind.

Turning around, I found myself face to face with my ex-wife—the person I hated only slightly less than my father and brother.

“Hey, Jake,” she said, stepping closer to me. “Long time, no see...Why are you looking at me like that? Don’t you remember me?”

“I’ve been trying hard to forget.” I glanced at her badge. “Did you somehow pick up the wrong nametag or are you still fucking with people’s minds with your games?”

“No.” She forced a smile and spoke low. “I’m Samantha now, Jake. *Samantha.*”

“Bullshit.” Her real name was Riley, Riley Cartwright, and she looked as if she was frozen in time from when we’d last met. She was still wearing her blond hair cut short in a way that complemented her brown eyes, she was the epitome of what ‘untrustworthy’ in the flesh looked like. And no matter how many times I tried to rationalize what she’d done, or attempted to placate the past with one of our softer, high school memories, my hatred of her would probably never be erased.

“How have you been after all these years?” she asked.

“Are you referring to the years *before* you told everyone in Missouri I was abusing you or after? Or maybe you’re referring to the years after I caught you sucking—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence!” She clenched her jaw. “Don’t you dare...And you *did* abuse me, Jake. I was mentally abused by your lack of care, your constant traveling, and your failure to give me what I wanted.”

“You got upset with me because I filed for divorce, and then you told the police I’d previously beat you in the face with a tire jack. That’s *physical* abuse, and it was a goddamn lie.”

“Right, well...” She smiled, fake as usual. “I think enough time has passed for you to be nice to me and get over us drifting apart.”

“You almost cost me my fucking career, Riley,” I said. “That’s not *drifting apart*.”

“Jake—”

“You even got my brother to believe your lies...I know how you got my father to believe you, but how did you get Evan to? Did he get the same *present*, courtesy of your throat?”

“Jake, I swear to God—”

“Jake?” My father suddenly stepped between us. “Jake, is that really you?”

“You know exactly who the fuck it is.”

His eyes widened and he forced a smile for an intrusive camera man who snapped a quick picture. As soon as the photographer walked away, he looked at me and cleared his throat. “You look good, son.”

“I thought you only had *one* son. That guy ‘Evan’ in the photos up there.”

“Yes, well...” A look of sadness crossed his face, but he changed the subject. “I couldn’t believe it when Human Resources told me you actually signed the transfer papers. I’m quite honored and surprised that you’ve agreed to work for my airline.”

“You shouldn’t be. You keep buying and investing in every single airline I switch to. I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“There’s *always* a choice, Jake.”

“I’m sure your first wife would disagree.”

He shifted uneasily, and his smile slightly slipped as the flashes of cameras continue to sound around the room. I tried to look him right in the eye, to finally see him as a human being, but all I could see was a heartless monster who was willing to sacrifice anything for his own dreams, no matter the cost.

“What happened to the commemoration of Flight 1872?” I asked. “The papers said you were finally going to tell the truth.”

“They said I would *address* it. They didn’t say anything about the truth.”

“So, you’re still paying for them to print your lies?”

“No, I did address it.” He pointed across the hangar. “It’s on the new plane if you get a chance to take a look. Nonetheless, I knew having it mentioned in the papers would make you come here. I really need to talk to you. ASAP, Jake. ASAP.”

I turned to walk away, but he grabbed my elbow.

“You’ve been going out of your way to avoid us all for years,” he said. “And I bought Signature to try to put an end to that. I even agreed to your over the top salary request. I more than agreed, actually. I doubled it so you could see that I’m serious about starting over. Is that not trying? Do you know how much money that is?”

“What’s a million to a billionaire?”

“Would you like more, then?”

“I don’t want shit from you. I’ll be quitting soon.”

“That’s not true.” He looked into my eyes. “Flying means too much to you, and you signed the contract. Even if you were to manage to get out of it, I’ll just buy or invest in the next airline you move to because I love you, Jake. I’ve missed you since you left us all those years ago.”

“See?” Riley smiled at me. “Everyone, including me, still loves you, Jake.”

“Fuck you, Riley.”

She gasped, acting as if she was actually shocked.

“Jake.” My father sighed. “When I told a little lie about the flight ceremony to get you here, I didn’t mean for you to take it the wrong way.”

“And when I said, ‘Take care of my wife while I’m flying new routes’, I didn’t mean fuck her.”

Riley’s cheeks reddened and she faked a smile for another photographer.

“Jake, listen. “My father tried to steer the conversation, but I refused to let it go this time.

“You have yet to even *attempt* to apologize for that.”

“For the umpteenth time...” He paused, giving a half wave to someone across the room. “It was a one-time thing that we both absolutely regret. Nothing became of it, we’re both with other people now, and it was a total accident.”

“Her pussy just fell on your dick?”

“No, but if you’d let me explain—”

“There is no justification.” I hated that I saw my own blue eyes in his, that if anyone else stood close enough, they could see it, too. “If you’re interested in explaining it to someone willing to listen, I would write Webster’s and make a claim on your accomplishment before it’s too late. There’s already a term for ‘motherfucker’ but I think the world is in desperate need of knowing that there’s a such thing as a *father-fucker*.”

The two of them glared at me.

“Nothing else to say?” I asked.

“You don’t have the whole story, Jake.” Riley hissed between her teeth.

“I have the only chapter I need. The scene where I came home early and caught you sucking his dick in my bathroom. Unless you were giving out blow jobs as party favors to everyone else, I’m not sure how I could’ve gotten the narrative wrong all these years.”

“You were never there, Jake.” Riley nearly lost it. “You were never home.”

“I was home *that day*.” I stepped back.

“Jake, please don’t leave.” My father looked genuine, but I couldn’t help but feel that he was playing another one of his mental magic tricks. “I think your mother—”

“Don’t you dare bring her up! *Ever*.” I felt an ache in my chest. “And fuck you. Both of you.” I took another step back. “But I am quite serious about that Webster’s submission form. You should hurry up before someone else takes credit.”

I stormed off toward the exit, ready to drink this night away. Something told me to keep going, to not bother looking back, but I couldn’t help it. I glanced over at its sleek white frame, at the light blue and crème emblem on its tail. And just as I was about to turn away and continue heading for the exit, my eyes caught something. Something disturbing and utterly callous.

On the right side of the tail, high enough for all to see was a faded image of my mother’s face in a light sepia tone. Her life span and a few words were written underneath:

I’ll always remember you, Irene.

Love, Nate.

Rest Peacefully,

Sarah Irene Pearson

1949-1999

“It was such a shame, wasn’t it?” An older woman next to me lowered her voice. “Losing his wife in the very first plane he built...I’m sure it still devastates him.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t.” I turned around and scanned the room for my father, catching him mid-laugh. I stared at him with fury running through my veins, waiting for his eyes to meet mine.

He posed for a few more photos with his new, much younger wife at his side and turned around, his eyes meeting mine. He raised his eyebrow, as if he was surprised I was still in attendance. Then he winked at me, mouthing, “Is that good enough?” before turning his attention to someone else.

I clenched my fists, seconds away from walking over and breaking his jaw.

Before I could make that happen, I spotted Gillian standing across the room.

Laughing, she was wearing a short, emerald green dress that left little to the imagination. The dress stopped at her thighs and clung tightly to her hips, showing off her perfect breasts.

I started to walk over to her, but stopped when I realized she was dancing with someone in a navy blue suit. Someone who was rubbing his hands against her back and whispering something into her ear.

Confused, I watched for several more minutes, assuming that it was some friend of hers, a casual dance with an acquaintance. But as she tossed her head back in laughter, I saw exactly who she was dancing with and all the blood left my face.

GATE B18

GILLIAN

New York (JFK)

“You’re hurting me...” I smiled uneasily as Evan Pearson, the CEO’s son dipped me low and told another inappropriate joke. He was holding onto me a little too tightly, and I was hoping Meredith would see my “Please come save me from this asshole” text soon.

I’d thought that if I simply laughed at a few of his lines that he would walk away, but my reactions only seemed to encourage him further. To make matters worse, he was drunk. Yet, anytime a photographer stopped and asked for a photo, he would somehow manage to look sober for all of three seconds for the shot. Then he would return to harassing me.

“Did we date once before, Gillian?” he asked, finally letting go and reading my name tag.

“No,” I said. “We’ve never dated.”

“Are you sure? I never forget a face, and...” He looked down at my breasts, smiling. “You look really familiar.”

“I interviewed you, your father, and your wife a very long time ago when I was a journalist.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. “Maybe that’s it.”

“That’s definitely it. Speaking of which, how is your *wife*?” I slowly pulled my wrist away from his grasp. “Her name is Sharon, right?”

“Yes.” He laughed. “She left me, but Shhhh! Don’t print that. No one knows yet.”

“My roommate is over there waiting for me.” I started to step back. “I need to—”

“Wait.” He grabbed my wrist again, much harder this time, his fingers pressing deep into my skin. “Were you shitting me about the interviewing me when you were a journalist thing?”

I shook my head. I remembered that awkward encounter all too well. A full day interview where he and his father, unsurprisingly, fed me rehearsed answers about Elite. After blowing off the interview three times in a row, they gave me answers I could’ve found on Wikipedia and turned a simple profile project into an absolute nightmare.

“Did you ask us how this amazing airline was really built?” He grabbed a glass of champagne off a waiter’s tray and tossed it back. “Did you ask us how we really started this, by chance?”

“With all due respect, everyone already knows the answer to that.” It was embedded in the history books as the ultimate Cinderella story.

“No.” He shook his head, his speech slurred. “Everyone just thinks they do. Come home with me and I’ll give you the exclusive...You have to swallow, though, I’m clean, so no condoms.” He looked me right in my eyes, giving me a familiar look that reminded me of someone else. “I just hate confirming the lies year after year at these parties...I’m getting very tired. Very old and tired...”

I was slightly curious as to what he meant by ‘confirming the lies,’ but minutes ago he’d claimed that he invented Starbucks coffee machines so I knew this was just the liquor talking.

I started thinking of another excuse to get the hell away from him, but a blonde stepped between us and took his hand—whispering into his ear.

“He’s here?” he asked her, his eyes wide. “He actually came?”

The woman nodded.

“Where?”

She didn’t answer. She just walked away.

Without saying another word to me, he turned away and followed her into the crowd.

Relieved, I headed to the other side of the hangar, in desperate need of some space. I pushed my way through the guests and past the packed restrooms. Noticing a “Silent Auction” sign hanging above a door, I stepped inside a room full of glass cases and mirrored walls.

The curator immediately handed me a blue sheet of bidding paper and smiled. Then, as if she knew I wasn’t in here to bid on anything, she rolled her eyes and whispered, “You came here to check on your makeup, didn’t you?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m just trying to get some space.”

“Sure.” She pursed her lips and snatched the blue paper from my hands. “You can ‘get some space’ on the far side of the room for twenty minutes. Then you need to get out.”

“Thank you.” I stepped away and stared at my reflection.

Even though there were small bags under my eyes, Meredith had done wonders with my makeup. The second I told her my flight was diverted and there was a gala tonight, she’d insisted on dressing me from head to toe.

Although I still wasn’t sure about the revealing green dress she’d made me wear, the bronze glittering eye shadow and bright pink lipstick were nothing short of amazing.

I dug through my clutch for the lipstick and suddenly heard the sound of glass shattering onto the floor.

“What the hell? You can’t just barge in here, sir!” The curator gasped. “Sir, you have to get out. *Now.*”

My head snapped up and I saw a red-faced Jake through the mirror’s glass. His eyes met mine in the reflection.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” He bellowed.

I looked back at him, completely confused. The few guests that were in the room headed for the door, murmuring their shock.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, *Gillian?*” He repeated, even louder this time.

“Excuse me?” I spun around.

“I didn’t stutter.” He gritted his teeth and walked over to me. “Why the hell were you talking to Evan Pearson?”

Shaking her head, the curator picked up her brochures and left the room, leaving the two of us alone.

I wasn’t sure why he was glaring at me right now but my blood was beginning to boil at his rude ass intrusion. “I’ll talk to you when you calm down,” I said. “Whenever you realize who you’re talking to.”

“I’m talking to *you.*” He hissed. “And I’m talking about Evan Pearson, someone I need you to never, ever talk to again.” He stepped closer, pressing me against the wall. “But since you’ve already done it, I need you to tell me why the fuck you were talking to him, and I need you to explain it right now.”

“I wasn’t *talking* to him. He approached me when I got here, insisted on getting a dance, and telling me stupid jokes.”

“You expect me to believe that shit?” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“I don’t care what you believe.” I felt my face turning red. “And I don’t have to explain *anything* to you. Do you really think you can tell me who I can and can’t talk to?”

“When it comes to certain people, yes.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you, Jake,” I said, feeling angrier than I’d ever felt before. “But you don’t own me.”

“I’m aware.” His forehead touched mine and he slid a hand under my dress and between my thighs, tapping my bare pussy with his fingertips. “But I’m pretty sure, for however long our arrangement lasts, that I do own *this*.”

My breathing slowed as he pressed his thumb directly against my clit, but I didn’t back down.

“Our arrangement only covers sex with other people, not *conversations* with other people.”

“Is that so?” He moved his hand away, leaving my pussy throbbing. “Do we need to add a common sense clause about not letting other people put their hands on you and you fucking laughing about it?”

“He’s the CEO’s son, Jake. The press was watching his every move. What was I supposed to do?”

“Before or after he tried to fuck you?” He damn near shouted. “Do what you do to me so easily, *walk away*.”

“That’s your specialty, not mine.” I felt the sudden urge to slap him. “He was drunk and I was simply being nice in entertaining him.”

“You can be nice to anyone but him. As of this moment, he no longer exists to you, so don’t say as much as one word to him again.”

“When I see him on my way out, I’ll be sure to say goodbye. I might even say, ‘Nice seeing you again’.”

“Then consider this arrangement over.”

“Because I talked to *Evan Pearson*?” I was on the verge of losing it. “Because you feel like he’s some type of threat?”

“Because he’s my goddamn *brother*.” He said it so loudly that the woman who’d just walked into the gallery stopped dead in her tracks.

“Exactly.” His attention was still on me. “So, tell me right now, Gillian, is staying the hell away from my brother while you’re fucking me going to be that much of a problem for you?”

“No.” I stared him right in the eyes. “Because I won’t be fucking you anymore. I don’t need this.” I pushed my way past him and left, not even caring that the woman who’d walked in on us was Miss Connors.

GATE B19

JAKE

New York (JFK)—> Los Angeles (LAX)

The flashing white fireworks from the gala lit up the sky as I sped out of the parking lot. My blood pressure heightened with every passing second, and I was sure if I didn't make it home within the next hour, I was going to do something I might later regret.

I was used to seeing my father's face plastered all over magazines and commercials, used to reading his words and rolling my eyes at his every lie, but actually seeing him face to face tonight made me realize just how much I still despised him. How much Elite and everything he stood for repulsed me.

I turned on the radio so I could focus on something else, but as thoughts of my father slipped away, thoughts of Gillian came into focus. The sight of her in that half-of-a-dress and flirting with Evan. The fact that it actually made me react.

"Our arrangement covers sex, not conversations with random people..."

Bullshit.

I made it to the valet at The Madison and didn't bother waiting for the attendant to approach my car. I stepped out and left the keys in the ignition, quickly rushing up the building's front steps.

"Good evening, Mr. Weston." Jeff held the doors open. "How are the skies lately?"

"Turbulent." I went straight to the open elevators and up to my suite, still appreciating that I no longer had to double check security each time I came home. I opened all the windows in my living room, letting the cool night air sift inside. Then I walked into my kitchen and pulled out all my shot glasses, filling them with bourbon.

I knocked back two and my voicemail system turned on.

"Welcome home. You have two new messages. Would you like to hear them?"

"Yes."

"Please say the password."

I tossed back shot number three. "One, eight, seven, two."

"Message number one..." There was a beep, then a raspy voice. "Hello? Is this Deluxe Catering? This is the number that's—"

"Next."

"Message number two."

"Jake, it's me." Riley's whiney voice echoed throughout the living room. "Jake, I know you're home, so pick up...Okay, look. Regardless of how you feel about me, Evan and your dad, we need to talk to you. It's really important and we've been using any means necessary to get your attention for years. Can you not see that? Can you not see?" She sounded as if she was actually crying. "If you're still listening..."

"Next."

"No new messages. Would you like me to delete the most recent messages?"

“Yes.”

“Okay. You now have thirty-six archived messages. Goodbye.”

I picked up my fourth shot, ready to toss it back, but there was a loud and sudden knock at my door.

The type of rude and inconsiderate knock that could only come from Riley.

With the words, “Stay the hell away from me” on my tongue, I walked over to the door, but when I swung it open, I saw Gillian.

Soaking wet, she was still dressed in the emerald green dress from the gala. Her face was flushed red, and her chest was heaving up and down.

“Yes?” I raised my eyebrow.

“We need to get a few things straight,” she said, walking straight past me and into the condo. “We’re going to get through this right now and I’m going to talk, and you’re going to listen.”

I slammed the door shut and tossed back my shot.

She crossed her arms and waited for me to look at her as her dress dripped water onto my floor.

“You can’t talk to me the way you did at the gala. You can’t *ever* talk to me like that again. I’m not your fucking doormat and I’m not some little doe-eyed girl who’s so desperate for your cock, that I’ll let you treat me any kind of way.”

“Gillian—”

“*I’m still talking.*” She cut me off, seething. “*I am still talking, Jake. Not you. You’ve said what you had to say in the rudest way possible and right now, it’s my turn.*”

I blinked.

“I know that you don’t really know me, that you don’t even *want* to know me outside of the bedroom, but you need to know this anyway. I have to be respected. Always. You will respect me for as long as we continue this arrangement and if you have a problem with something or “think” I’ve done something to betray what we’ve agreed on, you will talk to me like I’m a human being and not a goddamn possession.”

She paced the floor as she spoke, keeping her eyes on mine. “I’m the one who’s risking the most by sleeping with you. If we’re reported, I get an automatic termination, but since you’re a pilot you’d only get a slap on the wrist and a write-up. So, the least you could do is try to show me some respect. And you can start with an apology for blowing up on me the way you did in that gallery.” She suddenly stopped walking and let out a breath. “That was cruel and unnecessary, Jake. It was also very humiliating.”

Silence.

“Is that everything?” I asked once she looked like she had nothing more to say.

“Yes. Yes, I believe that’s everything.”

“Good,” I said. “You can get the hell out now.”

“*What?*”

“Do I need to say the words a bit slower for you?” I glared at her. “I said, *you can get the hell out now*. Tell the cab service at the back entrance to take you home and charge it to me, and then don’t come back. *Ever.*”

“No.” She walked over to me, stepping so close we were nearly touching. “I’m not doing anything until you say you’re sorry.”

“I’m *not* sorry.”

She opened her mouth to say something else, but I beat her to it.

“I’m not sorry, Gillian.” I made it perfectly clear. “I’m not sorry for a goddamn thing I said to you at that gala. I meant every single word, and if my delivery was a bit blunt for you—”

“If it was a bit blunt for me, then what?”

“Deal with it.”

“*Deal with it?*”

“Are you partially deaf or do you just enjoy randomly repeating everything I fucking say?” I crossed my arms. “I didn’t stutter.”

“*Jake...*” The strap of her dress fell down her shoulder, exposing the fact that she wasn’t wearing a bra, but she made no move to fix it. “Regardless of whether you’re really sorry or not, it’s the respectful thing to do.”

“The door is right behind you. Make sure you shut it when you get tired of talking to yourself.” I turned away and headed down the hallway, back to the kitchen for more alcohol.

I finished off my shot, sent Jeff a quick text to make sure he looked out for Gillian on her way downstairs, and then I took off my suit and slipped into the shower.

Letting the warm water hit me on my face, I shut my eyes and wondered how much more liquor it would take for me to forget this mess of a night.

I reached for my soap, but the sound of my shower door opening and closing caught me off guard. All of a sudden, Gillian grabbed my arm from behind and squeezed my bicep, forcing me to turn around and face her again.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” She stretched out her arms as if she was about to push my chest, but I grabbed her hands.

What the fuck...

“Does that feel good, Jake?” Her face reddened. “Someone coming from behind you and yelling at you for no reason?”

“*Gillian...*” I narrowed my eyes at her as the water above fell over the both of us.

“How about if I did it in front of a bunch of people in public?” She was on the verge of tears. “Do I need to wake up all your neighbors and invite them over so we can recreate the same effect?” She tried to break free from my grasp, but I held her still and pushed her against the tile—pinning her arms above her head.

“I think you need to calm down.” I tightened my grip on her wrists.

“Well, *I* think we need to call my roommate over and have her innocently flirt with you and compare my reaction so you can see how a mature person would react.”

“You consider what you’re doing right now to be *mature*?”

“I consider it *necessary*.” Her dress slid down a bit as the water fell harder, exposing the top of her breasts. “This is necessary until I get the apology you know I deserve, or else.”

“Or else, *what*?” I wasn’t sure what it was about this woman that got under my skin and effortlessly drove up my blood pressure, but if we didn’t end this tonight, I was pretty sure she’d soon have that shit down to a science. “Are you going to fucking *talk me* to death?”

She was suddenly quiet—a shocking rarity, but seething all the same. Her green eyes were glued to mine and her lips were tightly tucked into her perfect mouth.

“No words?” I asked. “Does that mean you’re finally ready to leave?”

“It means you’re in fucking denial,” she said. “It means you’re a bigger asshole than I could’ve ever imagined. And addictive sex or not, I will never speak to you again.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“*I won’t.*” She swallowed. “I think you like me a lot more than you’re willing to admit.”

“So, you’re *not* done talking...”

“Regardless of what you claim, you *like* when I call you late at night.”

“That’s why I hit ignore so often?”

“You like talking to me because you don’t have anyone else, and I know you don’t have any other friends.” She tried to move again, but I didn’t let her. “I think you even like when I try to get to know you better, when I ask you my questions.”

“I hate your goddamn questions.”

“All I want is an apology.” Her voice was firm. “But if you don’t want to give it, it just means you’re a bigger asshole than I ever imagined, and addictive sex or not, I can promise you, I’ll never talk to again.”

“Okay. Fine.” I immediately let her hands go and stepped back. “Step out of that dress and I’ll show you just how fucking *sorry* I am.”

“What?”

“Take off that dress—excuse me, that *piece* of a dress, and I’ll happily show you how sorry I am, Gillian. Do I need to repeat it again?”

Silence.

“You can’t seriously think that I want to have sex with you right now...”

“I don’t think you know what the hell you want.” I noticed her nipples hardening through the silk fabric. “And I’m starting to think we’re going to have some problems if you don’t make whatever that is a lot clearer.”

“Jake...” Her cheeks reddened as I dragged my finger against the zipper on the side of her dress. “Jake, I just want you to say that you’re sorry.”

“Take off that dress and I will.”

She stood still staring at me for several seconds, an ultimate stalemate. Her eyes never left mine, mine never left hers, and after what felt like forever, she unzipped her dress.

It fell to the tile floor in a drenched pool of green silk, confirming that she was wearing absolutely nothing underneath—making me even angrier that Evan had put his hands on her. She started to stoop down to unbuckle her silver stilettos, but I grabbed her hand—telling her to keep them on.

I pulled her close to me, holding her directly under the water. Without saying anything else, I pulled her down onto the shower bench.

Her lips latched onto mine—angry and wet, and she bit my tongue each time I tried to explore her mouth. She fought for control—cursing at me, trying to push me back against the bench so she could be on top, but I gripped her waist and easily flipped her over.

“Get on your knees,” I whispered, pulling her back by her hair.

She slowly leaned forward, bracing herself against the wood—her perfect ass and heels facing me.

I gripped her hips and slid inside her drenched pussy.

“Ahhh...” She moaned as I thrust all the way into her, as I slapped her ass.

“I’m sorry...” I whispered into her ear. “I’m very sorry, Gillian...”

She breathed out a soft, “Fuck you,” and I slapped her ass once more.

She cried out as I pounded into her again and again, as I gripped her hips and made her take every inch of my cock.

“I said I was sorry...” I bit her shoulder. “Is that good enough for you?”

She didn’t answer. She just moaned, moving back against me.

I grabbed her hair and pulled it back until her head tilted back and her eyes were on mine. “Are you going to accept my apology?” I slid my hand between her thighs and rubbed her clit, making her moan even louder.

“Is that a no?”

Her clit swelled beneath my fingertips, her pussy dripped onto my fingers. “You can demand an apology, but you won’t accept it?”

“Yes...”

“Yes to you accepting my apology or yes to you not accepting it?”

“Ohhh...Oh goddd...”

“Answer me.” I tugged her hair and suddenly felt her pussy clenching my cock. “Is my sorry not good enough, Gillian?”

“I...” She shut her eyes as her body shook against mine.

“Yes...Yes!” She screamed one last time and fell forward.

Coming right after her, I held her sides so she wouldn't hit the bench face first. Our breathing was heavy and in sync, and I waited until it was somewhat normal before pulling out of her.

I positioned her so she was sitting up and against the wall, and then the both of us sat still—the warm shower water still lashing against our skin.

After several minutes, she turned to look at me, her sexy green eyes meeting mine. “I missed using this shower.”

I smiled, holding back a laugh and stood up. I turned off the water and grabbed her hand, pulling her up and leading her into my bedroom.

“Here.” I handed her a towel and wrapped another around my waist.

I walked into my closet and pulled out the bottom dresser drawer where I'd tossed more of the random things I'd found hidden around my place since she first left. I grabbed a pair of black leggings, an oversized Boston U. T-shirt, and a pair of panties. And for some reason, I left her other clothing items inside and closed the drawer.

I returned to the bedroom and sat down next to her, handing her the clothes.

“Thank you,” she said softly, looking surprised. “Where did you find these?”

“Where they didn't belong.” I put on a pair of black sweatpants. “But you're welcome.”

She looked at me as she put on her clothes, giving me that strange look she often gave when we finished having sex.

“Did I hurt you?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I would've told you in the shower.”

“I meant at the gala. Did I grab your arm from behind the way you did to me here?”

“No.” She shook her head.

I sighed, hesitating. “I *am* sorry, actually.”

“For talking to me the way that you did?”

“For doing it publicly.”

“Jake—”

“Yes,” I said, taking her hands and helping her stand up. “I'm sorry for talking to you that way.”

“So, it won't happen again?”

“Not unless you feel the need to talk to my brother again.”

“I won't...” She bit her lip. “Were you adopted? Is Evan your stepbrother?”

“This conversation can't happen,” I said. “Drop it.”

“Evan never mentioned a brother when I interviewed him at my newspaper years ago. I'm just asking.”

“Gillian, if you and I are going to work—” I tried to keep my voice calm. “If whatever the hell this is is going to work, I mean, I need you to drop this and never bring it up again. It has nothing to do with whatever the hell we're doing.”

She smiled a sarcastic smile. “Are you saying you're now open to more since you *do* enjoy talking to me? That you could see yourself falling in love with me?”

“This is hardly love.”

“Then it's hardly lust.”

“Then we'll just call it *us*.” I rolled my eyes and led her into the guest bedroom, picking up her clutch on the way and handing it to her. Hitting the lights, I walked her over to the bed and pulled back the sheets. “You can sleep here tonight. I'll have you taken home in the morning.”

“Thank you.” She climbed into the bed, looking sexier than ever.

“How did you get here tonight?” I asked.

“My roommate dropped me off.”

“You’re lying.” I saw it in her eyes. “How did you really get here?”

“I took the bus.”

“Were there no cabs or Uber drivers available?”

“Yes, but some of us weren’t born rich, so we have to wait until pay day to have access to our money.”

“I wasn’t born rich,” I said, roughly fluffing the pillow behind her head. “Next time you’re that angry, just get a cab. I’ll pay for it.”

She looked stunned. “Is that an open invitation to stay at your place whenever I need to?”

“I think you’ve stayed in my place more than enough.” I slipped my hands beneath her thighs and pulled her closer to me. “But fuck no, that’s not an invitation to stay here at all. Outside of tonight, I can guarantee you’ll never spend the night here again.”

“Too worried you’ll catch feelings for me?”

“Too worried you’ll *think* I’m catching feelings for you.” I trailed her lips with my finger. “I’m not, Gillian, but I do enjoy talking to you. Sometimes.”

She let out a soft breath and started talking again—launching into one of those long monologues, slowly turning me on with each and every word that fell from her puffy pink lips.

This time, when she finally finished, I just stared at her. Then I realized I needed to end this conversation right now before we had sex again, before I failed to get enough sleep for my flight tomorrow night.

I didn’t say anything else to her. I simply took one last look at her, hit the lights, and walked away. I walked into the kitchen, put away the shot glasses and bourbon, and retreated to my own room where her previous strawberry scent was just now beginning to fade away.

Laying back on the bed, I stared at the ceiling, wondering how the hell we’d once again gone from arguing to fucking to cordial conversation.

Every other woman I’d argued with in the past—no matter the discussion, instantly landed on my ‘never speak to again’ list. Our ties were immediately cut, our communication forever frozen to that one particular moment in time. Yet, multiple arguments later, and I wasn’t feeling the need to block Gillian’s number or replace her with someone else.

When I finally shut my eyes hours later, I drifted into the easiest sleep I’d had in months. But when I woke up, I realized that I wasn’t in my own bedroom anymore. I was laying next to Gillian and she was wrapped in my arms.

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

I don't want to get my hopes up, and I don't want to forget how quickly he's capable of switching the hot and cold switch, but I really like him. A lot more than I probably should...And regardless of the nonchalant tone he sometimes takes with me, the way he now kisses me, and the way he takes his time fucking me, only reveals he likes me, too.

That said, I think this man is going to get me fired...

The discretion we shared before—the perfectly weighted “Meet me here” at this time, is now replaced with “The second I see you, we're fucking.”

He takes my hand in public—leading me away with no regard for our hundreds of coworkers or whoever else may see. Each time, I attempt to play it off as some type of silly game, but I always lose because he only fucks me harder every time I do that. And the day he fucked me in an abandoned food court stock room in Minneapolis/St. Paul International, I started looking up new jobs.

It's only a matter of time.

Write later,

****Taylor G.****

1 comment posted:

KayTROLL: You'll be getting yourself fired. Just like before. At least this time you won't have anyone else to blame but yourself...

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

There are now nightly phone calls, endless emails as we fly overseas, and text messages that never fail to make me wet. And yet, despite the fact that we are talking more than ever, that he only occasionally sends me those “This message is not about fucking” lines, he only lets our conversations skim the surface.

Questions about his past or his family are still abruptly cut short, any mention of ‘us’ is quickly dissolved into other safe topics, and when he can’t find another distraction, he ends our discussion with sex.

And last night, after he took me against the door of my hotel room closet, he kissed me so long and deeply that I could’ve sworn I heard him say, “You’re not good for me...But I like you anyway...”

At least, I *think* that’s what he said...

Write later,

Taylor G.

1 comment posted:

KayTROLL: The only reason I haven’t unfollowed your blog yet is because I pity you and your life. And your train-wreck posts make me feel ten times better about myself.

GATE B20

JAKE

Orlando (MCO)—> Hawaii (HNL)—> New York (JFK)

The taste of Gillian's pussy was still on my lips from a tryst hours ago in Orlando, providing enough of a distraction from another long week. It was also a mental diversion that kept me from paying too much attention to this morning's current pilots' meeting. Almost.

"So..." A man in a badly tailored blue suit stood in front of the small conference room, addressing me and twenty other pilots. "As you all know, we at Elite have the best benefits packages out of all commercial airlines, the best planes in the sky, and we also have the best track record for safety."

"Did you really call us in here to read the company brochure aloud?" I asked. This meeting had gone on for half an hour too long already. "I have far better things to do in Hawaii."

"Of course, *you* do, Captain Weston." He rolled his eyes and hit the lights, forcing a screen to fall down over the wall. "I called this meeting to discuss our non-fraternization policy."

All of a sudden, a grainy image appeared on the screen. A pilot in uniform tugging the hand of a flight attendant past an "Under Construction Zone."

"Now, the airports don't typically install the high grade cameras in the construction zones because, well...What would be the point of that since they're practically off limits, but a passenger caught this happening weeks ago and posted it on social media with the caption: *Bet the pilot is about to fly his cock up her runway.*"

There were a few laughs from the other pilots.

"There was also this clip." He clicked the remote, and a far clearer picture began playing. A video of a pilot in uniform kissing a woman against a wall in a closed and empty food court at Seattle International.

"Now," he said. "This is only a formality, as we're simply speaking to all Elite pilots who have flown routes to these particular airports during the times that the videos were taken. Needless to say, although what goes on in your personal bedrooms is none of our business, the idea of two employees blatantly breaking our non-fraternization rule when we so adamantly market our rules to the public is a bit..." He tapped his chin. "It's a bit shameful. No, another 's' word...Shocking? Staggering? No... *Scandalous.*"

He finally settled on a term and hit the lights. "If you know who this is, I suggest you tell them that we're on to them. And if it's you, I suggest you tell us at once so we can immediately terminate the flight attendant and have you sign off on the pilot's breach of policy form. You'll be subject to a disciplinary action, but you'll keep your job, as long as you cooperate."

He continued to talk as he handed out paperwork, but I kept my eyes on the screen behind him. The videos were playing on a loop, but since me and Gillian's faces never looked up or to the side, there was no way of knowing it was us. It only appeared to be two employees who worked for the same airline, two employees who were kissing in a way that looked like they didn't give a fuck if they got caught.

“Are you listening to me, Captain Weston?” His question snapped me out of my thoughts. “Captain Weston?”

“Yes?”

“I said you can leave the airport as soon as you sign the non-fraternization policy again.” He gestured around the now empty room. “You’re the only one still sitting here.”

I looked down at the paper, noticing the red lined change: *I, Jake Weston, have never, and will never engage in a relationship with any employee of Elite Airways, in any department or extension of Elite Airways. I also am in compliance with the original non-fraternization policy below.*

Picking up a pen, I signed my name and he took the paper from me. I stood up and headed for the door, but he called after me.

“Yes?” I looked over my shoulder.

“Um, you left something in your chair.” He pointed to a crumpled pair of black, lace panties.

“Thank you.” I picked them up and returned them to my pocket, not letting him ask whatever the hell he was tempted to ask. I stepped out of the room and into the terminal at Honolulu International, in no rush to spend my next four off days on the island.

Years ago, I would’ve relished the idea of spending countless hours near the beaches and fucking as many women as possible, but for some reason, that idea wasn’t as appealing right now.

I pulled out my phone and looked over Gillian’s line. She was currently in Orlando en route via a red eye flight to Seattle. From there she had a trip to Los Angeles with a three day stopover.

I calculated the math in my head: Los Angeles was only a five hour flight away from Hawaii, with a three hour time zone difference. Seattle was six hours away from Orlando, so she’d land there within the next couple of hours for a short flight to Los—

I immediately stopped my train of thought.

What the fuck am I doing?

I shook my head and headed down to the ground transportation dock, hailing the first available cab. I needed to get to the hotel ASAP before I could entertain that reckless thought any further.

GATE B21

GILLIAN

Orlando (MCO)—> Seattle (SEA)—> Los Angeles (LAX)

I winced as I made another pot of coffee for the first class cabin. The muscles in my arms were weak and heavy—worn out from holding onto a closet doorframe while Jake bent low on his knees and pleased my pussy with his mouth.

I was still waiting for a time when the sex wouldn't be so spectacular, an instance where it would only be 'good,' or maybe even average, but it was getting more intense every time.

Making sure the coffee was hot enough, I turned it on low, ready to start breakfast service. I opened the compartment where we kept the placemats, but Miss Connors stepped in front of me and slammed it shut.

"How are you on this lovely day today, Miss Taylor?" She asked, smiling.

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm *amazing*." Her smile didn't waver. "I didn't see you on the crew shuttle this morning, so I was quite surprised that you beat me to the airport for a change. Imagine my surprise when I arrived this morning and saw you already waiting patiently at the gate."

"Yes, well..." I wasn't sure where she was going with this. "On time is late, and early is on time. I caught the shuttle right before yours."

"Oh, really?" She crossed her arms and leaned against the counter. "You know, that's quite interesting because there was no shuttle before mine. Even if there was, I would've seen you catch it because I was in the lobby having coffee and a book at five this morning. If you came down, there's no way I would've missed you."

I said nothing.

"Furthermore," she said, narrowing her eyes at me. "I actually went to your room at seven to make sure you were coming, so imagine how shocked I was when a housekeeping associate told me you never actually checked into your room the other day."

I felt my face turning red, but I still didn't say anything.

"So, I started thinking to myself. Well, Miss Taylor is *definitely* incompetent at times, and although I did see her argue with someone familiar at the gala weeks ago, there's no way this young woman would risk her career over a pilot's cock." She shook her head. "There's no way the front desk agent had the same girl in mind when he told me you turned in your room key shortly after checking in and was picked up by some 'pilot guy.' There's no way, is there, Miss Taylor?"

I swallowed, unable to meet her gaze anymore.

"*End it.*" She narrowed her eyes at me. "End it today. I don't care what type of stupid system of lust the two of you have going on, but if it continues past today, I'll have you fired."

"Miss Connors, I'm—"

She held up her hand. “I expected more from you. You can do much better than a goddamn pilot,” She rolled her eyes and walked away without another word, leaving me completely embarrassed.

Seconds after checking into my Los Angeles hotel, I got the hell away from Miss Connors and locked myself in my room. I plugged my laptop into the wall and sat at the desk, forcing myself to temporarily forget about her threats.

I googled “Flight Attendants Fired for Breaking Employee Fraternalization Policy,” and several pages of results popped up. I clicked on each of the links, my heart sinking with each and every article. Of the twenty I read, eighteen of the incidents were from Elite Airways, but they were several years old. The more current articles were all quotes from executives, all of them saying a variation of, “That’s why our safety record is so high. Our flight employees are pure professionals. No other airline in the world has a policy like ours, but the proof is in the policy.”

Shit...

I closed all the browser windows and leaned back in my chair. I was going to have to find a way to end this; losing my job over sex wasn’t worth it, no matter how amazing it was.

Sighing, I got up and took a long shower—thinking through the past few months, tallying up all of our meet-ups. No matter how badly I wanted to believe that this could turn into something more, the only thing that improved between us was the sex. Our conversations were still on his terms, still unbalanced and tilted in favor of my reveals and his conceals. And the longer I continued to deny the fact that deep down, I did want more, the longer I would drag this out and potentially get hurt.

I stepped out of the shower and immediately scrolled down to Jake’s name in my phone. I typed my email and hastily hit send, not giving myself a chance to change my mind.

Gillian: We need to end this. Now. I’m sorry...

He didn’t respond.

And entire hour passed before I stopped staring at the screen and realized he wasn’t going to. Figuring silence was his easy way of accepting things, I opened my laptop once more and opened up a few new tabs.

Since I’d managed to go several weeks without giving in to my curiosity about Jake’s family, and we were now practically over, I had to know what he meant by Evan being his brother. Why he said it in a way that looked as if he hated to admit the fact.

I typed in “Evan Pearson” in one tab and “Elite Airways CEO Nathaniel Pearson” in another.

I clicked on the best picture of Nathaniel and enlarged it, raising my eyebrow as I noticed the similarities between him and his son, Evan. Then I pulled up a picture of Jake.

At first glance, there wasn’t much to compare—Nathaniel’s features were far softer and his hair in his younger years was a dark brown that complemented his full mustache. But his eyes—those bright blue and stunning irises were damn near identical to Jake’s.

So he couldn’t have been adopted...

I stared at the two of them for at least five minutes, wondering how the hell something like this had gone undiscovered for so long, how some opportunistic reporter hadn’t already spun the story to the tabloids at least. I was certain ‘family-oriented CEO fathered a secret son’ would’ve fetched a high price.

I made a cup of cheap hotel coffee and started to read over the short biography on his father's 'About the CEO' page. Everything was exactly how I'd remembered it years before, all standing still in its fairy tale glory:

At six years old, Nathaniel Pearson was a young boy who only dreamed of being a pilot. Growing up poor, his parents were unable to afford lessons at the local glider school, so he learned how to build planes instead. After dropping out of high school at age fourteen, Pearson worked two jobs to help support his family, and eventually enrolled himself into flight school and became one of our country's most decorated pilots.

After decades of service, he started Elite Airways, with the inaugural flight of a plane he helped design. However, the very first flight ended in fatality—killing his own wife, Sarah Irene, and severely injuring his only son, Evan.

Although Evan healed completely, Sarah succumbed to her injuries, forcing Nathaniel into years of depression. Amidst his heartache, Nathaniel vowed to make his airline the safest in the world and Elite has had no fatal crashes since.

He hopes to see this record continue.

I clicked on Evan's profile, but his biography was far shorter, far less informational. It was simply a rehash of his university years and his love for flying. His picture was an older one of him in a navy blue pilot uniform.

Frustrated, I leaned back and played a YouTube video of him being interviewed several years ago. As the questions were asked and answered plainly, I started to think that whatever ties Jake had to him were maybe long lost, or that maybe he was the product of infidelity the family wanted to keep hidden. I read a few more articles and prepared to turn off the interview, but I heard Evan say something that caught me off guard.

"Yes," he said. "I only spent a few years in the flight academy. I graduated with honors. I still have the uniform." Then a faded, younger picture of him in his grey academy uniform appeared onscreen.

I paused the video and rewound it—replaying that small part again and again, watching as the interviewer moved to the next question with ease.

I searched through my email and pulled up the notes I'd written years ago, looking for the direct quote that never made it into the article, but one I knew I'd marked down: "*I went to the flight academy, but I struggled to make it. I finished, not with honors, but the experience was worth it. I still have the uniform.*"

Out of an old researching habit, I rewound the YouTube clip to his flight academy picture, zooming in on the faint grey digits etched in the side of the photo—his student ID. Then I searched for the number of The Flight Academy—dialing the listed extension the second it hit my screen.

"Admissions Department," a male voice said after two rings. "How may I help you?"

"I'm—" I cleared my throat. "I'm doing some research for *The Times*. We're doing a profile on a graduate of your academy."

"Oh, great." He sounded honored. "We love seeing those. What do you need from me?"

"I'm just fact-checking, want to be sure I have the right background for our person."

"I got it." The sound of keyboard keys clacking was in his background. "You can never be too sure these days, huh? One second..." More typing. "Per our policy, I can only confirm or deny based on a student ID number you give me first. Do you have that?"

“Yes. Five, four, eight, nine, seven.” I stared at the photo. “One, zero, zero, nine.”

“Got it. What do you need to know?”

“Did this student graduate with honors?”

“High honors. Won every damn award in the goddamn book.” He laughed. “Looks like we even made one up for him his senior year.”

“Can you confirm the name?”

“Only after you give it to me first.”

“Right...Um, Pearson. Evan Pearson.”

“No, Miss. That’s not the name in our records. Perhaps you mixed up the—”

“No, I’m sorry.” I cut him off. “I was looking at the wrong sheet. Weston. Jake Weston.”

“That’s him. Jake C. Weston.” He paused. “He agreed to be profiled?”

“Took a lot of convincing.” I started to hang up, but I thought of one last thing. “Do you have a yearbook by chance? A digital copy?”

“I can send you an access code for it that’ll expire in an hour. You don’t have permission to use any of the images for your paper, though.”

“I won’t.” I recited my email address, thanked him, and ended the call. I stared at my inbox, waiting for the message to come through. When it did, ten minutes later, I immediately clicked on the link and scrolled through the scanned pages of the yearbook, stopping in utter shock when I reached the W’s.

There, at the top of the page, was a fresh-faced Jake, smiling proudly. I pulled up Evan’s interview picture right next to it and realized he’d photo-shopped his face over Jake’s.

I pulled up a few other photos of Evan from the press—pictures of him playing on the lawn of the academy and standing in front of small planes. And as I continued to scroll through the academy’s yearbooks, I saw that every single one of those photos were photo-shopped, too.

What the hell...

I searched for “Sarah Irene Pearson” and images of her pretty face, her smiling with Nathaniel, and her funeral appeared. There were no biography pages for her, only links that circled back to Flight 1872 and pictures of Nathaniel crying, with Evan at his side the day they buried her.

Jake was nowhere to be found in any of the pictures or files. He wasn’t even briefly mentioned in her public obituary. It was as if they’d erased his very existence.

I immediately shut down my laptop, deciding that I needed to drop this for good. I didn’t need to dig any deeper, I didn’t need to know anymore.

I lay back on my bed, trying my best to stop wondering about why someone would do that to Jake and why he would let the charade continue to happen for so many years. I rolled over to set an alarm, but there was a knock at my door.

Confused, I got up and opened the door, coming face to face with Jake.

“What the—” I stepped back. “Aren’t you supposed to be in Hawaii right now?”

“What the hell does this text message mean?” he asked, holding his phone in front of my face.

I blinked, still unable to process that he was standing in front of me right now. Looking absolutely livid, he was dressed in a casual grey T-shirt that clung to his muscles in all the right ways and dark blue jeans that brought out the shining azure jewels in his latest watch.

“Gillian?” He narrowed his eyes at me. “What the hell does this text message mean?”

The sound of the elevator doors opening filled the hallway and I pulled him inside my room.

Shutting the door, I avoided looking directly at him and cleared my throat. “It’s my attempt at saying goodbye.”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit cruel to deny me a goodbye in person?” He tilted my chin up with his fingertips, forcing my eyes to meet his. “You could’ve waited and told me this in New York next week.”

“Before or after I let you fuck me?”

“After, preferably.” He smiled. “Is this some type of joke?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I really did want to say goodbye and end this, for me.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “I need a reason.”

“I just gave you one.”

“Wanting to say goodbye is not a *reason*.”

“Fine.” I swallowed as he trailed a finger against my collarbone. “It’s against the rules.”

“You knew it was against the rules when we started. Try again.”

“My supervisor knows and threatened to have me fired. I’m not willing to lose my career over sleeping with you.”

“She’s not going to fire you.” He looked amused. “If she was, she would’ve done it after the gala after she heard me practically say we were fucking.” His hand moved down to my waist. “But now that you’ve brought that up, we need to be far more careful. There was a video of us kissing in the hallway via security camera.”

My eyes widened. “Do you not hear yourself, Jake? Is that not the perfect reason to end this?”

“No, and I’m still waiting for you to give me an acceptable one. Are you finished?”

I was silent for a few seconds. “I’m not attracted to you anymore.”

“A reason that doesn’t insult my intelligence.” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “Tell me the truth.”

“I like you.”

He blinked.

“And I feel like you don’t and won’t ever feel the same, so on top of the threats from my supervisor, I’d rather cut my losses now.” I stepped back. “That way, I won’t ever be tempted to say the words ‘us’ ‘more’ or—”

“Relationships.” He finished my sentence and grabbed my wrist, pulling me back to him. “I remember.”

“So,” I said, looking into his eyes. “I think that’s the end of this.” I waited for him to leave, but he didn’t. Instead, he stood staring at me, his gaze pinning me to the spot.

“Are you sure you’re not simply confusing infatuation with our sex for liking me?” He slipped an arm around my waist, strumming his fingers against my hips. “That could be the problem.”

“That’s not the problem.” My voice was a whisper. “I think, regardless of what we agreed to, that you’re going to end up hurting my feelings in the future.”

“You’re not a fortune-teller, Gillian,” he said. “You have no idea what either of us is going to do, and since you would have to *know me* to like me, I think it’s just a temporary crush.” He snapped my lips shut with his fingers before I could say something. “A *mutual*, temporary crush.”

Without saying anything else, he clasped my hand and pulled me over to the bed. He started running his fingers through my hair with his other hand, looking as if he was going to kiss me, but I shook my head.

“I don’t have a temporary crush on you, Jake,” I said. “I *like* you, I actually fucking like you, and I don’t need you to try and convince me that I don’t. As good as sex with you is, I’m not going to continue risking my job over it, or let my feelings get hurt by someone who doesn’t like me back. So, I think you should leave. Now.”

A confused look etched across his face, but he didn’t say anything. He just stared at me.

“Why are you here anyway?” I pulled my hand away from him. “You’re supposed to be in Hawaii.”

“I *thought* I wanted to see you.” He shook his head. “But now that you’ve once again decided that you can literally make even the most pointless conversations ten times more pointless, I’ve come to my senses. See you Friday in New York. E4.” He headed toward the door.

“Did you not hear any of what I said?” I scoffed. “We’re over. Done. I won’t be there.”

“Jesus, Gillian.” He groaned, still walking. “I get the goddamn point. Can I leave the room before you say anything else?”

“You’ll regret this someday…” I muttered under my breath, but he turned around.

“The only thing I regret is that I never got the chance to see your talkative-ass-mouth swallow something other than words.”

My jaw dropped.

“Yes.” He looked me up and down before slamming the door. “Yes, I really fucking said that.”

I stared at the door seconds after it shut.

Upset that he’d gotten the last word, I rushed over to open it, to hurl one last zinger at him as he left, but when I opened the door, he wasn’t walking to the elevators. He was standing right in front of me.

His mouth immediately latched onto mine and he picked me up, forcing me to wrap my legs around him. The door slammed behind us both and our lips fought for control, he growled against my mouth.

“You talk so fucking much, Gillian…So fucking much…” He tore his mouth away from mine and tossed me onto the bed.

My bath towel fell off, exposing my body and he pulled his shirt over his head—revealing abs that still made me bite my lip whenever I saw them.

Still glaring at me, he began to unbuckle his pants, but I moved closer to the edge of the bed and grabbed his wrist.

“Let me,” I said, my voice more demanding than normal.

He raised his eyebrow at my tone, but he moved his hand away.

Pulling his belt through the loops, I let it fall to the floor and unzipped his pants. I slowly pushed his briefs down a bit, letting his hardened cock free, and without hesitating another second, I slowly covered the head of it with my mouth.

He groaned, grabbing a fistful of my hair as I slowly sucked his cock deeper into my mouth, as I let it hit the back of my throat. I moved my mouth up and down his length, darting my tongue against his tip each time I pulled back.

“Fuck, Gillian…” He looked down at me, his eyes glazed over, his lips parted.

Relishing the control I had over him, I gripped the base of his cock with my hand and teased him with the pressure as his muscles tensed.

My mouth continued to move over his cock, my saliva coating every inch of skin, and both his hands were in my hair—gently attempting to control my rhythm.

He said my name again, harsh and guttural and I slid my free hand between his legs as he shut his eyes. I pressed the pad of my fingertips against his balls and massaged them—earning another low groan from him.

I started to take him deep again, but he suddenly pulled me back—letting his cock slip from my lips.

“I’m about to come…” he said, his eyes dark and heated. “So, if you’re—”

I didn’t let him finish. I wrapped my mouth around his cock again, letting him grip my hair once more, letting him roughly guide me back and forth.

He whispered curses as his thickness swelled against my jaws, and as his leg muscles tensed one last time, warm come slashed against the back of my throat. I gripped his legs as the rest of it came, swallowing every drop until he was finished.

When I was sure that was all, I looked up at him and noticed he was staring at me. I opened my mouth to say something, but he pressed his finger against mine before I could get a single word out.

“Not right now,” he said. He pulled me up and onto the bed, locking me in his arms as he kissed my lips.

He ran his hands against my bare back and whispered. “Even if I do like you…”

“I think you do.”

“Shut up, Gillian.” He bit me. “Even if I do like you—*which I don't*, you're going to have to come up with a much better reason than that to get me to stop fucking you...” He ran his fingers through my hair, and I felt his cock hardening against my thigh.

“I can deal with one broken rule,” he said, lifting me up and slowly sliding me onto him. “As long as you can agree that it'll be our ‘only one’?” He gripped my hips, not waiting for a response, and he fucked me harder than he ever had for the rest of the night.

GATE B22

GILLIAN

Los Angeles (LAX)

“It’s a CR-9,” I said, hours later. “Easy.”

“Close.” Jake pulled me closer. “It’s an MD-88.”

“Four out of five isn’t bad.”

“You’ve only gotten four out of twenty, Gillian.” He smiled. “That’s terrible.”

It was four in the morning and we were laying on the roof of a private, charter airport across the city. Much to his insistence, and after we both agreed that we were restless after three rounds of sex tonight, he said he “had an idea” and ordered a luxury cab to bring us here.

He’d held my face and kissed me the entire ride, causing butterflies to flutter against my stomach, forcing the driver to shut the partition.

“If this was a couple of years ago—” I turned on my side and looked into his eyes. “I would’ve gotten every single one of them right.”

“Why a couple years ago?”

“Because I used to write about planes and the aviation industry for the paper. Not all the time, but a couple times a month.”

He was quiet, running his fingers through my hair. “Why did you quit?”

“I didn’t quit. I was fired.”

He looked surprised. “For slander?”

“For the truth.”

“Hmmm.” He trailed a finger across my lips. “Did it have anything to do with Elite, or he who shall never be named between us?”

“No,” I said. “It was personal. Someone burned me, so I burned them back.”

“How mature.”

I changed the subject. “What were *you* doing a couple years ago?”

“Flying.”

“Is this all you’ve ever done?”

“Yes.”

“Jake...” I sighed. “Do you see how when you ask me questions, I elaborate, but when I ask you, you give me one word answers?”

“Then maybe you should ask better questions.”

“Fine. Why didn’t you tell my supervisor on me after the night I left your apartment?”

“Because there would be no purpose in doing that.” He looked at me. “I also found you very amusing and wanted to see you again.”

“Okay. Why do you have to have your TVs and coffee table replaced every few weeks? I remember all the work orders, even right before we met...Why do they break so often?”

“Faulty engineering.”

I blinked and he smiled, pulling me on top of him.

“I used to have problems sleeping. That’s all.”

“Used to? That wasn’t that long ago, Jake. Aren’t you still having problems?”

“Shockingly no.” His blew a warm kiss against my skin. “Not since I’ve been in whatever the hell this is with you.” He didn’t give me a chance to ask a follow up question. “What else did you do in my apartment?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, why did you feel the need to reroute my security cameras and make them run a loop? What were you doing?”

“Nothing.” I pressed my head down against his chest, right on top of his beating heart. “I stole books from your library before, though.”

“I’m aware. I always noticed. Is that it?”

“I also used to sleep naked on your living room couch.”

He laughed. “And in my bedroom?”

I nodded and he playfully slapped my ass.

“I know that Nathaniel Pearson is your real father, Jake,” I said softly, letting the words rush out of my mouth.

“That makes two of us.”

“I looked up old family pictures and you’re not in any of them..Why did they erase you like that? And I mean, why haven’t you said anything? You’re the son of a billionaire CEO. Is that where your money comes from?”

“No.” He didn’t elaborate any further. He simply rubbed his hands up and down my back, massaging me in a firm way that said, “Stop this.”

“Just say you’ll tell me one day,” I murmured. “If we last longer.”

“I’ll *think* about telling you one day.”

“Well, whenever that ‘one day’ is, I would like it to be the same day you take me out on a date.”

His hand immediately stopped their pleasurable rhythm. “What?”

“A real date with flowers, dinner, and—”

“Everything we originally agreed *not* to do.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Gillian...” He sighed. “I’d prefer if we didn’t break any more rules.”

“And I’d prefer if you actually *talked* to me, but I’m clearly not going to get that, so this is a compromise.”

He didn’t say anything for a long while, but his hands eventually returned to my back, and we didn’t speak until the sun began to rise.

When our ride returned, he tossed me over his shoulder and carried me downstairs and placed me into the backseat. He positioned my head in his lap, and I slept as the car slowly trudged through early morning L.A. traffic.

When we arrived back to my hotel, he walked me into my room and tucked me under the covers—holding back a laugh as I attempted to fight my exhaustion and convince him to stay.

I thought that he would stay another day, since he had two more nights before he had to fly out from Hawaii, but when I woke up, he was gone.

The only remnant of his presence was his watch box on my nightstand. I flipped it open, coming face to face with yet another Audemars Piguet. I ran my fingers across its sparkling crystals and sighed. I

pulled out my phone to text him and tell him he'd left it, but it fell to the floor once I saw the massive white and red flower bouquet sitting by the door.

Shocked, I walked over and opened the small silver envelope that was attached and read the note.

*This never happened.
And the watch is yours.
—Jake.*

GATE B23

JAKE

Hawaii (HNL)—> Dallas (DAL)—> New York (JFK)

I need a drink...

My head was throbbing in pain after piloting two turbulent flights back to back, Gillian was starting to call and text me whenever she felt like it, and I was seconds away from walking out of this simulator session. To make matters worse, the Elite Airways circus was back in full swing—gaining front page stories in all the major papers and placing promotional interviews on damn near every news station.

My father, ever the attention whore, was now the first airline CEO to host a “flying media tour.” He was allowing journalists from every paper to board his new Dreamliner—to write glowing reviews of the plane as he flew along with them and plied them with lies. He was reported as saying things like, “Yes, this is the plane I’m the proudest of,” “My family still hasn’t flown in it yet,” and “Yes. Yes, I think Sarah would’ve loved this one.”

It wasn’t until I read that last quote that I realized that he pulled this media frenzy shit at the exact same time every year. It was probably how he dealt with the guilt of getting away with his numerous lies, how he dealt with being destined for Hell.

I stopped myself from reading the remainder of the articles and put my phone in my pocket. I pulled out a new crossword puzzle, but before I could start it, the simulator session ended with a jerk that almost knocked me out of my chair, damn near slamming me against the windscreen.

Annoyed, I looked ahead at the results screen.

“Congratulations again, Ryan,” I said. “You’ve killed everyone again, but at least this time you crashed on the ground, so all of us will get to have our body parts in our caskets.”

“You’re not helping me learn, sir,” he said, teary eyed just like last time. “Would it kill you to actually give me some advice?”

I unbuckled my seatbelt. “Fly better next time.”

“With all due respect, could you tell me something that will actually help?”

“How about learn how to read?” I stood up and tossed the operations manual for the Airbus 321 at him. “You’re making the same emergency protocol mistakes because you’re treating this like a damn CR-9. Try memorizing chapters seven through thirty. Is that helpful enough?”

He nodded and I rolled my eyes, stepping out of the tube. I walked through the hangar—past the other simulators, ignoring the supervisor who was shaking his head at me.

I made it to the parking lot and opened my car door, but I heard a familiar, ugly voice calling my name.

“Jake! Jake!” Evan stopped a few feet short of me, forcing me to turn around. “Jake, I—I missed the chance to speak to you at the gala. Would you please let me talk to you?”

I didn’t answer.

“I just need five minutes of your time, so—”

“Get the fuck away from my car.”

“Jake.” His face fell. “Jake, don’t do this...”

“Don’t you have some erasing to do?” I glared at him. “More childhood photos you need to crop me out of?”

“Jake, please.”

“I like ‘Pearson’ as a last name. That was a really good choice the two of you made. How many of your legal friends did you have to go through to cover everything up?”

“We’re not covering up anything.”

“No?” I crossed my arms. “Have I somehow missed the scandalous tell-all in the press somewhere? I’d love to read it, if so.”

“We’re still your family, Jake.” He changed the subject. “No matter what you think we did, or no matter what we’ve done, we’re still your flesh and blood and we both need to talk to you.”

“Leave me a voicemail.” I opened my car door, but he stepped in my way.

“We’ve left you *hundreds* of voicemails, Jake. Hundreds. You keep changing your phone number, treating us like we don’t exist.”

“How ironic is that?” I pushed him. “Get the hell out of my way.”

“Today would’ve been mom’s birthday, you know. She would’ve wanted us to—”

“How do you sleep at night?” I felt the veins in my neck swelling. “How the fuck do either of you sleep at night?”

He shoved his hands into his pocket, regret creeping over his face. “We don’t...We honestly don’t.”

“Good.” I clenched my fists. “You don’t deserve to.”

“I know, and I think it’s time for you to listen to us, Jake. If you heard us out, you’d see that it’s time for you to forgive us.”

“The people who inflict pain can’t decide when it’s time for it to go away.” I slid into the driver’s seat, tempted to roll my car in reverse and then run over him. “Now, get the fuck away from me, and stay the fuck away from me. You, Nathaniel—”

“*Dad*, Jake. His name is *Dad* to you.”

“Funny.” I shrugged. “That’s not what I’ve read in the papers all these years.”

Looking saddened, he raised his hands in surrender and backed away from the car. I cranked the engine and pulled off, speeding onto the highway. I now knew I wasn’t going to last at Elite for more than a few more months—huge salary or not, and I needed to figure out a way to leave.

Turning on the radio, I searched for a decent station—something that could distract me, but there was nothing. All static or songs I didn’t feel like listening to.

I groaned and pulled over on the side of the road, parking and putting on my hazard lights. The fact that my brother and father could act so fucking normal, or like they’d ever be forgiven, still got under my skin and grated my nerves.

As a light snow began to fall outside my windows, I leaned back in my chair and shut my eyes—trying to calm myself before driving on the road.

By the time I opened my eyes again, an hour had passed and I had two missed calls from Evan, an unknown number, and a handful of emails from Gillian.

Subject: Can’t sleep.

Are you awake?

—Gillian

Subject: Yes, I know this email is not about fucking...

I know you're awake, Jake...

—Gillian

Subject: My pussy is wet...

So. Soaking. Wet.

—Gillian

I clicked on her name and hit send via FaceTime.

“Seriously?” She answered on the first ring, her pretty face appearing on my screen immediately.

“That’s what it takes?”

“That’s always what it takes.” I noticed she was only wearing a tank top, that her hair was wet and dripping onto her bare shoulders.

She narrowed her eyes at me and sucked in a breath, but I spoke before she could batter me with another long rant.

“I just left a simulator session,” I said. “I saw all of your messages at the same time.”

“So, you would’ve responded to the first one, if you’d seen it earlier?”

“Probably not.” I smiled. “You’re in Newark right now, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Which hotel?”

“The Doubletree.” She squinted at the screen. “Are you in your car?”

“Yes.” I turned on my windshield wipers as the snow fell a little harder. “I needed a minute to think.”

The look on her face said she was waiting for an explanation, but I didn’t give it.

“Why can’t you sleep?” I asked instead. “That’s a pretty relaxing hotel.”

“Because I’m so wet.” She shook her wet hair. “So soaking wet...Oh, god, the ache in my pussy is so unbearable right now.”

I rolled my eyes. “Be serious, Gillian.”

“Well, for one, there’s a couple next door to me having sex.”

“Put on some headphones.”

“Two, my supervisor wrote me up for serving the wine and cheese too slow.” She frowned. “She embarrassed me in front of the entire crew, so I’m still trying to get over that. And three...”

“Yes?”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“I have a feeling you’d talk to anyone right now, if they’d let you.” I shook my head, but decided I could use a little conversation right now. “How many boyfriends have you had?”

“What?”

“How many boyfriends have you had?” I repeated.

“I heard you the first time,” she said. “I’m just shocked you’re asking me something that’s not about sex.”

“This is temporary. I’ll ask you to show me how wet your pussy is later.”

She laughed. “I’ve had one serious boyfriend and three casual ones. Are you going to ask me if I still think about them?”

“You’re fucking me, so you have no reason to. Why did you break up with the serious one?”

“He cheated on me.” She lay back on the bed, holding the phone above her face. “With like ten other women.”

“I take it that’s where your ‘*only one*’ demand came from?”

She nodded, blushing. “Since you don’t do girlfriends, how many women have you slept with?”

“I’ve never kept count.” I admitted. “None of them ever meant anything.”

“Right.” She forced a smile. “Makes sense. Have you *ever* dated anyone seriously?”

“Not since my ex-wife,” I said. “Piloting doesn’t allow for any serious relationships.”

She nodded again, giving me that fake smile. “In your non-serious relationships, not including me, have you always had incessant sex in airports and on planes?”

“Gillian, the reason we fuck in airports is because you’re the only woman I’ve been incapable of waiting to have sex with. I’ve never fucked anyone else in an airport—doubt I ever will, and I haven’t fucked you on a plane yet, but I’ll keep that in mind as that’s something I’d definitely want to do with you. So, that would be a *no*. Happy?”

“No.” Her real smile gave way, and I turned off the car’s hazard lights.

“Glad we could clear that up.”

“Me, too...Oh, and Jake?” Her cheeks reddened, as if she was about to laugh. “*You* called me tonight.”

“I’m aware.”

“Well, this counts as a late night phone call.”

“*And?*” I dared her to hang up on me.

“And I actually wouldn’t mind if you did it again...”

“I won’t.” I took her off video chat and switched the call to my phone’s speakers. “You have to be at the airport in twelve hours, correct?”

“No, nine hours.”

“Did the flight time just change?”

“No.” She let out a breath. “My supervisor makes me show up to everything two to three hours early whenever possible.”

“That’s pointless.” I switched lanes, heading back toward New York. “What do you do with all the free time?”

“Book hop. I start reading a book in one bookstore and then I walk to the next bookstore to read the next few until it’s time to go. Or if you’re in town...Well, I meet you.”

“Interesting.” I turned up the volume on her soft and sexy voice, unable to end this call for some reason. “What’s the last book you read?”

Her tone changed and she became completely animated. For two hours she and I talked about favorite novels as I drove through traffic, and before I knew it, I was crossing the bridge into Newark, not New York.

Jesus...

I turned off my car after parking in front of the Doubletree, with her still talking in my ear.

“Are you at home yet?” she asked, yawning.

“No, I’m outside your hotel...What’s your room number?”

GATE B24

GILLIAN

New Orleans (MSY)—> San Francisco (SFO)—> New York (JFK)

I hit “post” on my thirtieth blog post of the week, logging off before I could see a comment from my personal troll. I was sitting on the fire escape by my window, letting New York’s familiar soft rains pelt against my skin.

With two days off, I’d planned to finally address my mail, to finally open the numerous envelopes that littered the corners in my apartment, but I couldn’t do it. For one, I still thought that if I avoided them, they would eventually go away, and two, I was getting slightly paranoid about the fact that Jake had yet to respond to my latest email, even though I knew he was here in New York.

I scrolled through my emails again, double checking to be sure my “Hey...You got a minute?” text had gone through yesterday. I tapped the screen as the word “sent” appeared and tapped my fingers against the window sill.

I didn’t want to make too much of this, but there was definitely a pattern. Every third week of the month, like he’d said from the beginning, he was practically unreachable. No texts, no emails, no phone calls. But the second the weekend ended, he would pick up right where we left off, as if the messages I’d sent prior had never happened.

Not only that, but the few occasions that I spent the night with him, I would catch him whispering in his sleep. It was always the same phrases over and over, “He lied to you, Jake, he lied to all of us,” “How do you sleep at night?” or, “Who are you here for?”

And every time that I attempted to ask him about it, he would look at me as if he had no idea what I was talking about. He would then, as always, distract me from the topic with his incomparable sex—rendering me completely useless for hours.

Sighing, I swung my feet across the ledge and shut the window. I walked over to the corner by my desk and picked up a handful of envelopes, prepared to force myself to at least face five of them, but a familiar sound suddenly came through the walls.

“Ohhhh goddd! Ohhh god! Yesss!!!” Meredith’s voice rang out loud and clear. “Yesssss!” The walls shook harder and harder, and before I could grab my earbuds, my phone vibrated against my pocket. A text message from Jake.

Jake: Come over. (Use the luxury cab. I’ll pay for it.)

I tossed the envelopes to the floor and grabbed my coat.

GATE B25

JAKE

JFK (New York)

As the evening clouds gave way to an ashen grey sky, I stood on my balcony, watching Gillian sleep in my bedroom.

Whenever she spent the night with me, I noticed a pattern: No restless nights or stress if she was around. Even today, when my memories seemed hell bent on following me around, her very presence seemed to keep them at bay. Not only that, but anytime I was around her, there were remnants of feelings that came to life whenever she gave me a certain look.

When we kissed, I felt hints of emotions I once possessed. And after several meet-ups in cities all across the country, I wanted to deny that my attraction to her was more than skin deep. I wanted to deny that even though she was the exact type I should stay away from, I couldn't seem to get close enough. She was getting under my skin, slipping into my marrow, and that was a problem.

Picking up my phone, I logged into my condo's call log, stopping when I saw a new voicemail from an unfamiliar number. Helplessly hoping it was the one I'd waited years for, I typed the password into my system and let it play.

"One new message..." The system said before the familiar soft beep.

"Jake, it's me..." It was the *last* person I wanted to hear again, Evan. "Jake, I really hate that you insist on rerouting all of our phone calls. It really hurts, and you never—"

"*Stop.*" I gritted my teeth as the message came to an end, scrolling past the new set of blocked numbers for Evan, Riley, and my father—the ten different ones they'd used this month.

As I added this new, unwelcome number to the list, a chill ran down my spine. It was a sudden reminder of how I'd been off track for the past weeks, how I'd lost focus and almost started to trust someone again.

Every person in my life, except one, had betrayed me at some point, or decided to take an opportunistic turn instead of remaining loyal, and I knew it was only a matter of time before Gillian did the same.

I walked back over to her as she slept and pulled the blanket across her body. I trailed my finger against her lips, making them curve into a sated smile, and then I took a pillow and a blanket to the couch.

I needed to stop whatever the hell this was turning into and return to what we were at the start. For both of our sakes.

GATE B26

JAKE

Madrid (MAD)

Subject: Hey...

My parents (and family) are coming into town in a few weeks for that marriage proposal I told you about. We'll both be in New York that weekend, and I was wondering if you wanted to be my date (casual...just casual) at dinner?

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Hey...

This email is not about fucking.

—Jake

Subject: Re: Re: Hey...

LOL. I'm aware. (Haven't received one of those from you in awhile, so thank you for the laugh :-))
Would you like to come, though? It might ease my nerves if you're there...

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Hey...

Why would I want to meet your parents, Gillian? Would you introduce me as the guy you're fucking?

—Jake

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Hey...

I would introduce you as my friend.

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Hey...

We're not friends.

—Jake

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Hey...

Okay...Are you having a bad day or something? Something wrong?

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Hey...

Jake? Are you there?

—Gillian

I didn't answer that thread. I started another.

Subject: Dallas.

Meet me at A21 Thursday.

—Jake

Subject: Re: Dallas.

I'm not meeting you anywhere until you tell me what the hell is wrong with you. What's wrong, Jake?

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Dallas.

Nothing is wrong with me, Gillian. A21. Thursday.

—Jake.

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Dallas.

I won't be there. Shoot your come in the trash can.

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Dallas

You *will* be there. Bring your mouth.

—Jake

She never responded.

Days passed and no new words from her ever came. And on Thursday, I stood in the bathroom near A21, realizing she wasn't going to show.

Agitated, I left and walked into the terminal—spotting her at a restaurant. She was sitting at a table alone with her arms crossed, looking off into the distance.

A part of me wanted to walk over and tell her to follow me back to the restroom, and another part of me wanted to apologize, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

She'd get over it.

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

Foolish, foolish girl...

So much for not being a doormat.

I feel like one of the heroines in an old romance book—one of the Mary Sues who's willing to put up with anything from an asshole hero in exchange for amazing cock. But I honestly can't continue to live like this—can't let someone toss my heart into a grinder over and over again for shits and giggles.

I denied him in Dallas, gave into him in Charlotte, and let him do whatever he wanted to do to me in New York.

And the only words spoken between us were moans. That, and a “See you next week.”

I know better than this...

Write later,

~~Mary-Sue~~

Taylor G.

1 comment:

KayTROLL: The ‘Misadventures of Taylor G.’s Emotional Pussy’ continues...

GATE B27

GILLIAN

Memphis (MEM)→ New York (JFK)

I stared at Jake as he tossed a condom into the trash, waiting for him to make eye contact with me, but he seemed too pre-occupied.

“Jake, is something wrong with you?” I asked.

“No.” He adjusted his cufflinks. “I’ve told you no every time you’ve asked for the past couple of weeks.”

“Well, why don’t you answer my phone calls anymore?”

“I have nothing more to talk to you about.” He put on his blazer and walked over to the mirror. His eyes met mine in the glass and he raised his eyebrow. “Why?”

“I just thought we were getting somewhere...” I shrugged. “That’s why I asked. I feel like we’re—”

“We’re back to just fucking?”

I nodded. “I thought we were becoming more, and now you’re... You’re moving backwards, and you promised not to burn me.”

“How the fuck am I burning you?” He turned around. “I’m not doing anything different.”

“You’re shutting me out. You won’t fucking talk to me about the simplest of shit, and you get agitated if I ask you about your goddamn day.” I didn’t mean to yell, but my loud voice echoed off the empty walls.

“You can’t say you haven’t noticed a difference between now and a few weeks ago. You were almost a Prince Charming, letting us connect on all the great things we have in common, but now you’re on the verge of being an unbearable asshole. You’re colder, meaner, and I don’t think I like you anymore.”

“You don’t need to *like* me to fuck me,” he said. “You just need to like fucking me.” He stepped closer, letting his forehead touch mine. “And from the way you still come every time we meet up, it’s clear you still like that.”

“Watch the way you talk to me.”

“Says the person who just said unbearable asshole?”

“I’m sure your feelings weren’t hurt at all.”

“I guess I’d have to have feelings for that to be the case.” He glared at me. “I’m not doing anything different. We’re fucking like we’re supposed to, you come every time, and I don’t think you can expect more than that. Yes, we share a love of crossword puzzles, traveling, and we both know plane design, but that’s as far as this will go, so if you want something more, tell me and I’ll walk away for good. Or since you always have to have the last word, you can walk away first. Do you want more?”

“No.” I lied, keeping my face stoic as I looked away from him and down at the watch he’d given me. “No, I don’t want more from you.”

“Good.” He grabbed the handle of his luggage and walked away. Then he looked over his shoulder. “See you in Chicago next Thursday.”

I refused to admit that the tears falling down my face were real.

“Honey, I’m home!” Meredith waltzed into our apartment several days later. “Oh god, what is that smell? Did you attempt to cook again?”

I didn’t answer.

She fiddled with pots and pans—turning off the food I’d burned. Then she lined up her shopping bags on the counter. “I’ve had interviews with Dior, Michael Kors, Furstenberg, and Coach. Oh! And you won’t believe the new line that’s coming from Hermes this fall. It’s edgier than anything they’ve ever put out on the market.”

I stared straight ahead.

“Gillian? Can you hear me?” She stepped in front of me. “Gillian, why aren’t you—Whoa...What’s wrong with you?”

I didn’t answer.

“Did you get fired? *Again?*”

“No...” I shook my head.

“Did you run into Ben?”

“No.”

“Okay, wait. Did your family finally find out that you live in a shithole and they have no idea who you really are?”

“No.” A slight laugh escaped my lips, but a cry came after. “You were right. You were so right...”

“About?”

I sighed. “You know that guy I told you I was sleeping with?”

“The pilot? The one you swore to leave alone after he embarrassed you at the gala?”

“Yeah, but...” I sighed. “I didn’t leave him alone. I went right back and we’ve still been...”

“Having sex?” She crossed her arms, confused. “You’re kidding.”

“I wish I was.”

“I see. Well, did he physically hurt you? Is that why you’re crying?”

“No...” I shook my head, and then I gave up any attempt to pretty up my words. I told her everything, everything that led up to our last tryst in the bathroom. How his fucking was perfect, but his mind was elsewhere. How the warmth in his eyes didn’t match the coldness that fell from his lips.

“You’ve argued with him how many times already?” She looked at me in shock.

“Just a few.”

“Is ‘just a few’ more than twice? More than five times?”

I didn’t answer.

“Okay,” she said. “You need to break this off for your sanity. Casual sex is literally ‘casual sex’ It’s supposed to be casual and fun, and he should be able to at least hold a simple conversation with you. If he shoots you down like that again, let him go. Otherwise, you’ll just be fighting for him to pay attention and it’ll be a waste of your time.” She must’ve noticed the expression on my face because she held up her hands in a fake surrender and sighed. “What’s his name?”

“Jake.”

“Is he really that attractive?”

I nodded.

“And that good in bed?”

“Yes.” I hated that the very thought of him kissing me again made me bite my lip.

“Regardless, no more chances until he apologizes, Gillian. And only *one* more chance after that. Promise me that. You’re too good to be tied down to another asshole.”

“Okay. I promise.”

“Good.” She stood up and picked up a stack of envelopes from our coffee table. “Oh and by the way, the new mail has changed faces a bit since you’ve been away. Let’s see what we have.” She flipped through the envelopes. “James Patterson, Stephen King, Janet Evanovich and as always—Kennedy B. So, the bill collectors are hoping you’re a fan of big name authors now?”

“Yep.”

“You know, I was actually getting used to the fictional characters.” She shrugged, tossing the envelopes into the corner. “One day you’re going to tell me how the hell you got them to treat you this way. Unless you tell ‘Jake’ first, that is.” She headed toward the kitchen. “I need a dinner date and I choose you. You want pancakes?”

“No, thank you.”

“What about crepes?”

“That’s the same thing, Mer.”

“Okay, so what about blueberry crepes *and* pancakes? With syrup?”

I laughed, giving in. “Okay.”

“Now, please tell me more about the sex because it better be off the Richter scale phenomenal for someone like you to *ever* put up with this type of guy.”

GATE B28

GILLIAN

Denver (DEN)

Subject: Us...

Jake, I'm not sure what happened to you, or why you've been acting like you have lately, but I don't like it and I want us to talk. I want "us" to go back to how we were.

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Us...

I'm trying to determine if this message is about fucking or not. Does your "us" refer to the original agreement we made in the hotel stairwell?

—Jake

Subject: Re: Re: Us...

It refers to the "us" where you actually *talked* to me, where I could consider you my friend. I *miss* that...

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Us...

Tuesday in Charlotte. E28.

—Jake

GATE B29

GILLIAN

Charlotte (CLT)→ San Francisco (SFO)→ France (CDG)

Don't cry...Don't you dare cry...

I stood inside the bookstore in Charlotte International, flipping through another Grisham novel—hating that my flight today was delayed by two hours. As I pinned my thumb between chapters twenty-five and twenty-six, I heard the sound of someone approaching me from behind.

“Gillian?” Jake’s deep voice turned me on instantly, but I didn’t bother facing him. “Gillian, this is not E28.”

“I know it’s not E28. It’s Charlotte Daily News, a bookstore.”

“Did you come here hoping I would search the airport for you?” he asked. “Are you waiting on me to buy the book?”

“No, Jake.” I felt a pang in my chest. “I think you know exactly what I’m waiting for you to do.”

“I’m not fucking you in here.”

“What?” I spun around, tears pricking at my eyes. “Are you being serious right now?”

“My flight is in two hours. I would prefer if we fucked sooner than later.”

“You are...” A tear fell down my face. “Jake, you’re not being *you*. What happened? We were fine and you just flipped the switch... You haven’t said anything at all to me this week.”

“I just texted you an hour ago, Gillian.” He kept his voice low. “Yet, once again, you’ve chosen to ignore where I told you to meet me so we can argue for no reason.”

A woman suddenly darted between us, quickly grabbing a book from the shelf before moving away.

“You like me, Jake,” I said. “As much as you want to deny that fact, you like me and regardless of whatever the hell has happened to you, I deserve to be treated better than this.”

“Is this the part where you demand an apology?” He was struggling to hide his anger. “Is that all I have to do to get you to fuck me today?”

“No,” I said, setting my book down. “This is the part where I finally walk away. *For good.*” I rushed past him, slipping into the terminal—letting my tears fall as I blended between travelers.

I felt my phone vibrating against my pocket, saw his name cross my screen when I finally pulled it out, but I simply turned it off.

If he could act as if we never meant anything, I could, too.

Several days later, I stared at my reflection in the restroom in San Francisco—failing to get my mascara to stay on my eyelashes. Each time I brought the wand up to my face, tears fell or a lump formed in my throat.

Groaning, I snapped the cap shut after the fifth attempt. I pulled out my foundation, in desperate need of color, but the tears cracked through every coat.

Ugh...

I looked at my watch—a cheap, “I Love New York” one, since I refused to wear the one Jake gave me anymore, and realized I had three full hours before I’d need to board for Paris. Only three full hours before I needed to get myself together.

Grabbing a paper towel, I froze when I saw Miss Connors walking into the restroom.

Without saying anything to me, she walked down the row of stalls, opening each door—checking to see if they were empty. Then, she took a spot next to me in the mirror, she pulled a small pack of Kleenex from her purse and handed it to me.

I mouthed, “Thank you,” and dabbed my eyes.

“I fell in love with a pilot once,” she said, pulling out a makeup compact. “I was about your age when it happened, too.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Things were slightly different then, though... It wasn’t as outright illegal as it is now, but it was frowned upon.” She put away her makeup and pulled out a brush, turning toward me and fixing my bun. “Me and my pilot shared the same trips fifty percent of the time. We purposely set it up that way. The only place he insisted on going every three weeks or so was Detroit, but since I hated it, I never did make too many of those trips with him.”

I felt more tears falling and she paused, wiping my eyes for a few seconds before re-pinning my hair.

“Anyway,” she continued. “You couldn’t tell me I wasn’t in love with this man. We were stupid and reckless, drooling, *obvious* idiots, just like you and Captain Weston.” Her eyes met mine in the mirror, but they weren’t full of judgment like usual. “I told all my friends I was going to marry him, that we were *that* much in love.”

I winced as she drove a final bobby pin a little too hard against my scalp. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” She stepped back and slid her bag over her shoulder. “Except his fiancée in Detroit felt the same way about him that I did.”

I wasn’t even sure what to say.

“Took me longer to realize that hot sex, lack of communication, and crying every few weeks about secret trips were all a dead giveaway from the very beginning.” She shrugged. “Hope it won’t take you that long.”

I didn’t utter a word. I just watched her walk toward the door.”

“Oh, and Miss Taylor?” she said before leaving.

“Yes?”

“Train-wreck of a love life or not—” She looked me up and down. “When I see you three hours from now, your face better bear makeup, and it better be fixed to *perfection*.” She flipped her hair over her shoulders and walked away.

GATE B30

JAKE

Dallas (DAL)

Stepping off the plane in Dallas, I realized that Gillian had yet to respond to my last email. Not only that, but she hadn't sent me a single message this week, and I wasn't sure why I cared—or even noticed, but it made me upset for some reason.

Jake: Bathroom near the Hudson's Bookstore. Terminal B.

Jake: The board says your flight landed half an hour ago, Gillian.

Jake: This arrangement works better when you actually answer.

Ten minutes passed.

Jake: Have you somehow gotten lost in the airport?

Twenty more minutes passed, and she never answered, never showed up. Frustrated, I figured she was still upset about our last conversation and sent her an email instead.

Subject: Our arrangement...

You're making this more difficult than it needs to be, Gillian.

—Jake

Subject: Re: Our arrangement...

I'm not making anything more difficult than it needs to be. I'm done. I can't deal with how you treat me anymore. (Also, I'm pretty sure those ellipses weren't necessary in your subject heading.)

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Our arrangement...

Seeing as though I don't treat you terribly, you need a better reason than that. Feel free to tell me in the bathroom near Hudson's Bookstore. Terminal B. (I'm pretty sure you should never challenge me on grammar.)

—Jake

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Our arrangement...

You now treat me like a fuck-toy and a cum-bucket. You won't even TALK to me about simple shit like the weather unless YOU feel like it.

I. AM. DONE.

—Gillian

PS—This is exactly why I never wanted to fuck a pilot.

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Our arrangement...

You know seventeen letter words and twenty-one letter adjectives and you choose to use the words “fuck toy” and “cum bucket”? I don't TALK to you because we agreed not to fucking TALK and unlike you, I would like to stick to the original rules.

You are not done, you just want to play like you are, but I'm not chasing you again, Gillian.

—Jake

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Our arrangement...

I'm counting on it.

—Gillian

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Our arrangement...

I'm giving you five minutes to get to the bathroom, Gillian.

—Jake

Subject: Failed Message. Auto Response.

The recipient has blocked all further communication from this email address.

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

Fuck him.

Comments disabled.

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

My phone has ten unanswered text messages from him, far more than he's ever sent, each one acting as if things will eventually return to normal, as if I'll still meet him for sex.

I hoped like hell I wouldn't have to see him for at least a month, but as luck would have it, we shared a Monday night flight from New York to Milan, but I went the entire flight without so much as giving him a second glance. No matter the two times he attempted to confront me in the galley, or give me a look that made me want to screw him on the spot, I couldn't do it. I called for a fellow flight attendant to come over so he would walk away.

The ride on the hotel van held a tension so thick, I wondered if anyone else could feel it. And when he came to my room later that night and knocked on the door, I only stared out of the peephole and waited for him to leave.

As much as I desperately wanted to feel his hands on me again, as much as I *needed* to feel him inside of me again, I couldn't let my feelings develop any further. I even called in sick today and am tempted to put him on my "no fly" list with the scheduling department. Very tempted...

Write later,

Taylor G.

1 comment posted:

KayTROLL: 36 posts in three days?! Your life isn't THAT interesting...

GATE B31

JAKE

JFK (New York)

A line of cars slowly drove down Hampton Avenue in Brooklyn, honking their horns at me as I slowed my car in the right lane. A heavy rain was falling over the city, drenching every walking straggler in sight and damn near flooding the city drains.

I looked outside my window at the address Jeff gave me for Gillian—a brick building that looked more like a haunted house experiment than an apartment, and shook my head.

We hadn't spoken since she blocked my email address, and the few times I'd seen her in passing, she'd done everything she could to avoid me. The more recent occasion, when I saw her boarding a tram in Atlanta International, she glared at me before rushing away. If it hadn't been for the fact that I was needed for a quick turnaround flight, I would've gone after her.

Braving the rain, I stepped out of the car and shut the door. I walked up the steps at the front of her unit and pressed the call button for unit four. The panel let out a loud, screeching sound, and then the entire thing fell to the ground.

Jesus...

I knocked on the warped wooden door, but as the winds blew by, it immediately gave way. I headed up the steps to the fourth floor and came face to face with two apartment doors, but when I saw the words "Two Broke Girls" artfully written in pink across the one on the right, I knocked on it a few times and waited.

Two minutes passed.

I knocked again, even louder this time.

"I heard you!" Someone yelled. "*I heard you!*"

The door swung open, but it wasn't Gillian. It was a brunette in a bathrobe with huge red rollers in her hair.

"Yes?" She crossed her arms. "It's two in the morning, *asshole*. What the hell do you want?"

"I'm looking for—" I paused. "I'm Jake."

"I know who you are." She glared at me. "May I help you with something?"

"Is Gillian here?"

"I don't know a Gillian." She leaned against the frame. "I'm pretty sure you have the wrong address."

"I'm pretty sure I don't. Is she here?"

She shrugged. "I think she's flying to Los Angeles right now."

"Her line says she returned from Los Angeles yesterday."

"Oh, well I guess you're right," she said. "Well, I guess she's still out on a date. You know, those things you never take her on."

I rolled my eyes. "When will she be back?"

"Tell him *never*." Gillian whispered harshly from inside the apartment. "*Never*."

I peered through the crack in the door, seeing Gillian standing in the kitchen with her arms crossed. She was shaking her head and wiping her eyes with a Kleenex.

“Never.” Her roommate repeated. “She’ll never be back, Jake. I’ll tell her you stopped by though. You can go now.”

“Did you get my flowers?” I ignored her, knowing damn well Gillian could hear me right now.

“She never got any flowers.” Her roommate stepped back. “Best of luck, Jake.” She slammed the door in my face before I could say anything else.

I started to knock again, but since the walls were so thin, I heard Gillian begin to speak.

“I hate him..” she said. “I fucking *hate* him.”

“No, you don’t.” Her roommate countered. “But you don’t have to put up with him anymore.”

“I won’t. He just...” She was crying. “I can’t handle no strings attached sex. I should’ve listened to you, Mer. I just—I thought he was starting to fall for me, too.”

“Are you going to spend your next two days off crying about him?”

“No.” Her tone was sharp. “I need to do the same thing I did to get over Ben. I need to go out and find someone else. Maybe not to sleep with, but...Just *someone else*.”

My blood boiled at the thought of her being with “someone else” and I started to knock again, but I didn’t feel like wasting time. I twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open, walking right inside.

“What the fuck?” Her roommate jumped up from the couch. “Don’t make me call the cops, *Jake*. You’re breaking and entering.”

I ignored her and walked right over to Gillian, stopping dead in my tracks when she recoiled. She didn’t look up at me. She simply stared at the floor with her arms crossed, with her face beet red as tears fell down her face.

“Gillian—”

“No.” She cut me off, still not looking at me. “Say whatever you think you need to say and then leave. Now.”

I sighed, looking over my shoulder to where her roommate was now watching us from the couch. I scanned the room, noticing that despite the drab exterior, they’d managed to make the inside look like it belonged in a completely different apartment. And in two of the corners, in front of massive stacks of piled envelopes, were eight of the flower bouquets I’d sent yesterday.

“Say whatever you think you need to say,” Gillian said under her breath. “And then leave me alone, Jake.”

“Okay.” I adjusted my watch. “I honestly think you’re the most insane and infuriating woman I’ve ever met. I knew from the moment you gave me a tour of my own goddamn apartment that you were a special brand of psycho.”

“Okay, you know what?” She looked up and her eyes met mine. “*Don’t* say whatever you think you need to say. Just leave.”

“I miss the way you fuck me.”

“Oh, be still my beating heart.” She hissed. “How could I *ever* be okay with letting you go after hearing that?”

“I figured I’d start with honesty.”

“How about starting with *transparency* instead?” She narrowed her eyes at me. “Where do you go every three weeks? Why is it that we can never meet up on those weekends? And why do you always take your phone calls in another room and change the subject when I ask about it?”

“Gillian...”

“Why is it that every time we’re on the verge of getting closer—every. single. time.—you shut me out and act as if I can turn off my feelings as easily as you can?”

I stepped back. I'd seen her angry before, seen her damn near on the edge of lividness, but the look on her face right now was beyond different from that. It was pain.

"Those flowers don't make up for you being an asshole, Jake." Her voice cracked. "I don't care how beautiful they are. And neither does this." She opened a drawer and pulled out the watch I'd given to her and threw it to me.

"You don't have to give this back."

"I *want* to give it back," she said harshly. "I want you to give it to a woman who can deal with you treating her heart like a goddamn yo-yo. So, like I said earlier...Say your final words and leave."

"I'm not leaving."

"Well, I will. Hurry up."

Her roommate noisily opened a huge bag of potato chips and sat up on the couch, watching us intently like we were her entertainment.

I rolled my eyes at her and faced Gillian again. "Can I talk to you, *in private*, please?"

"Right here is fine."

She pointed at the clock on the wall. "Five minutes."

"Fine." I held back a groan. "I do miss the way you fuck me, and I miss the way I fuck you, too." I stepped closer to her, crossing into the kitchen. "And if you weren't crying right now, I might believe that you want me to leave you alone." I closed the gap between us and wiped her tears away with my fingertips. Then I returned the watch to the drawer.

"Don't touch me..." she said, but she didn't move back when I wiped another stream of tears away.

"I don't intend to hurt you, Gillian," I said softly as she turned away. "And I think you should know by now that I do have feelings for you."

"You have one hell of a way of showing it."

"Gillian..." I grabbed her hands, entwining them with mine until she looked up at me again. "I don't usually let people get close to me because they always disappoint me in the end. Always."

"What happened to 'neither of us can predict the future?' I believe it was you who said that."

"I'm not done talking." I pressed a kiss against her lips. "The three-week thing is personal. It's something I've never had to answer to anyone about, but..." I looked into her eyes. "We can discuss it later if you'd like. You think I'm fucking another woman when I can't meet you those weekends?"

She nodded, looking completely convinced.

"Well, I'm not. It's only been you since we met." I let one of her hands go and ran my fingers through her hair. "As crazy as you drive me sometimes, I don't want to lose what we have."

"Outside of great sex," she said, her voice completely hoarse. "What do we have, Jake?"

"Whatever it is, it's a mess, but I *like* it." I looked right into her eyes. "That said, I honestly don't want us to argue anymore."

"*Ha!*" her roommate snorted, making both of us turn around, making us both realize she was still watching."

"Sorry," she said, faking a cough. "My allergies are just awful this year."

I gave her a blank stare and turned around, refocusing on Gillian. "I don't enjoy arguing with you and I'm s—" The word stalled on my lips. "I'm..."

Her eyes lit up and her lips turned up into a small smile. "You're *what*, Jake?"

"I'm sorry," I said, and before she could make a spectacle out of it, I continued. "For not treating you right. Yes, I will do better. If you let me."

"I think that's as good as an apology as you're going to get from him, Gil." Her roommate spoke from the couch. "I would be okay with you giving him one more chance based on that, especially since you say the sex is so amazing."

Gillian cheeks turned red as she ignored that comment and looked up at me. “Is this the part where you whisk me into my bedroom and make love to me?”

“No, this is the part where I ask you to come fly with me.”

“When?”

“Now. This morning.”

Her smile faded. “I can’t.”

“And why not? Is it the *someone else*?”

“No.” She shook her head, and grabbed my hand, pulling me down a short hall and into her bedroom. She motioned for me to sit at her desk. “I’ll be right back.”

She left and I looked around her room. With its bright yellow walls and Christmas lights strung atop the window, her cramped space was stuffed with boxes of shoes and racks of clothes on one side. Her mattress, propped up by egg-crates, was on the other side.

The wall above her desk was covered in photos, college news-clippings, and handwritten notes. There was one particular phrase that was written repeatedly on multiple pinned post-its:

Fuck you, NYC.
Fuck you, NYT.
And Fuck you, Kennedy.
Ha! It rhymes...

Underneath her handwritten notes were photos of herself. She was smiling in a college newspaper room, laughing at an airfield, and numerous shots of her in an airport.

I picked up one of the airport pictures and noticed it was dated for six years ago. Her hair was twisted into a bun and she was dressed as a gate agent, not a flight attendant. Not only that, but she wasn’t dressed as an Elite Airways gate agent, she was wearing the red and white from Delta Airways in a few shots, and the blue and red from American Airways.

Interesting...

Before I could think about how she’d managed to get hired at three competing airlines within the same few years, I spotted two pictures of us on her wall. Confused, I pulled them down and saw that she’d snapped them while I was sleeping. With her eyes squinted and her black bra slightly exposing her breasts, she was smiling while resting against my chest.

She suddenly returned to the bedroom and shut the door.

“What is this?” I held up the pictures before she could say anything.

“Nothing.” She blushed and walked over, trying to snatch them away from me but I moved them away and pulled her down into my lap so she was facing me.

“Next time a warning would be nice,” I said.

“You’d actually pose for pictures with me?”

“No, but I’ll be sure to take your phone away next time we spend the night somewhere.” I ran my hands against her thighs. “Why can’t you come fly with me this morning?”

“My family is coming into town for that proposal I told you about.”

“So? You hate your family.”

“Yeah, well...I need to meet them at the airport in a couple hours and come clean about everything.”

“What’s *everything*?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Give me the Cliff’s Notes.”

She let out a breath. “They still think I have the same fancy job I had years ago and am doing something with my life. They think I still live on Lexington Avenue, and my mom and sisters are expecting to stay in that apartment, but you know.”

“You were going to tell them all that as soon as they arrived here?”

She nodded. “I made them reservations at a Hilton Hotel. They’ll have to pay for the rooms on their own, but I did try to make sure they wouldn’t have to stay here at my apartment.”

“This is *not* an apartment.” I rolled my eyes, deciding to hold that discussion for later. “Do you really care about seeing your brother’s proposal in person?”

“No.” She scoffed. “I know right after, him and everyone else will spend the rest of the weekend talking down to me after they find out the truth.”

“Then don’t give it to them. Tell them something came up, but you’ve moved to Park Avenue, at The Madison.” I was officially out of my goddamn mind. “We’ll meet them at the airport, say hello, goodbye, and my doorman will let them inside while we’re flying for the weekend.”

She blinked.

“*What*, Gillian?”

She didn’t say anything. She leaned forward and pressed her lips against mine. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Where are we flying?”

“London.”

“Which airline are we flying with?” she asked.

“None. This will be a *private* flight.” I felt my cock stiffen in my pants. “Hurry up and get dressed before I fuck you for the rest of the morning and we never make it there.”

GATE B32

GILLIAN

New York (JFK)—> London (LHR)

Hours later, I blushed as Jake held me against his side after we made it through security. Both dressed in casual clothes, it felt different walking through the airport without the demands of work.

“Will you be flying the private plane alone?”

“No.” He looked down at me. “We’ll have a relief pilot aboard for midway through the flight and one flight attendant.”

“Why do we need both?”

“So you and me can make up properly over a served lunch and fuck in the clouds.”

“*What?*” My cheeks reddened again.

“You heard me.” He smirked, leading me toward Gate 24A, where my family’s flight from Boston was set to arrive. He kept me close as we waited in our chairs, shocking me by kissing me in public every few minutes.

It was twenty minutes past arrival time when the flight finally arrived at the gate, and as suspected, my family of first-class-only buyers were the first people off the plane.

“I’ll be right back,” I said to Jake, standing up and walking over to my mother.

“Well, hello, Gillian,” she said, pulling me close for a hug. “You look lovely this morning.”

“She does?” Amy chimed in immediately. “You live in the city of fashion and you’re wearing ripped jeans and T-shirt? *I guess.*”

“I was being nice, Amy,” my mother said. “I’m sure when we all go out for the proposal later, Gillian won’t be dressed like this. She’ll be dressed like the rest of us. Right, Gillian?”

Brian shook his head and shot me his usual, “I’m sorry, kid” look. My father hugged me and said he was ready to get some rest, and as I started to pull the keycard for the Madison out of my pocket, Claire began her usual line of questioning.

“Did you and Ben make up yet?” She gave me a fake look of sympathy. “Or did he realize that he was the real catch and *you* were the one who needed him more?”

“Ha!” Amy laughed. “You’re late. Ben has moved on already—I saw a picture of him on Facebook with, shocking! Someone who looks like she’s actually doing something with her life. She’s an author, I think.”

“Oh, how very wonderful,” my mother said. “Now, *that’s* impressive. Maybe you can call Ben and ask to be introduced to her, Gillian. Since you edit, maybe you can ask to edit her upcoming books? Maybe she can get you in the doors of a publishing house?”

I gritted my teeth, ready to finally tell them “Fuck off” for good, but I suddenly felt Jake slipping his arm around my waist—suddenly heard him whispering, “Don’t.”

“I think you should introduce me,” he whispered a little louder, planting a brief kiss on my forehead.

“Mom, Dad—” I paused. “The rest of you, this is Jake. Jake these are my parents, Amy, Mia, Claire, and Brian.”

Brian and my father immediately extended their arms for a handshake, but all of my sisters—even my mom, were standing still and staring at Jake, looking completely awestruck.

“This is your boyfriend?” Amy asked, blinking a few times as she shook his hand. “This, um, is Jake?”

“Yes.” Jake answered before I could, keeping his other hand firmly attached to my waist. “I was surprising Gillian with a flight today. I didn’t realize it coincided with your proposal—” He looked at Brian. “But we’ll do our best to be back in time.”

My sisters nodded in unison as he flashed his pearly whites. This was the first time I’d ever seen them completely speechless and I immediately committed the image to memory.

“The key, Gillian...” Jake said under his breath. “Give them your key.”

I pulled the keycard out of my back pocket and handed it to my mom. “I’ve moved to The Madison at Park Avenue. I sent you an email just in case you forget what to tell the cab driver. I’ve already told the doorman to expect you and he’ll help you with anything you may need while you’re here.”

“Thank you,” she said, her eyes still on Jake.

“Well, wait,” Brian said. “So, you are going to try and make it back by tonight for the proposal, right, Gillian?”

“Absolutely.” I gave him my best fake smile, answered a few more questions from him and my father about the city, and then I told them goodbye.

They walked toward baggage claim and I stared in their direction, catching them throwing glances over their shoulders every now and then until they were out of sight.

“You ready?” Jake said, minutes later.

I nodded and he grabbed my hand, leading me toward the newest and smallest terminal in JFK—the one designated for private and charter planes.

He held up his pass to the only gate agent, and escorted me down the jet bridge and onboard one of the most luxurious aircrafts in the world, a Gulf-Stream 650.

“Dare I ask how you can afford this?” I muttered, more than sure he wasn’t going to give an answer.

“I don’t have to ‘afford’ it,” he said, smiling at me. “It’s a benefit of previously flying for Signature. They still have to honor certain things for anyone who reached senior status. Happy?”

“No. How do you afford your Park Avenue apartment?”

He smiled again, gesturing for me to sit in a leather passenger chair. He bent down and fastened my seatbelt. “That was given to me by someone special. No, not an ex-wife, and not a trust fund.”

“Your mother?”

“Yes.” He pushed stray hairs out of my face. “And before you ask, because I have a feeling you will, it’s the same answer for the watches.”

“So, technically, *you* yourself are not independently wealthy?”

“I wouldn’t necessarily say that.” A smirk crossed his lips. “Have we talked enough for six in the morning yet or do we need to discuss something else?”

“No, we have. For now.”

“Thank you.” He tugged at my seatbelt one last time. “I’ll see you when we level out.” He headed into the cockpit and the flight attendant set a tall cup of orange juice in front of me.

She handed me a four-paged breakfast menu, but I set it down and gripped the handles of the chair to prepare for takeoff.

Shutting my eyes, I listened as Jake spoke to the other pilot in the cockpit.

“Flaps—set, transponders—set, De-ice—on, Lights—clear...” his voice began to fade as the plane rolled backwards and away from the gate.

Not having to fake a smile for watching passengers, I kept my eyes closed as the plane rushed against the runway, as it hit the air full speed and leveled out against the sky.

Leaning back in my chair, I tapped my fingers against my jeans for several minutes—still waiting to hear verbal confirmation that we were at the proper altitude, but it seemed as if that announcement was never coming.

“You’re free to move about the cabin.” Jake’s hand suddenly caressed my cheek, causing my eyes to flutter open. His lips curved into a smile. “Were you waiting on me to say that?”

“Yes, that’s what normally happens.”

“Only on commercial planes.” He unbuckled my seatbelt and took the seat across from me. “What are you thinking about?”

“How you can really be a perfect guy when you want to be. What are you thinking about?”

“Your *mouth*,” he said. “I’ve missed it.”

“The way it looks?”

“The way it wraps around my cock.” He leaned forward and grabbed my wrists, pulling me to him. “I need to ask you a couple of personal questions.”

“I’ll *think* about answering them.” I mocked him and he pressed a kiss against my neck.

“I know we’ve been apart for awhile, but how often do you think about fucking me?”

“What?” I swallowed.

“You heard me, Gillian,” he said, his voice low. “How often?”

“A lot...”

“Define *a lot*.”

“Every day.”

“Do the two of you need anything to eat right now?” The flight attendant stepped next to us. “Would you like more time to look at the breakfast menu?”

“No,” Jake said, standing. “We’ll eat later.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the back of the plane, where a small en-suite was tucked away. Shutting the door, he pulled me close and looked down at me.

“Every day?” he asked, picking up our conversation. “That’s as elaborate as you can get?”

I nodded, unsure of where he was going with this. Before I could ask him something, the plane slowly shook and veered to the right—pushing me back against the wall.

Looking unfazed by any sort of turbulence as always, Jake held me in place.

“When we met again in the mailroom months ago, you said you’d previously had much better sex with someone other than me. Bullshit aside, was that even halfway true, then?”

“You actually remember that?”

“Answer the question.”

“No, that’s not true.” I felt the plane shake again. “Why are you asking me this after all this time?”

“No reason.” He pulled my hair out of its side ponytail and tossed the elastic band to the floor. Staring at me, he grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head.

“Take off your pants,” he said.

My hands went to my jeans and I unzipped them, watching him as he took off his shirt and stepped out of his pants, too.

He stood stark naked in front of me, his cock hard and alert, his body making mine tremble in anticipation of what I’d been missing. Sighing, he stepped close and looked down at the only thing I was still wearing. Without saying a word, he ripped them off—letting them fall in shreds to the floor.

“Give me your phone.”

Confused, I bent down and grabbed my jeans, pulling my phone out of my front pocket and handing it to him. “What are you doing?”

“Your phone has video storage, correct?” He didn’t give me a chance to answer, tapping the screen a few times. “Yes, it does...” He clasped my hand and pulled me over to the small couch in the corner.

I thought he wanted us to sit on it, but he kept me standing.

With my ass pressed against his cock, he held the phone in front of us—our bare bodies visible as the red “recording” light flashed on the screen. Before I could ask him what the hell he was doing, he pressed his mouth against my skin—slowly trailing his tongue from my right to my left shoulder.

Holding my phone steady, he wrapped his other hand around my waist and pulled me close enough so his cock was slightly pressed between my cheeks. His mouth continued pressing kisses against my flesh, his teeth softly biting me.

“Keep your eyes on the camera, Gillian...” he whispered. “Keep your eyes on *us*...”

My cheeks flushed bright red as I stared at myself onscreen, and my eyes went wide as saucers. His blue eyes met mine from behind—gleaming wickedly as his kisses became teasingly unbearable with each passing second.

He suddenly spun me around to face him, latching his mouth onto mine—owning our kiss before I could even get a chance to try. His full lips moved against mine—wet and rough, demanding that I follow his lead. And as he continued to record us, he whispered, “Relax, Gillian... You’re about to see *exactly* why I’m so addicted to fucking you.”

Without saying anything else, he bent me over the couch—my body bowed so far over that my hair grazed the floor. He slapped my ass with his palm repeatedly, making me gasp every time. Then he slowly slipped his hand between my thighs, sucking in a hard breath once he felt how wet my pussy was.

I watched him position my phone against the pillows, heard him unwrap a condom, and the next thing I felt was his rock-hard cock sliding into me. His fingers twisting in my hair and tugging me back as he filled me inch by inch.

I immediately cried out in a mix of pleasure and slight pain, still never fully accustomed to how deep he could fit inside of my pussy. How he *owned* my walls with his each and every thrust.

“Look at how I’m fucking you right now, Gillian... Look at how your pussy only responds to me,” he whispered harshly, but he didn’t give me a chance to move. He pulled me back by my hair, forcing me to look at myself onscreen.

I didn’t recognize the woman staring back at me.

Sweat was glistening against my skin, my lips parted with every moan, and as I gripped onto Jake’s legs for balance, I looked as if I was completely out of control. As if I wanted him to keep fucking me more than anything. When he finally let go of my hair, he reached around my chest and palmed my breasts—roughly strumming my nipples.

Panting, I briefly shut my eyes, but he demanded that I open them.

“I want you to watch.” He punished my earlobe with his teeth, biting me more than once. “I want you to watch how fucked up we both are... How we need this...”

As the red light from the phone continued to blink, and the sound of our skin slapping against each other filled the room, Jake whispered, “This is why I can’t stay away from you, Gillian... This is exactly why...”

I bit my lip as he ground his hips against mine and moved my hand down to my clit. I felt it swelling beneath my drenched fingertips, felt my pussy continuing to throb in bliss against Jake’s reckless rhythm.

Jake suddenly grabbed my hand and sucked my fingers into his mouth—groaning as he tasted my wetness. I felt the muscles in his legs beginning to tense as he continued pounding into me, and as he held me taut against him, I came with him for the very first time.

I collapsed onto the couch, his cock leaving me as I fell, and he remained standing, staring at me.

Shutting my eyes, I waited to catch my breath, and several minutes later, I realized he was still staring at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.” He smiled and picked up my phone, turning off the red light before handing it to me. “Keep that for yourself.”

“You wanted to do that just so I could watch it later?”

He nodded.

“Why?”

“Because the next time we argue—*if* we argue again that is, you’ll have a visual reminder that you don’t *ever* need to waste your time looking for someone else.” He walked over to me and covered my mouth with his. Then he continued to make up for lost time by spreading my legs and sliding his cock inside of me once more, slowly fucking me again and again.

GATE B33

GILLIAN

London (LHR)

We landed in London much later that evening, the familiar fog of the city welcoming us with open arms. Still bearing the scent of our sex, we checked into a hotel and showered, with Jake taking me shopping shortly after.

Completely sated from our sex in the air, I fell asleep locked tightly in his arms that night, my heart never feeling more full or happier. And as he kissed me to sleep, I hoped—truly hoped, that we could remain just like this for at least a month...

In the morning, I woke up completely sore and exhausted, with a full, assorted breakfast tray sitting to my left. A handwritten note from Jake was sitting right next to the strawberries.

Had to take a few phone calls.

I'll be back.

—Jake

I didn't let my mind wander to thoughts of why he'd once again felt the need to leave the room to talk on the phone; I decided to let it go.

I slowly sat up and started eating the breakfast, scrolling through my text messages as syrup dribbled down my chin.

Mom: Your apartment is far nicer than I thought it would be. Thank you for letting us use it.

Mom: How are you able to afford this? (Tell me Gillian...*Are* you selling drugs?)

Amy: You missed the proposal of the year... It was AMAZING, Gillian!

Heather: Really wish you could've been there. How's Jake?

Brian: She said yes! I'll send you pictures later today. It was EPIC.

Meredith: Your brother's proposal was whack as fuck. You owe me for forcing me to waste my Saturday on that. O_o. Pictures attached. [img.] [img.] [img.]

I laughed and clicked on the images, grateful that I'd escaped the "epic" celebration this weekend. As I was looking at the picture of Brian crying as he got down on one knee, Jake returned to the room.

"What's funny?" he asked, setting his phone on the desk.

"My brother's proposal." I held up the phone. "He was crying before he even got down on one knee." He looked at the picture and raised his eyebrow. "Interesting."

"If you ever want to propose to me in the future, please don't cry in front of me. It'll ruin the mood."

He ignored that comment completely and pressed a strawberry against my lips. "Get dressed. We have only a day and a half left here, and I want to take you somewhere."

I smiled and quickly slid out of bed, dressing under his watchful eyes in the new jeans and sweater he'd bought me last night.

When I was finished, he clasped my hand and walked me out of the hotel and into a waiting taxi cab. Pulling me into his lap, he ran his fingers through my hair as the car careened across the cobble-stoned streets.

"Where are we going?" I asked softly.

"Somewhere I think you might like."

Within minutes, the cab pulled in front of Hatchard's, the oldest book store in London.

I couldn't stop the smile from spreading across my face as he helped me out of the car. He led me inside, past the famous café and displays and toward a sign and room that read "Signing Event Today!"

"You brought me to a book signing?" I looked up at him, unable to contain my excitement. "Is it John Grisham?"

"Unfortunately not." He laughed.

"Then who is it?"

"That type of thing matters at a signing?" he asked genuinely, looking as if he was really trying to make an impression today.

"No." I smiled. "Not this time."

He pulled out a chair for me at one of the room's tables. "I'll get you some coffee. Three sugars, hazelnut shots, right?"

"You remembered?"

"Not at all." He kissed my forehead before stepping away.

All of a sudden a loud applause filled the room and I joined in, standing with the rest of the room as a woman in a red dress took the short stage at the front of the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said. "Thank you so much for joining us today at Hatchard's! We're honored to bring our guest of the month here. Please welcome, World-renowned and bestselling author of *Mile High Club Unveiled* and *New York, New York*, Brooke Clarkson!"

My hands immediately stopped clapping and my heart sank ten levels as my past collided with my present.

The author, dressed in a beautiful black dress with her famous million-dollar smile, waved at the audience as she took her seat.

"Hi!" She said, still looking as perfect as she did years ago, when my "run-in" with her got me fired. "It's so nice to be here today!"

The audience giggled and said "Squee!" like little schoolgirls while my previous career played in front of me, while all the pain and anger that landed me in my current life ran on repeat.

"I want to start with a question and answer session before I start today," she said, and I slowly stood up, ready to get the hell out of here.

I rushed out of the room, nearly running into Jake and he followed me toward the doors—grabbing my wrist before I could leave. Noticing the look on my face, he pulled me toward the back of the store and pressed me against a bookcase.

“What’s wrong with you, Gillian?” He held my face, looking concerned.

I shook my head.

“Another long story?”

“Yes, but...I don’t want to tell this one.”

“Then don’t.” He set my coffee on the shelf. “But we’re not wasting the rest of this date.”

“This is a *date*?” I smiled. “I thought you didn’t do those.”

“I thought I didn’t either.” He pushed me against the bookshelf and pressed his mouth against mine, making me quickly forget everything else. But only for a few hours...

Four hours later, in the middle of the night, I woke up to the sound of his voice on the balcony. He was shouting at someone, throwing glass onto the floor.

“You wait until now to tell me this shit?” He snarled. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve been—” He threw another glass. “Fuck you. Fuck. You. I’m on my way.”

I sat up in the bed, watching him open the sliding doors. He stormed into the room, glanced at me and shook his head. He tossed back one of the half-full shots from last night and grabbed his pants.

“We need to go,” he said.

“Now?”

“Right now.”

“Together?”

“No.” He dialed a number on his phone and held it up to his ear. “Yes. I need a first class ticket to New York for someone. No, the airline doesn’t matter, but departure is today, within the next three hours preferably. I prefer JFK over LaGuardia airport. Yes...Yes, thank you.”

My phone suddenly vibrated with an email.

Subject: Flight Confirmation.

Thank you for flying with Delta Airways. We look forward to serving you aboard our first class cabin. Please click the attachment to view your itinerary.

[pdf.]

I watched as Jake redressed without another word, as he gestured for me to do the same. He didn’t speak to me as we left the hotel together, didn’t even look my way as he registered for a cheap rental car and drove us to the airport.

“You got my hopes up again, Jake,” I said softly. “You got my fucking hopes up again and you just stomped all over them for no reason. No explanation.”

“I can’t give you an explanation right now, Gillian,” he said. “I honestly can’t. We’re not there yet.”

“Then I don’t think we ever will be...” I didn’t say anything else for the remainder of the drive.

When he pulled in front of the Delta departure stop, he simply held the door open for me and only said, “Have a safe flight.”

“I thought you were going to tell me what was going on with you. Does it have something to do with why you’re acting this way right now?”

“Get out of the car, Gillian.”

Shaking my head, I grabbed my bag and stepped out—ignoring the agonizing ache in my chest.

“Thank you for not fighting with me on this,” he said, leaning forward to kiss my forehead but I stepped back.

“You know how you previously said that you would need a *real* reason for us to come to an end?”

“Don’t do this right now, Gillian. You have no idea what’s going on.”

“I know,” I stepped onto the sidewalk. “That’s the point. *This* is the end for me, Jake. Goodbye.”

I walked away for the final time.

GATE B34

JAKE

London (LHR)—> Newark (EWR)

I didn't have time to think about Gillian's feelings right now. I only received these phone calls or voicemails every so often and I needed to act quickly each time they came.

The second I landed in Newark, I took a cab straight to a secluded black cove in the middle of the suburbs. Rushing inside the lone building that sat in the center of the cove, I signed my name at the desk and hoped I wasn't too late this time.

I walked down the hall, to room number eight, and slowly ran my fingers across the nameplate: Sarah Irene Weston.

I walked into the room and the woman in bed immediately sat up.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Are you here for Sarah? She pointed to the empty bed next to her.

"Yes," I said. "I'm here for Sarah. Do you know where she is?"

"She'll be back in an hour or so." She patted the edge of her bed. "You'll keep me company until she gets back?"

I nodded and walked over, sitting on her bed.

She was silent for a few minutes—looking as if she was waiting for Sarah, too, but then she began to speak.

"They don't keep it warm enough here," she said. "I always have to ask for blankets."

"I'm sorry to hear that." I noticed she was buried under four of them, that there was a stack of them in the corner.

"It's okay. They joke with me every time I ask for a new one. Apparently, I've asked for so many, that some anonymous donor sends me brand new ones whenever I want. All I have to do is call some place called Blanket Manufacturing when I'm running low and they come like clockwork."

"That's very nice." I looked toward the door to see if a nurse was nearby.

"Isn't it?" She smiled. "I hate the food here as well, so another anonymous donor sends me catered food every day. What's your name, son?"

"Jake."

"*Jake?*" Her eyes lit up. "I have a son named Jake! Jake Weston is his name. He's a pilot, you know."

"Is he now?"

"Yes." She looked proud. "He sends me trinkets from every city he flies to, every single one so I can feel like I've traveled the world, too."

"That's very nice of him."

"He is nice." She nodded. "He's just stubborn. Things always have to be his way or no way."

"Not always..."

“Oh, trust me.” She laughed. “I know my Jake. It’s *always*, especially since he’s in his twenties now.” She pointed toward the stack of blankets in the corner, so I grabbed one and lay it on top of her, tucking her tightly underneath.

“Do you have any children, Jake?” she asked.

“No.”

“No? Why not? You look like you’re in your prime, like you’re ready to settle down and have a few.”

“I don’t have the time.”

“The time?” She laughed. “Oh, now you sound exactly like my Jake! He always says that! I’ll have to tell him about you. I’ll have to let him know that there’s another Jake in the world who doesn’t want to have any kids.” She looked toward the door. “Since Sarah’s taking a long time, can we talk a little more? Can I tell you more about my Jake?”

I nodded, the ache in my chest becoming damn near unbearable.

“Well, you know how they say a mother never has a favorite child?” She waited until I nodded.

“Between you and me, Jake is my favorite—always has been. When my father passed away, and left me this monstrosity of a condo in Manhattan, I gave it to Jake. Only Jake. I gave my other son something just as nice—it was nicer actually. But it was located in the suburbs because he once told me he wanted a family...” She paused. “But then he sold it, for half of what it was worth.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be! I did the same thing with my father’s watches,” she said. “I’m not sure why he left them to me, but Jake always appreciated them, so he deserved to have them.” She leaned over her bed and opened a drawer, pulling out my high school yearbook picture and showing it to me with a smile.

I nodded at the image, wishing I’d gotten here faster.

“I don’t get visitors too often, Jake,” she said. “Since we’re still waiting on Sarah, you have to stay for at least an hour, okay? I can tell you stories if you want...”

With no prompting, she told me endless stories from my childhood, stories I’d heard a million times before and lived through first hand. She embellished details here or there, making me sound slightly more mischievous, like she always did.

In the middle of her telling me about the time she caught “Jake” sneaking out of the house at night, she grabbed the glass on her night stand and slowly sipped her water. Then she set it down and stared at me, her eyes widening with every second that passed by.

“Why are you...Why are you sitting on my bed?” she asked. “*Who are you?*”

“I’m sorry.” I stood up. “My apologies, Miss. I must be in the wrong room.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s okay. Are you here for Sarah?”

I sat down again, letting her tell me the same stories over and over—watching her remember and forget me within the same five-minute span. And the more she talked, the more I wondered if she knew she was technically dead. That her name and likeness were already transfixed to a plane, for a flight she’d never taken, a fake story she’d never hear.

Every now and then she’d come to and remember random, recent things, saying, “I’d always tell Jake about my husband, I’d say, He lied to you...He lied to all of us...He used that accident for his advantage...”

And although she could easily slip into another happy refrain and forget all about it, all I could see was my father—fucking lying, always lying. Using any opportunity possible to bolster his image, shunning me and anyone else who dared to stand in his way. Using the timing of my mother’s brain disease diagnosis and short life expectancy in conjunction with a plane crash to garner sympathy and funding.

All for the love of greed and worthless adulation. All for *nothing*.

I knew I wasn’t going to be able to fully function for the next few weeks, that I was going to fuck up more shit in my apartment like always. That seeing her like this, seeing her getting worse without having someone else trustworthy enough to talk about it with, was going to have a lasting effect on me.

Maybe it was good that Gillian left after all.

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

This is the last time I will say this to myself.

The very last time.

My heart can't take another sequence of angry arguments, another round in this dangerous game of "Will we make it? *Should* we make it?" or another spin on this never-ending carousel of highs and lows.

Yes, the way this man fucks me is incomparable and leaves me craving more the second he pulls out of me. And yes, the way he pleasures my pussy with his mouth and makes me come for hours on end will forever be unparalleled. But the way we fit (rather, *don't* fit) has finally reached its climax.

I will not go back.

I will not go back.

I. Will. Not. Go. Back.

If he calls me, I won't answer.

If he texts me, I won't respond.

If he emails me, I won't open the message.

I'm done.

I. Am. Done.

Write later,

Taylor G.

1 comment posted:

KayTROLL: I've heard this before...Let's see how long you last...O_o

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

Two weeks down.

No messages from him, no calls.

Although, we did share a short, repositioning flight from Charlotte to Houston, and he did sign off on a form to confirm that a male passenger was being overly rude and offensive to me during the deplaning process. But that was it.

He barely looked at me after signing the form, and we each went our separate ways to separate flights in the terminal.

He barely even *looked* at me...

Write later,

****Taylor G.****

1 comment posted:

KayTROLL: I'll reserve judgment until you make it to 8 weeks...

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

Four weeks.

Nothing.

Write later,

****Taylor G.****

No comments posted.

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

Six weeks.

Still nothing...

Just a heavy heart and a sad realization that I really did love him, but I meant *nothing* to him.

Write later,

****Taylor G.****

No comments posted.

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

He finally texted me today, nearly eight weeks after I walked away, and it wasn't an apology. It wasn't even a hello.

It was a: *I need to fuck your pussy. Call me when you get this.*

I hope I never see him again. I'm moving on.

Write later,

****Taylor G.****

1 comment posted:

KayTROLL: You **are**** moving on...**

GATE B35

JAKE

New York (JFK)

I woke up to the sound of low voices outside my bedroom, heard them talking about me as if I wasn't here.

"Why does this tenant keep getting this TV replaced?" One voice said. "I feel like he breaks it every week."

"It's one of his many hobbies," Jeff's distinctive voice floated through the halls. "He enjoys it."

"Yeah, well. You should probably tell him that there are hobbies out there that cost less than a thousand dollars a week."

"I'll be sure he knows," Jeff said. "Thank you once again for coming by."

"Anytime. *Literally.*"

The sound of my front door closing and Jeff's signature hard-bottom shoes walking across the floor were the next things I heard. His steps were getting closer and closer to my bedroom door, and without knocking, he stepped into my space.

"You're welcome, Mr. Weston," he said, placing a paper invoice onto my dresser. "You're also welcome, in advance, for finding a new botanist to take care of your plants."

"What happened to the one I had?"

"I believe you told her to, 'Get the fuck out of my place,' a few nights ago during one of your episodes. Do you not remember that?"

"No."

"I figured." He shrugged. "Well, if you need me, I'll be downstairs awaiting your next round of problems."

"Wait..."

"Yes?"

"I texted Gillian a few times last night and the night before. She hasn't texted me back."

He blinked.

"This is the part where you fill in the blanks for me, Jeff. Why the fuck hasn't she texted me back since you seem to know everything else?"

"I'm not sure," he said, his voice dripping with sympathy. "But it has been over two months since you last spoke so I'm assuming you're over." He took a pen from his jacket pocket and wrote something on the back of the invoice. Then he walked out of my room and left the apartment.

I stood up and walked over to see what he'd written on the paper.

She dropped off the watch. It's on your counter.

I groaned and got dressed, taking my private elevator down to the parking garage. I pulled out my phone and started to send Gillian another text, but then I looked through our history.

She hadn't responded to me in over *two weeks*, and the last time she texted me—months ago, I'd never sent a reply.

Shit...

I sped out of the garage and toward her Brooklyn apartment, risking the ire of her neighbors by temporarily parking my car in the middle of the street. I rushed up the outside steps, not bothering to knock on the cheap door, and stormed up four flights.

The “Two Broke Girls” sign was no longer hanging on her door, but I knocked anyway.

No answer.

I heard a female's voice inside so I knocked even harder, refusing to let Gillian ignore me.

The door swung open and it wasn't Gillian or her roommate. It was an older woman holding her cat.

“Well, yes?” She smiled at me. “What can I help *you* with today?”

“I'm looking for Gillian Taylor.”

“Who?”

“The woman who used to live here. Black hair, green eyes, beautiful. Where is she?”

“Oh! The girl with the crazy roommate. They moved out over a month ago.

A month ago? “Where did they move to?”

“I'm not sure.” She tapped her lip. “But wherever it was, it was probably someplace really nice. The crazy girl's dad picked them up in a limo. *A limo...*”

“Thank you.” I walked away and headed down the steps, returning to my car. I couldn't believe this shit, couldn't believe I'd let this much happen within so much time without even noticing it.

I turned my key in the ignition and felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. It was a text message.

Gillian?

I clicked on her name and read the response.

Gillian: Um...I'm not sure who you're trying to reach, but this phone number doesn't belong to a 'Gillian'. I'm Clara. That said... If you're interested in “making up” by “eating *my* pussy all night until I come on your face” then, no need to text back. Give me a call :-)

GATE B36

JAKE

Atlanta (ATL)---> Paris (CDG)

A week later, I stood at Gate B4 in Atlanta's airport and printed out the weather reports for tonight's flights, hoping like hell whoever I flew with would be somewhat competent. The first officer I was originally due to fly out with had contracted food poisoning overnight, so scheduling was supposed to be sending a reserve pilot so we could finally get onboard.

"Mr. Weston?" A familiar, male voice said from behind. "Mr. Weston, is that you?"

I turned around and found myself face to face with Ryan. *Simulator Ryan.*

Get the fuck out of here...

"Looks like we'll be flying together in the real-world now, sir." He smiled. "Maybe you can show me that magic carpet button, right?" He laughed and waited for me to join him.

I kept him waiting.

I tore off the remainder of the weather reports and signaled to the gate agent that we were ready. And as she led us over to the door, I noticed Gillian's supervisor, a blonde, and Gillian heading in our direction.

"You ladies on Flight 1543 with service to Paris, as well?" The gate agent asked. "Let me scan your badges after the pilots step onboard, please."

I looked back at Gillian, waiting for her eyes to meet mine, but they never did. She kept them glued to the ground, and when she did board the aircraft minutes later, I overheard her say to her supervisor, "I'll do my best on this flight, Miss Connors, but can you please keep Captain Weston the hell away from me if he chooses to leave the cockpit?"

Miss Connors gave her an assured, "Of course," and then she threw a scowl in my direction.

I'd planned to remain in the cockpit for the first few hours of the flight anyway—mainly because I didn't trust Ryan alone for five seconds, and I wasn't sure he'd been joking about that magic carpet button.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking," I said over the speakers, once boarding was complete. "On behalf of the flight crew, we'd like to welcome you aboard Elite Airways Flight 1543 to Paris. Our flight duration is around eight hours and twenty minutes and we are expecting a fairly smooth flight today. Thank you for choosing to fly with us. Sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight." I ended the message and waited for our turn to take off on the runway.

"Um, sir?" Ryan tapped my shoulder.

"Yes, Ryan?"

"No disrespect or anything, but you forgot like four whole sentences of the mandatory greeting. That's like a write-up worthy offense."

"Excuse me?"

“You know, the greeting: I really love flying for Elite! It’s the best job and the most exciting airline in the world! And then you’re supposed to say something witty, or tell a funny joke to make all the passengers feel comfortable.”

I blinked. “Do *you* feel comfortable, Ryan?”

“You want an honest answer?”

“I would *love* an honest answer.”

“Well, I might feel more comfortable if you’d told a joke. Might have convinced me that you’re an actual human being and not a robot outside of the simulator sessions, and might’ve even made me more comfortable flying an Airbus 321 for only the fourth time.”

Jesus Christ... “Elite one five four three ready for take-off.” I called to control. “Runway two-niner.”

“Copy. Cleared for takeoff. Elite one five four three, runway two niner.”

I pushed the throttle forward, propelling the plane down the runway at maximum speed. The lights on the ground glowed brightly through Atlanta’s dark blue nightfall, and the yellow signs that lined the side of the tarmac gleamed brightly as the plane’s lights shone over them.

We ascended into the air, and faint hints of adrenaline I used to live for rushed through my veins.

Ryan remained in contact with control, shocking me with his sudden professionalism, and as we cleared our cruising altitude of thirty-three thousand feet, I turned off the seatbelt sign.

“Ladies and gentlemen...” Gillian’s voice came over the speakers, rendering me still. “The captain has turned off the fasten seatbelt sign. You are now free to move about the cabin. However, we always recommend to keep your seat belt fastened while you’re seated.”

I’ll be damned if she doesn’t talk to me on this flight...

“So,” Ryan said, clearing his throat. “You’re not going to tell me that joke? It actually would help.”

“Sure.” I rolled my eyes and turned to face him. “Knock. Knock.”

He smiled. “Who’s there?”

“Mr. Shut the Fuck Up.” I motioned for him to hand me a clipboard. “Let me test you on some stuff while we’re here so I can feel safe whenever I need to leave and go the restroom.”

Whenever I need to leave and go find Gillian...

It took me four hours to convince myself that Ryan was actually a good pilot; he just needed to learn how to take things seriously. When he assured me that he would be okay for five minutes, I left the cockpit and spotted Gillian standing in the closest galley.

“Hello,” I said, walking over to her. “Can we talk?”

She said nothing.

“*Gillian.*” I stepped next to her. “Gillian, I know you hear me talking to you.”

She didn’t look up. She continued preparing dessert cups, and as I leaned close, I noticed tears falling down her face.

“Gillian, please talk to me. Let me make this right.”

“I’ll have someone bring you your Coke in a minute, *Captain.*” She picked up her tray and moved past me.

I watched as she served every passenger in first class, as she avoided my gaze and took her time pouring extra wine. I waited for her to return so I could force her to listen to me, but she never did. Instead, she moved to the galley near the middle of the aircraft and finished serving her desserts from there.

Angry, I returned to the cockpit—killing time by thinking of other ways I could get her attention. I lasted all of thirty minutes before deciding I would let everyone on this plane hear what I had to say to her

if need be.

I walked through the first class cabin, then the business and the economy, looking for her. I reached the back of the plane, finding myself next to the lavatories with no luck.

Annoyed, I knocked on the door of the lavatory on the left and a male voice answered. I knocked on the right one and immediately heard her distinctive voice.

“Someone’s in here,” she said. “The occupied light is on.”

I knocked again, even harder. I heard her groan and toss something to the floor.

“The occupied light is clearly—” The door swung open and she gasped, looking me up and down. Her eyes were filled with tears and her face was flushed red, yet she still looked absolutely stunning.

Behind her, in the lavatory, crumpled Kleenex littered the small sink and her phone sat still on the ledge.

I considered remaining calm, going with the bullshit, “Please hear me out” approach, but I decided not to waste my time.

“We need to talk, Gillian,” I said. “Now.”

“I’ll pass.” She tried to slam the door in my face, but I held it open and pushed her inside—locking the door behind me.

For several seconds, neither of us said a word. We simply stared at each other in silence, waiting for the other person to start. I was supposed to apologize right now, to say something poignant and sweet that I knew would get to her, but I had a feeling that shit wouldn’t work tonight. And I had a more important question on my mind, anyway.

“I have nothing else to say to you, Jake,” she said softly. “Nothing else to say.”

“Good, *I’ll* do most of the talking.”

“Well, that’s quite ironic. You don’t normally *talk* at all.”

“Are you fucking someone else?”

“*What?*”

“Do I need to repeat it?” I closed the gap between us. “Are you fucking someone else?”

“We haven’t spoken in weeks.” She hissed. “I haven’t seen you *in weeks*, and this is the first thing you ask me? How about, ‘Hello, Gillian. It’s been a long time since we last spoke. How are you?’”

“Hello, Gillian.” I locked my eyes on hers. “It’s been a long time since we last spoke. How are you? *Are you fucking someone else?*”

“No.”

“Are you seeing someone else?”

“That’s the same goddamn question.”

“Then give me the *same goddamn answer.*”

“No.” She crossed her arms. “No, I have not been seeing someone else, but I will be soon. And you know what? It’ll be someone who doesn’t make me feel this way every few weeks, someone who doesn’t get a sick thrill out of disappearing on me for weeks at a time or leaving me wondering at all hours of the night because he won’t open up to me. Best of all, it’ll be someone who will respect me and not act like loving me is a burden.”

“I’ve never said loving you was a burden.”

“You’ve never said you loved me at all.”

Silence.

“Gillian...” I looked right into her eyes. “*Listen to me.*”

“*Screw you.* Let me leave, please.” She pushed me, but I held her still. “Let me leave right now, Jake.”

“No.” I pulled her close and wrapped my arm around her waist, using my free hand to wipe her tears with my fingertips. I ran my hands across her back and kissed the edges of her mouth, softly biting her bottom lip to calm her down. “You know that I would never want to hurt you.”

“Do I?”

“You fucking should.” I bit her bottom lip again, harsher this time, and then I whispered against her mouth. “I need you to give ‘us’ another chance.”

“What makes you think I would be stupid enough to do that?”

“Because I’m not the only person here who has ever made a mistake.” My lips brushed against hers. “I recall the start of this being quite fucked up.”

“It’s *still* fucked up.” She looked as if she was about to cry again, but I wiped away the tears before they could fall. She began rambling, launching into one of those long, epic rants I actually missed and I couldn’t help but kiss her lips.

She tried to pull away from me, to act like moans weren’t escaping from her mouth, so I kissed her harder until she finally gave in to me.

“Are you having sex with someone else, Jake?” she whispered against my mouth.

“No.”

“Have you been dating anyone else?”

“No.” I slapped her ass and yanked her hair out of its bun. And as she continued to ask questions like only she could, I kissed her until she was too breathless to ask another. Until she gave me a glazed over look that said she was actually willing to listen to me.

“We can talk tonight,” I whispered. I grabbed her hand and pressed it against the front of my pants, letting her feel how hard she made me. “We can talk about whatever the hell you want to talk about tonight...”

GATE B37

GILLIAN

Paris (CDG)—> New York (JFK)

Hours after landing in Paris, Jake pulled me close against him in his suite's Jacuzzi. My back was pressed against his chest and he was running his fingers through my wet hair—kissing my neck every few seconds.

Despite what he'd said on the plane about talking about "whatever [I] wanted," no words were spoken when we first checked in. Instead, we'd spent most of the night re-connecting all over his room, letting our sex say all the things we still struggled to say aloud to each other.

It wasn't until a couple hours ago, that he'd held me still and began to tell me about all the things that had plagued his entire life. His father's lies. His brother's assistance in protecting those lies. His ex wife. And the saddest story of all, his mother.

"That's where you go every three weeks?" I asked.

"Yes."

I felt guilty for assuming it was something else. "Does your brother or your father ever go visit her?"

"No."

"Do they know where she is?"

"They do," he said. "I'm sure they've sent things their money can buy. Maybe once or twice they may have snuck in under the guise of a charity event, but..."

"They can't let the truth get out."

"Exactly. That can never get out because it would ruin them both," he said.

"But why haven't *you* said anything about it at least?"

"There's nothing to gain," he whispered into my ear. "Do you mind if I change the subject?"

I shook my head and he slid his hands underneath my thighs, slowly turning me around until we were face to face. He leaned forward to kiss me—letting his teeth slightly bite my bottom lip, and then he grabbed both my hands.

"I want us to make this work," he said, looking into my eyes. "I *need* us to make this work."

"I said I was willing to give us another chance when we were on the plane."

"No, no, no..." He shook his head. "You don't understand what I'm saying." His eyes were still on mine, looking more vulnerable than I'd ever seen him. "Almost everyone in my life has betrayed me at some point or used me for some type of personal gain. Almost *everyone*...My father is a goddamn liar and a cheat, my brother is a manipulative hypocrite, my ex-wife is an opportunist and a father-fucker."

"You, on the other hand..." His lips found mine again and he pulled me down against his chest.

"You're my anomaly."

"What do you mean?"

"Surely after all the crossword puzzles you've stolen from me, you know what the word 'anomaly' means."

“I know what the word means, I mean in terms of us.”

“I mean that although I’m sure you’re practically incapable of doing *any* of the things my family has done, I don’t ever want to have to wake up and read the papers to find out about what lies you’re spinning, I don’t want to have to worry about you being with someone else, and something tells me no one else would put up with your incessant talking as much as I do, so this relationship would actually be in your best interest as well.”

“One of those clauses was *not* like the others...”

“I’m aware.” He let out a low laugh. “I just need you to promise to continue being my anomaly. And I’m also just not sure how to say I love you.”

I sucked in a breath, my heart immediately full of butterflies, and his mouth claimed mine with kisses, breaking down any playful resistance, cementing his feelings over my own.

When he finally let me go, I remembered what I needed to talk about tonight. What had changed in my life since we last broke up. “Wait, Jake. I have to tell you something.”

He ignored me, pressing his lips against mine again, slipping his tongue deeper into my mouth.

“No, wait...” I pulled away from him. “It’s really important.”

“Is it *bad*?”

I hesitated. “It depends on your definition of bad.”

“You know what bad is, Gillian.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Is it really that bad to where you have to tell me right now, or can it wait?”

“It can wait.”

“Good.” His mouth was on mine again and he pulled me into his lap before standing up with me attached to his waist. “Tonight, I just want to focus on the good, and the fact that I really do love you.”

“If you love me so much, maybe we don’t have to do so much fucking anymore...”

“We’ll *always* be fucking, Gillian.” He smiled, biting my lip before tossing me onto the bed. “That’s the best part of us.”

GATE B38

JAKE

New York (JFK)—> Tokyo (NRT)

For the first time in years, I felt that everything in my life was almost right. That thrilling adrenaline rush I once lived for at every takeoff had now returned, and the fact that I finally had someone who wasn't out to use or betray me, made me feel like I was capable of trusting again.

It'd only been a few days since I made up with Gillian, and I knew we had more work to do to get on the same page—to *remain* on the same page, but I was actually determined to make this work.

The second I landed in Tokyo, I called Jeff to make sure the flowers I'd ordered yesterday were still set to arrive at her place on Eastern time tomorrow.

"Yes, I placed the flower order, Mr. Weston." Jeff laughed as he answered the phone. "All eight bouquets. That is what you're calling about, isn't it?"

"I called to discuss the weather."

"I thought so." He laughed again. "I like the way love looks on you, Mr. Weston. You're far more tolerable this way."

"I was tolerable before," I said. "I'll see you when I get back. And thank you."

"You're quite welcome."

I ended the call and stood up to leave the cockpit, bidding the departing passengers farewell for the first time in as long as I could remember. I didn't even get annoyed when they took their precious-ass time to take selfies in the aisle with the flight attendants.

When the last one deplaned, I walked down the jet-bridge and felt my phone vibrating against my pocket. Gillian.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hey..." Her voice was faint for some reason. "I was hoping to get your voicemail."

"Why is that?"

"I wanted to leave you an important message."

"Are you drunk, Gillian?" I sighed. "Are you and your roommate playing some type of game tonight?"

"No..." She cleared her throat. "I need to tell you something, the same something I tried to tell you when we made up that day."

I stopped walking as I entered the terminal, rolling my bag over to the windows. "So it *is* something bad?"

"No, it's just bad timing."

"You're *not* pregnant."

"No..." She laughed nervously. "No, I'm definitely not pregnant."

"And you also said you didn't fuck anyone else while we were apart." I felt my jaw clenching. "Are you about to tell me differently?"

“No, that’s not it either. I’ve only slept with you since we’ve met.”

I tapped my fingers against the handle of my luggage, mentally rewinding the past months we’d been apart and the months prior that we’d been together. I thought about the times she’d given me her “Cliff’s Notes” of long stories, her bad days that always involved her family, and figured she was probably blowing whatever it was out of proportion.

“I take it this is going to be a long conversation?” I asked.

“Yes.” Her voice was damn near a whisper now.

“Okay.” I walked toward the transportation dock. “I’ll call you once I check into the hotel.”

“You promise?” There was worry in her voice. “You promise to call me as soon as you check in?”

“Yes, Gillian. As soon as I check in.”

“Okay, good. I’ll be waiting.”

“Talk to you in twenty.” I ended the call, extremely confused. I walked past baggage claim and outside, catching sight of the rest of the flight crew getting onto the shuttle van.

“Excuse me, Captain?” A man walked up to me, his camera in hand. “Will you please take a picture with us?”

“*With?*”

He nodded, pointing at his toddler daughter who was wearing a blue and white dress. “My daughter begged me to ask. It would really make her day.”

“Sure.” I stood still and waited for his daughter to stand next to me.

He held his camera above all of us and I actually smiled for a change.

“Thank you!” He picked his daughter up to show her the picture, dropping his newspaper onto the ground.

“I’ll get it,” I said, stooping down to grab it. I started to hand it back to him, but my fingers instinctively tightened around the edges once I realized that this was yesterday’s edition of *The New York Times*. Once I realized that my so-called “anomaly” was on the front page.

What the fuck...

TERMINAL C:
BOY FUCKS GIRL

(Well, Vice Versa...)

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

Somewhere between the time we last broke up and the moment he showed up on my doorstep, the previous weeks of tears were long forgotten. The endless coffee runs and all-nighters that ended with crumpled Kleenex beside my laptop all faded, all went away the second he wrapped me in his arms and begged me to take him back.

And even so, when he bared his truths to me, when he told me he loved me and our sex meant more than “just sex,” I wanted to tell him that this time, during our longest break up, my life hadn’t been solely filled with crying and pain. There were days when I didn’t cry in-flight, nights when I wouldn’t let myself waste a single second thinking about him. And in those times, I’d channeled my energy into something else.

I was going to tell him.

I really was...

Write later,

Taylor G.

No comments posted.

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

Twenty calls to his home phone since last week.

Thirty texts to his cell since last weekend.

Twelve emails to his personal and work addresses this morning alone.

Not a single response from him, though...Not even a rude and well deserved “This text isn’t about fucking.”

I even caught him in the airport today, an hour after I formally submitted my two weeks’ notice.

I was taking one final glance of the newest runway, when I spotted him walking through the terminal. Still turning heads with his every step, still making damn near every woman blush as his cockiness radiated off him in waves, his eyes met mine and my entire world stopped.

I rushed over to him, anxious to explain myself, but he looked right through me and continued walking. I even ran after him—calling his name, but he glared at me with eyes that held hurt and betrayal. Eyes that once held nothing but overwhelming, chaotic love for me.

“Please listen to me,” I said. “Please, let me explain.”

He didn’t. He held up his hand and forced a smile. “I don’t take photos with passengers, *Miss*,” he said. “I’m sure any of the other pilots here would be happy to help you. Have a good day.”

Then *he* walked away.

I haven’t seen or heard from him since.

Write later somewhere else,
Taylor G.

1 comment posted:

**KayTROLL: So...Do I still need to comment on these posts now that we've met up in person?
Let me know!**

GATE C39

GILLIAN

Eight Weeks Earlier...

I stared at my blank screen and held back tears. Time wasn't healing anything between me and Jake, and every second without him was only making things worse.

It was taking everything in me not to call and reach out to him, and I knew I was being foolish by picking the lines with the absolute worst routes so we wouldn't cross paths, but I couldn't bear to see him in person right now.

Our last argument still left me feeling raw and allowed me to see that we'd finally reached the end of our relationship. There was nowhere else for us to go, and we needed to stay the hell away from each other before we ended up being even more messed up than we already were.

Unable to write a long blog post, I simply wrote, "I think this really was the end for us," and hit publish. Before I could shut down my laptop, there was a soft pinging sound. An immediate comment from my personal troll.

(KayTROLL)—I'm pretty sure he's thinking about you just as much as you're thinking about him. Just my two cents. If I were you, I wouldn't lose too much sleep over it.

I'd never responded to his troll-ish comments before, but with Meredith out of town and no one else to vent to, I typed a response.

(Taylor G.)—No, I think this was finally the end for us. It feels different this time.

(KayTROLL) You always say that. Then two days later, you go right back. (I'm not holding my breath on this one. Sorry.)

I groaned, typing. "Well, CLEARLY this time is different because it's been more than two days. It's been damn near TWO MONTHS to be exact, so quite honestly? Fuck you and your "two cents." Since you clearly don't have a life, go find yourself another random and obscure blog to bother on a daily basis, please. I don't have anything else for you."

There was one more reply before I logged off. A brief, "LOL. Still a hothead, I see. :-)".

I couldn't think of a decent biting rebuttal, so I slammed the laptop shut altogether and fell back against my sheets. I needed to figure out a way to be re-assigned to a different home-base city as soon as possible.

As I was thinking of the best possible excuse for a transfer, my phone rang. My mom. I immediately silenced her call. I didn't need any additional doses of negativity right now.

It rang once more minutes later, but my finger hovered over the silent button. It wasn't my Mom attempting a second call. It was a number I hadn't seen in forever. One I'd avoided and loathed for years. "Kennedy B"...

Her full name was Kennedy Bronson, and she was once my literary agent.

She scooped me up fresh out of graduate school—admiring my talent, promising me what every aspiring author secretly wanted: A book deal.

She swooned over my words with her infectious personality, and pitched my ideas to publishers while I interned under an esteemed editor at *The New York Times*.

Back then—just a few short years ago, life as a writer was good.

Publishers were handing out book deals like brownies—baking them early in the morning and holding them out for whoever wanted a taste in the afternoon. Magazines were hiring the eager-faced girl with ambition and a smile, and newspapers were printing about their infinite number of internships because there was so much that needed to be written. So much that needed to be said.

No one really cared who you knew, it was what you wrote. And as for me, small town girl from the outskirts of Massachusetts, even I wasn't looked at like the know-nothing girl from a city no one gave a second-thought about. I was a fast-rising editor at one of the biggest papers in the country, and according to my supervisors, I was going to be lead editor within just a few years.

I arrived to the office two hours early every morning—coffee for the superiors in hand, just to show them how hard I was willing to work. I did the work no one else wanted to do, completed the research that everyone else found mundane, and double checked the facts even after they were cleared by our legal team.

Six months into my job at *The New York Times*, I was assigned to write about the sudden troubles and countless crashes in the aviation industry, how most of the airlines (except Elite) couldn't *buy* good publicity.

First, there was the Asian flight that disappeared over the Indian Ocean—so suddenly and mysteriously that no one could (and have yet to) figure out what happened. Next, there was a series of unexplainable crashes at American airports—all apparently triggered by pilots' lack of emotional stability. And lastly, there was the final straw that thrust the industry into an uncontrolled tailspin: An American pilot, flying for a foreign carrier, deliberately crashed his plane into the side of a mountain, killing all one hundred and fifty passengers on board.

I reported on each of these stories, exhaustively writing and rewriting the facts, and then I realized that, maybe, all of these things needed further research. Maybe they needed to be a book. And maybe, just maybe, I should figure out what Elite was doing right to avoid the issues that plagued every other airline.

I sent the idea to Kennedy and within months, a handful of publishers asked for additional details. Some passed, some never got further than the initial interest, but three large publishers did. After all the deals were laid on the table, we went with St. Martin's Press, since they seemed the most enthusiastic about the idea.

For six months, I was supposed to go undercover as a flight attendant—to try and get the real scoop about Elite Airways and the airline industry. And at the end, we'd "add a bit of a fiction to it for

liability's sake," but it was going to be marketed as "the closest true account ever printed."

The book was to be titled, *The Truth Behind the Mile High Club*, but my author name wasn't going to be my own. It was to be "Taylor G." since "Gillian T." and "Gillian Taylor" were "far too plain," "not commercial enough" and "way too pretentious."

Everything was set.

Or so I thought...

Unfortunately, it was a lot harder to get hired as an Elite Airways flight attendant than I'd originally anticipated. I failed the interview sessions three times, so I had to temporarily settle for being a part time gate agent. It also turned out that publishers have a short-term attention span—especially when the introduction of e-books and Kindles began to cause change.

Slowly, the publishers laid off editors—claiming this had nothing to do with the rise of digital media. But then the magazines and newspapers began to hand out pink slips, and Fifth Avenue, once with one of the biggest stream of writers, became a dried up gorge of heartbroken dreamers.

What was once celebratory and new hire parties in the morning, became the clearing of desks and teary-eyed phone calls in the evening.

I paid no mind to that at first, though. I was still safely tucked in my internship, and working as a gate agent a few times a week; all while writing feverishly for six hours a night.

When I completed the first draft of my book, the editor at the publishing house decided that it only needed a few tweaks, so it was given a release date that was nine months away. I was promised a small promotional tour, advertising in all of the best bookstores, and a pretty big print run for a debut author.

All amazing things that never happened.

Two weeks after I submitted my final version of the book, Kennedy called me to say that the publisher was pushing the release of *Mile High Club* back. A pilot had just successfully landed a plane in the Hudson River and everyone was calling him a hero and praising him for successfully saving all one hundred fifty passengers and five crew. Releasing my book within six months of such an incident wouldn't be well received by the public.

I didn't panic. I knew things like this happened all the time. Besides, at that point, I'd finally passed the first round of the never-ending flight attendant interview process, and the publisher was offering me an advance to write a sequel.

On Christmas, the day I planned to call my family and tell them all about my huge, secret accomplishment and the book's late January release date, Kennedy called and said two things: 1. "They have to push the date back again, Gill. Turns out they are in some type of pricing war with Amazon, so they can't put your book up for pre-order. Also, your book may not be in Barnes and Noble until later. They're not giving much shelf space to authors who don't have established fan-bases." 2. "But! I was just at a conference and I met this huge indie author who has just sold a million copies of her book! She also just got picked up by your publisher!"

I plucked an ornament from my miniature Christmas tree and attempted not to sound disappointed.

"I was telling this author about you and your story, and she's agreed to blurb it!" She practically squealed. "She's also going to ask her editor to feature your first two chapters at the back of her first printed book! If that's okay with you, that is."

The bitter taste of disappointment immediately evaporated and I cried, agreeing with a loud "Yes!" I now felt that there was a silver lining to all of the previous setbacks.

Just a few weeks later, I received the blurb from the smash indie author, Brooke Clarkson. It read, "*The Truth Behind the Mile High Club* is a beautiful, eye opening, and poignant debut. Ms. G's prose unravels like a silk yarn and will keep you up all night!"

I printed her words on a poster and framed it in my apartment, high above my desk so I could see it every morning before work. By then, I'd made it past the fourth round of flight attendant training and I was

sure I'd be employed by the time I started writing the sequel.

Mile High Club was finally slated to come out in the spring, a full year and a half from when it was originally guaranteed to publish. My boss at *The Times* had planned a release party, a few early review copies were being printed, and I was still waiting to tell anyone about it; I needed it to be in my hands and real first.

However, just as I was getting excited about the many possibilities of being a published author, the very paper I worked for ran a dream-de-railing headline that altered any hopes I was clinging to:

Smash Indie Author, Brooke Clarkson, to Publish New Book: The Mile High Club Unveiled

I grabbed the paper and simply skimmed the article, hoping this was some type of joke, but it wasn't. Her book sounded just like mine, and before I could ask my agent why I was never informed about this, my boss at *The Times* slammed an advance copy of Brooke's book onto my desk.

"Raymond is out with the flu and won't be able to review this in time," he said. "It's not due to release for another three months, but he apparently stalked the publisher, insisting that we get a copy. You mind doing a short write up?"

The question was rhetorical. He walked away shortly after asking.

I stared at the book for an hour before flipping open its dust jacket, wanting to believe that her cover was only an homage to mine. That maybe, just maybe, there were only so many photos of planes worthy of being on the cover of a mass printed book.

I started reading chapter one and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

This was my fucking book. This was my fucking story.

Every word from my novel had been lifted and repurposed, masked under a more refined and rigid prose. Yet still, the blatant plagiarism shone through the ink.

I flipped through the entire book, recognizing sentence structures and words I'd already written months before. As tears of anger fell down my face, I forced myself to actually read every word of the article in *The Times*, to see if she would, at the very least, credit me for her stolen work.

"I have a friend who works in the airline industry," she was quoted two paragraphs in. "I managed to snag a short two-month stint as a flight attendant and I'm excited to share this story with my readers."

When asked for the inspiration behind her story, she said, "Well, I've always wanted to write what I would enjoy reading. I was on a plane one day and I saw this flight attendant who looked like she had a story to tell. All of a sudden, I wanted to be in her shoes, know about her life, so I took that moment and decided to craft something semi fictional, but very meta-world."

At the bottom of the interview, there were a few lightning-round questions. One in particular stood out: "Did you read any books about flight attendants, aviation, or pilots while working on your novel?"

"Not at all," she'd answered. "I've actually never read any book regarding the airline industry. I crafted the story first and then I consulted a few experts for technicalities. I try my best to never, ever, read any other author's work while I write."

Her lies cut deep, but the bolded line at the bottom of the article struck me the hardest: "For inquiries and further information about *The Mile High Club Unveiled*, contact the author's agent: Kennedy B."

I'd never known heartbreak before that moment, never knew what it felt like to feel as if my heart had been yanked from my chest and stomped on repeatedly. I tried not to cry too loudly, but the thought of holding back tears only made me cry more.

Not only did Brooke's book come out a full three months before mine, it shot up the bestsellers' charts. And it stayed there. For weeks. Her book was on the tip of every reputable critic's tongue, and publishers were clamoring for more stories 'just like it.' However, when my book finally debuted, it was cruelly dismissed as a "knock off," and the critics labeled it as "Nowhere near as good as its predecessor," and "For a debut, Ms. G. should know better than to so obviously copy her superior."

I never opened a single envelope from my publisher after that. I tossed them all to the side in various corners of my apartment—keeping them as close and distant reminders of a tarnished dream. I stopped answering Kennedy's phone calls and emails—the few that came anyway, and as much as it hurt me financially, I returned my twenty-five thousand-dollar advance for the sequel to the publisher.

I was too hurt to write anything else for them again.

What I *did* write was my first official column for *The Times*: "How It Feels When a Bitch-Ass Bestselling Author Steals from a Debut Author and How My Agent—Kennedy B. of Bronson and E. Literary Asshole Associates Backstabbed the Shit Out of Me." I wasn't classy or careful about it at all. I listed names, dates, and gave dead proof that almost every word in her book was a variation of mine.

Since I was on amazing terms with the logistics team, and never had any prior problems, the article made it all the way to the layout department before my slander was detected.

The next time I came into work, I was fired. Then banned.

Then erased, as if I'd never worked there.

The same month I lost my dream-internship at *The New York Times*, I received an email from Elite Airways. I'd passed the final round of pre-screening but it would take a while before they would be able to fly me to Dallas for the full eight-week training session. And even then, they admitted that their newly hired attendants could remain on reserve from anywhere for four months to four years.

I still had my part time job as a gate agent—which I had to keep, and there was a massive condominium complex I'd once done an exclusive exposé about. It was a beautiful, state-of-the-art building, full of million dollar homes, and from what I remembered in my report, it had a very high demand for "domestic engineers" and hired a new one every week.

Desperate, I figured I'd give that job a temporary try. And above all else, I would stop writing for a while.

I had to.

I met Kennedy at Andrew's Coffee on Fifth Avenue, spotted her as soon as I stepped inside.

A beautiful Asian woman with long black hair, she still looked as friendly and approachable as she did when I first met her years ago.

"Hey," she said, smiling as I sat across from her. "Do you still take hazelnut and Splenda in your coffee?"

"You actually remember something about me?" I rolled my eyes. "Shocking."

"So, you *don't* take that anymore?"

I stared at her.

She pushed a cup of coffee toward me and smiled again. "How have you been? It's been a long time since we last spoke. I'm actually surprised you answered my phone call."

"No shit."

"Um..." She sipped her tea, having the audacity to look confused. "Did I catch you on a bad day? Is something wrong?"

"Yes." I gritted my teeth. "Yes, you did catch me on a bad day and yes, something is wrong—something is *very* wrong."

“Would you like to meet me some other day, then?”

“I don’t want to meet you after today at all.” I tried to hold back and stay calm, but I couldn’t. “You are the worst fucking literary agent ever,” I said. “The fact that you still have my number is appalling and I hope the reason you’re here is because you’ve lost every client you’ve ever had.”

“I haven’t.”

“Well, that sucks for them.” I crossed my arms. “Have you changed your process about signing new people now or is it the same? Lure them in with a debut book they didn’t write, slap their name on it, and voila! Instant fame and undeserved success.”

She sighed. “I had no idea that Brooke was going to be influenced by your book, Gillian.”

“Influenced? *Influenced*? Oh, now that’s grand. Is that what they’re calling plagiarism these days?”

“I’ve apologized to you, countless times.” She looked sincere. “I had no idea, and when I found out —”

“You didn’t even tell me!”

The café was suddenly silent and everyone was staring at me, but I didn’t care.

“You didn’t even tell me, Kennedy.” I shook my head.

“Because I wanted to avoid you behaving like this.”

“Yeah, well. As always, great planning on your part. Whose book ideas is she stealing now? I’ve seen only the greatest of deals for her in *Publishers Weekly*—movies, foreign, audio. Must be nice.”

“Gillian...”

“I even saw her at a signing overseas where she apparently still doesn’t seem to read other authors’ books while she writes.” I leaned back in my chair. “Oh, and it was just last week when I read that she’s getting a very nice promotional tour for her latest release as well. Which client of yours did she steal that book from?”

She sighed. “Are you going to let me talk, Gillian? Or are you going to sit there and treat me like shit all day?”

“I’m going to sit here and treat you like shit all day,” I said, sounding a lot more like Jake than myself. “You signed the author who clearly stole—not influenced, my first book. You failed to tell me about it when it first happened, stopped reaching out to me, and now you want to call me out of the blue and sit down with me for a cordial conversation? Do you honestly expect me to let you?”

“*Enough!*” She cut me off, her face beet red. “Enough, Gillian. Don’t you think I was hurt, too? Don’t you think I cried about it as well?”

“The tears must’ve dried up pretty fast, since you signed her to your agency.”

“I did *not*.” She glared at me. “That was a misprint. My *partner* signed her, but she was new at the time and she had no idea about what she’d done until after the contracts were signed. I would never have done that to you.

“But ignoring me for all these years and sending me generic holiday greetings was okay?”

“You either have a very distorted memory of what happened or you sincerely want to hate me,” she said. “I emailed you all the time. *You* stopped answering *me*. I called you every day for months and you didn’t pick up once, so of course, I stopped. You needed time to get over it, I figured, but I never stopped fighting for you, Gillian.” She looked genuinely hurt. “I’ve sold the rights to your first book in several countries. I’ve sent excerpts of it to magazines whenever I thought it would be a good fit, and I still have your unclaimed royalty checks in my desk drawer. I’ve mailed you the notices repeatedly, but you haven’t answered one in years.

I stared at her.

“I told you from the very beginning that I would never quit on you, that I believed in you, no matter what, and I do not deserve to be talked to like that. *Ever*. How would you feel if that pilot you’re dating talked to you that way?”

“Upset. Wait...” I paused. “How do you know about him?”

“Good question.” She smiled and pulled a folder from her bag. “That’s part of what I wanted to talk to you about today. But first, I want you to look at this.” She slid the folder to me. “It’s a book deal. North American rights only, so you would retain all foreign rights and you’d be able to sell those as you want.”

I stared at the file, not wanting to open it. The state of publishing was even worse today than it was back then. No one new received more than a couple thousand for an advance these days.

“What’s the advance this time?” I asked. “Seven dollars?”

“Close.” She sipped her tea. “Seven figures.”

“*What?*”

“See for yourself.”

I immediately flipped the folder open and read the top sheet.

There it was in black and white: A two million dollar offer for North American rights to some book I’d never written or even mentioned.

“What the hell is *Turbulence*?” I asked.

“Your blog posts.” She smiled. “I’ve been following you from the beginning. You’ve got about one hundred thousand words of material to work with already.”

What the ... “You’re KayTROLL?”

“Yes, very nice to ‘meet’ you in person. Well, *again*. Now, if you’re interested in taking this deal, you’ll have to change the—”

“No, no, no.” I interrupted her. “That was *you* leaving all those rude-ass comments all this time? Following my sex-life? Saying things that you knew would hurt my feelings?”

“First of all, you decided to blog about your sex life. I didn’t force you. Second, are you really going to sit there and talk to me about hurting someone’s feelings?”

“You once wrote “You’re a slut,” in the comments.”

“No,” she said, smiling. “I said that you were ‘behaving’ slutty—which *you were*. Big difference.”

“You said I needed to grow the fuck up.”

“You did.” She smiled again. “And from what I’ve been reading over the past few years, you have. But if we’re going to discuss things we’ve both said, didn’t you once call me a “Backstabbing Bitch,” amongst other things, on your blog? And also, for your never-published *Times* article?”

I sighed.

“I think we can both be mature and throw the mean comments under the bridge now. Don’t you think?”

“Yes...”

“Good. Now, back to this deal. In order for it to work, you’d have to turn eighty percent of the blog posts into more of a narrative. You can keep ten to fifteen of your favorite ones and have them printed as is, and you may have to do a few male-point-of-view chapters. It’d have to be super-fast, and you’d have to do something unique with the chapter headings to separate the blog posts. Maybe airport gates—A1, A2, et cetera, for chapter headings? It would just have to be something non-chapter like, because they’d like to do an advanced publication for this.”

I leaned back in my chair as she continued.

“You should know that every editor I pitched this to wanted an immediate meeting, and I was as discreet as I could be. Before I could even suggest an auction, Penguin put this deal on the table and their promotional teams are already salivating to go the extra mile. What do you say?”

My mind was still spinning, my heart was still racing. “I need time to think about it.”

“What? Which part exactly needs to be *thought* about?”

“The part where the guy I fell in love with is in the story, the part where I’ll be putting him and our relationship out for the public. I know we’re over now, but—” I paused. “I’m still in love with him.”

“Understandable.” She nodded, lawyer-like. “You can change his name, distort a few of the facts. The deal is packaged for you to have creative freedom. It’s meta-fiction.”

“I just...” I shut the folder. “I’m honored, Kennedy. But this is way too fast. Thirty minutes ago, I despised you. Fifteen minutes ago, I *tolerated* you.”

“And now?”

“Now, I regret the way I’ve thought about you all these years.”

“It’s water under the bridge.” She leaned forward, tapping my hand. “Take all the time you need to think about this.”

“Do you really mean that, or does that phrase still mean the same thing as it did years ago?”

“Of course, it does.” She put her hand on her chest, laughing. “You’ve got until the end of the week.”

GATE C40

JAKE

Present Day

Penguin Acquires \$2M Rights to Meta-Fiction Account of Elite Airways Stewardess' Steamy Affair with Pilot
—*The New York Times*

I stared at the black and bold headline—wanting to believe the words were some type of joke, but the accompanying article held no humor.

Gillian Taylor, formerly published as “Taylor G.” was quoted as saying, “It was a very turbulent affair that occurred between the two of us. And yes, we did risk a lot by being in some of the places we were together. But through the ups and downs, I fell in love with this man and I wouldn’t change anything about the experience for the world. Well, minus our own personal ending in real life, of course.”

When asked if the subject of her novel had any fucking idea about what was happening, any idea about the fact that she was about to tell this story, she gave a short, “No comment.”

I couldn’t even finish reading the article in its entirety, not when I managed to make it through her short bio that detailed her previous time in publishing. Time she didn’t even think to share with me on the night I told her everything.

Everything...

Here I was, once again, *reading* about someone’s actions in my life via the ink of the press instead of getting the words in person. Once again, I was used and quickly betrayed, and someone I actually loved became another disappointment. Just like everyone else.

GATE C41

GILLIAN

New York (JFK)

I took a cab to Jake's apartment around three in the morning, my heart unable to stand being ignored by him for another week. As the driver carelessly sped across the city streets, my anxiety rose with every click of the running meter.

"You alright back there?" the driver asked. "You look like you're about to vomit in my car."

"I'm not going to vomit in your car."

"You better not." He eyed me through the rearview mirror. "I'll have to charge you double for that. No, *triple*."

I let out a sigh and kept my head turned toward the window, attempting to focus on the sight of Manhattan instead of my emotions.

When the cab finally pulled up in front of The Madison, I handed the driver a couple twenties and rushed right up the steps.

"Wait a minute, Miss." Jeff held up his hand, not opening the door for me. "How may I help you tonight?"

"I'm here to talk to Jake."

"I don't know a Jake."

"*Mr. Weston*, Jeff," I said. "You know who I'm talking about. I need to see him."

He gave me a sympathetic look and slowly shook his head. "He put you on his 'Not Welcome' list."

"*What?*"

"You've been on it for weeks. I'm not supposed to let you in, and you're actually banned from the property. Would you like me to arrange another cab for you?"

I was silent. I wasn't even sure what to say.

Near tears, I took a couple steps back, but Jeff began to open the door for me.

"Hurry up," he said, looking away and giving me a chance to rush inside.

I headed straight for the elevators, using the key Jake had given me to get up to his floor—hoping like hell it still worked. When the car began to move, I breathed a sigh of relief.

With every floor that passed, I attempted to calm my nerves, but it was no use. By the time I arrived to his level, I was an even bigger mess of emotions.

I walked over to his door and knocked five times.

No answer.

I knocked five more times, a little louder.

No answer.

I kicked at the door a few times—saying his name, and Jake finally answered, wearing nothing but a pair of lounge pants. Looking as if he'd just gotten out of the shower, water from his hair dripped onto his

bare chest, and the familiar, intoxicating scent of his body wash wafted toward me.

“Thank you for finally answering the door,” I said, noticing the imprint of his cock through his pants. He didn’t say anything. He just stared at me.

Clearing my throat, I glanced behind him, noticing the television in the living room was on and blaring loudly. “Am I bothering you and someone else on a late-night date right now?”

“What the fuck do you want, Gillian?”

“I want to talk.”

“Are you sure about that? Perhaps you mean you want to *write*.” He sounded angry, but I could see a world of hurt in his eyes.

“I just want to talk to you. Can I come in?”

“No.”

“Well, can you step out here so I can—”

“Record it? Tape it? Use it for *Turbulence Part Two*? Or will the second novel have a different name?”

“I’m really sorry, Jake, and I really tried to tell you that night,” I said softly. “I told you it was important.”

“You told me it could wait.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “You knew damn well something like that *shouldn’t* wait. Was that your motive all along? Was all this shit just a fucking *project* for you?”

“No, it wasn’t. I *promise*. I signed that deal when we weren’t talking for weeks, when I thought we were truly over. I don’t reveal anything specific about you. I don’t state your name anywhere and I—”

“You didn’t have to.” He clenched his jaw. “You didn’t have to give details about shit, Gillian, because guess what? Now you’ve got HR sitting every employee down and asking about how often we all fuck in-flight. What happens when they discover the other relationships that actually have substance? For the people without FCEs or million-dollar-book deals? What happens to them?”

“Nothing. It’s being marketed as meta-fiction.”

“Is that a new synonym for bullshit?”

“I said I was sorry.”

“And I said I didn’t care.”

“You’re not going to give me the chance to explain?” I wiped away a tear. “You’re just going to let what we had go? This is supposed to be love.”

“It was never love.”

“It was love the moment you gave up everyone else for me.”

“I did that so I could fuck you again. It had nothing to do with loving you. I hardly *knew* you.”

“You wanted to.”

“Is this what you came over in the middle of the night to do?” He wasn’t giving in. “Talk in circles? To keep running around each other until one of us gives up?” He held up his hands. “*I* give up. Now, what?”

“I’m not going to beg you to see what’s right in front of you, Jake.”

“You don’t have to, Gillian.” His voice was cold. “It’s very clear what’s currently in front of me: *The past*.”

My heart dropped.

“Now, if you would kindly get the hell away from me, and return to your adoring flock of fans who actually buy into the bullshit you’ve spun about us, I think you’ll be a lot happier in the long run.” He slammed the door in my face, and it took everything in me to resist the urge to knock on it again and force him to open it right back up. To hold off from storming inside and making him listen to me, but I held back.

I needed to let go of this for good.

We were finally done.

GATE C42

JAKE

Dallas (DAL)

I took a seat in the makeshift Personnel Office at the Dallas/Ft. Worth Marriott, noticing that unlike my previous experience here, there was no blue-suited witness, no files stacked all over the desk, and no digital recorder waiting to collect my every word.

There was only a red-haired woman with glasses sitting across from me, looking as if she'd been conducting these sessions far too long.

She adjusted her frames and clicked her ballpoint pen. "Good afternoon, Mr. Weston."

"Good afternoon."

"Could you take a look at the paper in front of you and read the first few lines aloud, please?"

"Sure." I picked it up. "Elite Airways does not, under any circumstances, condone interpersonal relationships between any of its employees. If any employee is found to be involved in such a relationship, he or she may (depending on their position within the company), be subject to suspension, transfer, or termination."

"Thank you." She slid me a different sheet of paper. "Now, for the record, I am aware that you have an FCE and are nearly incapable of being fired for any reason. That said, so far, I've asked every pilot who's scheduled to fly out of this city this week a certain list of questions, and I have to travel across the country over the next few weeks to ask hundreds more. So, please don't take the following line of questioning personally. Did you, Jake Weston, ever have interpersonal relations with Gillian Taylor?"

"I don't know who that is."

"It's a yes or no question."

"Then I guess it has to be a *no* since I don't know who that is."

She raised her eyebrow and flipped open a folder. "Miss Taylor flew with you on numerous trips, Mr. Weston. During her last few months here, your schedules actually aligned thirty percent of the time. I'm not attempting to imply anything. I'm just asking if—"

"I said I have no idea who the fuck she is." I glared at her. "Can we move on?"

"Fine." She glared back, pressing the issue even further. She slid me a copy of an employee witness report. "Is this your signature? Confirming that you did see a passenger treat her inappropriately, upon landing at Houston, during a repositioning flight?"

"It looks forged."

"There's a video tape on file of you signing it."

"Was I under duress at the time?"

"Mr. Weston," she said, crossing her arms. "Did you confirm that you saw Gillian Taylor being treated inappropriately or not?"

"I did." I relented. "Although, she wouldn't be the first flight attendant I stood up for."

“Actually, she would be.”

Silence.

“In all of your years as a pilot for other carriers, you’ve never vouched for any of your peers. Only Miss Taylor. Quite an interesting fact, isn’t it?”

“Only if you have a distorted definition of the word *interesting*.”

“Why would you vouch for her, Mr. Weston? And why did you vouch for her over something so simple? Were you jealous?”

“This is your attempt at *not* implying?”

“It’s my attempt at giving you a chance to be honest with me.” She looked me right in the eyes. “When I pulled your file a few minutes ago, I noticed that you updated it weeks ago. You listed a new emergency contact, one by the name of Gillian Taylor. Her phone number and address are actually identical to the ‘Gillian Taylor’ we’re currently discussing. Any idea how her name and *your signature* got there?”

I took the form out of the folder and quickly signed my name next to the “Never had any contact with Gillian Taylor” and “I understand the employee relations policy” boxes and stood up. “Is that all you need from me?”

“Yes.” She shook her head as I handed her the paper. “Yes. Thank you, Mr. Weston.”

“My pleasure.”

GATE C43

GILLIAN

PENGUIN PUBLISHING'S UPCOMING RELEASE, *TURBULENCE*, ENJOYS DIZZINGLY HIGH
PRE-ORDER SALES, EBOOK & PRINT

—*USA Today*

SOON TO BE RELEASED *TURBULENCE* REVEALS THE FALLACIES IN ELITE AIRWAYS'
NONFRATERNIZATION CLAUSE, REVEALS SEX IN-FLIGHT

—*Flying Quarterly*

PILOTS DECRY THE LOGISTICS OF "IN-FLIGHT SEX" IN UPCOMING NOVEL, *TURBULENCE*

—*CNN*

TWO PILOTS ADMIT TO HAVING SEX IN-FLIGHT AT LEAST ONCE DURING CAREERS, SAY
'*TURBULENCE*' COULD BE ACCURATE

—*MSNBC*

TURBULENCE, AN EROTIC ROMANCE, REACHES SOARING ALTITUDE ON BESTSELLERS'
CHART FIRST WEEK OF RELEASE

—*The Wall Street Journal*

AUTHOR OF *TURBULENCE*, TAYLOR G., TO APPEAR ON THE TODAY SHOW TO DISCUSS
SCANDALOUS NOVEL

—*Today.com*

TURBULENCE LANDS AT #1 ON THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLERS' LIST SECOND WEEK
OF RELEASE

—*The New York Times*

DAUGHTER OF FAMED NEUROSURGEON(S) RELEASES STEAMY, EROTIC NOVEL BASED ON
HER OWN EXPERIENCES AT ELITE AIRWAYS

—*Boston Globe*

TURBULENCE SPENDS SEVENTH CONSECUTIVE WEEK ON NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLERS' LIST

—*The New York Times*

OFFICIAL ELITE AIRWAYS PRESS RELEASE

Regarding the fiction that is currently being propagated as fact via a former employee

Our esteemed airline did indeed employ Gillian Taylor as a gate agent, a reserve flight attendant, and as a full time flight attendant over a well-documented period.

During her short term career with us, Miss Taylor amassed a total of five minor employee infractions—one of which was a termination which was eventually overturned due to an error in the Human Resources Department.

However, her fictional account of being able to so easily sustain such a relationship within the confines of our airline's strict non-fraternization policy is simply untrue, and is packaged solely for her publisher's entertainment.

Furthermore, although we are genuinely happy for "Taylor G.'s" newfound career and success, we would be even happier if the reading public accepted her "truth" for the mere fiction that it really is.

###

GATE C44

JAKE

Dallas (DAL)—> Barcelona (BCN)—> Chicago (ORD)
Rome (FCO)—> New York (JFK)

The news media was like a flock of thirsty seagulls. Desperate and deprived, they waited at their desks every morning for something worth devouring and they fought over it until there was something new.

Unfortunately, *Turbulence* was still running its course through the news cycle, and “Taylor G.” was everywhere I looked. The airport bookshops were stuffing that book on every possible shelf, late night talk show hosts had started a “How Many Days Until Pilot’s Identity Is Revealed” contest, and even passengers on my planes were still carrying their freshly bought copies, asking, “Hey...Since you work for Elite, do you know who she was talking about?” with annoying curiosity.

I’d flown every international trip I could manage—running my body off pure anger. I changed my phone number, got a new email address, and made sure that Jeff now knew that anyone whose name started with a ‘T’ or a ‘G’ was on my “I Don’t Fuck with You” list. Along with the rest of my family.

I made new casual sex contacts abroad, but I could never seal the deal with any of them. “Dinner” always ended with just dinner. “Drinks” never escalated to anything more than a drunken evening alone. My promises of “more” always remained broken, and an unwelcome feeling of guilt lodged in my chest whenever I even attempted to call someone new.

It didn’t stop me from trying, though.

My date tonight was with a woman I’d met after landing at JFK this morning. She’d purposely brushed by me in the terminal and she didn’t waste any time letting me know what was on her mind.

“How long are you in town for, Captain?” she asked.

“Until tomorrow.”

“So, that means you’re free tonight for some company?”

“I don’t do company.”

“Do you do fucking?”

“I do.” That was what brought me to the Marriott Le Grande, at a small café outside of Bergman’s. Since her room was being serviced, she’d suggested that we have lunch.

I was glad she wasn’t the talkative type. She didn’t even pretend like she wanted to have a conversation.

“They should be done with my room in twenty minutes,” she said, putting her phone away.

“Good.” I took a short sip of coffee and looked out the window, hoping tonight would finally be the day I would end my sexless cycle.

As the waiter offered us more bagels, I heard the sound of a familiar light and raspy voice behind me. Gillian.

I turned around in my seat and looked around the room, trying to place where she was, but then I saw that she wasn't really here. She was on the television, on the news.

Dressed in a fitted beige dress and red heels, she was sitting across from one of the most popular morning anchors in America, Katie Seleck, a pretty blonde woman with a penchant for being completely over the top.

Without thinking, I stood up and moved closer to the screen.

"Can you turn that up a bit, please?" I asked the barista.

"Sure thing." He smiled and lifted the remote.

"Today we're here with Taylor G." Katie said. "She's a former Elite Airways flight attendant and author of the book that is causing quite a bit of a buzz, *Turbulence*."

The camera panned to Gillian, and she looked as if it was killing her to smile.

"It made its debut on shelves last month and it's apparently going to have to go through a second printing fairly soon." She looked at Gillian. "How do you feel right now about living your dream?"

"I'm still in a bit of shock, honestly."

"I can imagine." Katie laughed. "So, let's just get down to the question that everyone wants to know. Outside of the name and city changes, is your book mostly true?"

She hesitated to answer. "Yes."

"Interesting!" She pulled out a sheet of paper. "Are you aware of the press releases that Elite Airways has sent out this week? How they're now framing you as a disgruntled employee?"

"Yes, and I think they're doing a very good job to discredit me." Gillian folded her hands in her lap. "A very good job, but facts are facts."

Katie smiled again, seemingly overjoyed to have an exclusive. "You told me right before the interview that you wouldn't divulge the name or anything specific about the pilot you were involved with, but does he know about the book? Is he aware that he's the main subject?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that."

"Fair enough," she said. "Let's focus on you. So, you got a small book deal fresh out of college and your debut book was supposed to be about..."

I tuned out the reporter's voice, tuned out Gillian's obviously-rehearsed answers. I kept my focus on Gillian's lips and her eyes, the way she blushed every few seconds when she was uncomfortable.

I couldn't deny that she was still fucking beautiful, or that seeing her for these few minutes was having an effect on me and making me sense the very feeling I'd been attempting to avoid for the past few months. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I had yet to curb my habit of waking up in the middle of the night and reaching for her.

I'd found images of us in my desk drawer, more secret pictures she took of us, and ones she continued to snap of me when I was asleep. And I still looked at the naked images she once sent to my phone via our FaceTime chats. I couldn't bring myself to delete those.

"One last question before we take a quick commercial break." Katie's shrill voice cut through my thoughts. "If there's anything you'd like to say to the other subject in *Turbulence*, anything at all, what would you say?"

A look of hurt crossed Gillian's face, but she recovered quickly and forced a smile. "I would say, two word phrase, seven letters. Something I always wanted you to say, but now I'm saying it to you and I mean it."

I'm sorry...

"Okay, then...We'll be right back with—"

"I'd also say that I miss you." She looked directly into the camera. "I miss you a lot more than words can explain." Then she mouthed, "And I love you."

Someone off camera handed her a box of Kleenex and Katie winked at the audience. She patted Gillian's knee and whispered, "We'll be right back, America" with a smile. And after the camera got one last shot of the tears falling down Gillian's face, the screen cut to a laundry commercial.

"You ready?" The Marriott woman whispered into my ear. "I just received the text from housekeeping. We're good to go."

I turned around to face her, unable to see her true features. All I could see was Gillian.

"Is that a yes?" she asked.

"It's a no." I moved past her and walked out of the bistro and into the evening air of the city. I headed down 38th street, toward the financial district where I was less likely to run into too many people.

When I approached a stoplight, I looked to my left and noticed *Turbulence* staring at me from a display inside of Barnes and Noble. Unable to look away, I stepped closer to the glass, eyeing the new cover for the paperback. Unlike the hardback cover which featured a couple leaning against the wall in a post-sex kiss, this cover was far simpler.

The word "Turbulence" was split into two: "Turbu" and "Lence" lined up symmetrically in a bright white font. There was a man in a pilot uniform—a captain's uniform with four glittering gold stripes on his shoulders, and his back was turned as he stood beneath a dark blue sky. In thin, white letters at the bottom were the words, "Taylor G." and above that were the italicized words: *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author.

A part of me wanted to storm into the store and strip the cover off every copy—to rip out the pages until there was nothing left for anyone to read. But another part of me, a part I couldn't explain, was telling me to pick up a copy for myself.

With the streetlight still red, I went against my better judgment and walked inside the store. I was immediately faced with a larger display of her book, and a stand stocked with free bonus gifts that came with every purchase of it: A silver plane keychain with the words "This is us. This is our messed up love" etched onto the wing.

"Can I help you with something today, sir?" A brunette walked over to me. "Anything particular you're looking for?"

"I've found it," I said, picking up a copy. "Where do I check out?"

"Far right wall." She smiled. "Happy reading!"

"Thanks." I walked away from her and headed toward the counter, stopping when I saw a black book with the title, *How to Date a Pilot (And Have Cockpit Sex!)*. I knocked it onto the floor and purchased my book.

I disregarded my previous plans for the Financial District and hailed a cab straight to my condo.

Since I was off for the next few days, I poured myself a few shots of bourbon and tossed them back. Then I took Gillian's book out of my bag and sat on my couch.

I stared at it awhile, still unsure of whether I wanted to read it or set it afire.

It wasn't until a little after midnight that I finally flipped open the page and read the first few lines:

PRE-BOARDING

GILLIAN

Prologue

How many times will you burn me?

Three, four, five, maybe ten—

Is it me who's burning you?

Yes, 'this' needs to end.

If you walk away first, I'll follow suit.

I've told you this before, and yet you never do...

The first time I flew through severe turbulence, I swore on my life I'd never fly again.

It was during a red-eye flight from Seattle to London, and three hours in, we were swept up in a sudden summer storm. The plane shook violently as the passengers screamed and prayed for their lives, and my calm assurances of "Hold on! Everyone, please just hold on!" fell on deaf ears.

The pilot was young and inexperienced, his soft voice not comforting in the least, and as the glasses from the first class cabin shattered onto the floor and luggage toppled from the overhead bins, I promised myself that if we ever landed, my days in the sky were long over.

I broke that promise hours later, of course, but I could finally say that I'd experienced the worst of what turbulence could ever be.

Or, so I thought...

I read the one after that, and as the hours passed, my eyes took in her sentences—devouring her every word.

GATE C45

GILLIAN

MYSTERY PILOT IN EROTIC ROMANCE BELIEVED TO BE RELATED TO AN AIRLINE
EXECUTIVE

—*E! News*

AUTHOR OF PREVIOUS BESTSELLER, *MILE HIGH CLUB UNVEILED*, ADMITS TO “HEAVILY
SAMPLING” TAYLOR G.’S FIRST NOVEL AMIDST THOUSANDS OF FAN ACCUSATIONS

—*RT BOOK REVIEWS*

ELITE AIRWAYS MAKES ALL EMPLOYEES RESIGN NEW NON-FRATERNIZATION POLICY.
CLAIMS THE MOVE HAS “ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO WITH THAT BOOK”

—*USA Today*

‘TURBULENCE’ TO RECEIVE A RECORD FIFTH PRINTING WITHIN FIRST THREE MONTHS OF
RELEASE

—*The International Times*

AUTHOR OF ‘TURBULENCE’, TAYLOR G., BEGINS INTERNATIONAL BOOK TOUR AS NOVEL
CONTINUES #1 REIGN FOR THIRD MONTH IN A ROW

—*The New York Times*

OFFICIAL ELITE AIRWAYS PRESS RELEASE

Regarding the fiction that is still being propagated as fact via a former employee

Our esteemed airline has now completed an extensive investigation process that included all of the pilots who currently fly for our company. The results definitively conclude that the former employee in question, Miss Gillian Taylor (writing as “Taylor G.”) was never involved in an interpersonal affair with one of our pilots.

We will no longer issue any more press releases regarding this matter, but as mentioned previously, we wish Miss Taylor the best of luck with her newfound literary success.

###

GATE C46

GILLIAN

New York (JFK)—> Salt Lake City (SLC)—> Pittsburgh (PIT)

“Keep your eyes on the camera...” Jake whispered into my ear as he pulled me back by my hair, fucking me deeper and deeper.

I looked right at the lens, crying out as he filled me with every inch of his cock. His left hand squeezed my breasts, pinching my hardened nipples as I cried out.

“Jake...Jake...” My body spasmed violently beneath his and he flipped me over, covering my mouth with his and claiming my lips until I went completely still.

Then, just like he’d done in every other viewing of this video, he kissed me before turning off the tape. I immediately hit replay, watching it for the umpteenth time.

“Miss Taylor?” The interviewer from Midnight Ramblings suddenly stepped into the room.

“Yes?”

“I just wanted to personally thank you for letting us interview you tonight.” She extended a bouquet of flowers toward me. “Not too many people are willing to fly to Salt Lake City, so it was an absolute pleasure, and I look forward to your next novel.”

“Thank you. I’m honored you invited me.”

“Do you mind signing a few copies before you go? They’re on the table by the soundstage.”

“I don’t mind at all.”

“Great! Thank you once again!”

I waited until I heard the click of the door, and then I finally let my perfectly-rehearsed smile falter and fade. I let the tears roll down my face, let my chest heave up and down like it always did after these unfulfilling interviews.

With no shame, I dialed Jake’s number, but instead of going directly to voicemail, there was a new message: “This number is no longer in service.”

Subject: You.

You’re still *my* anomaly.

Miss you,

Gillian

No answer. As usual.

I hit refresh a few times, hoping for something—anything, but nothing came.

A light knock came at the studio door and I quickly wiped my eyes.

“Come in,” I said.

“Okay, yeah.” Kennedy walked in, talking on her cell phone. “Right. Well, we can talk about that on Friday. I’m with a client. Friday, Kenneth.” She shot me a quick ‘I’m so sorry about this’ look and spoke to whoever Kenneth was for a few more minutes before hanging up.

“Well,” she said, giving me her full attention. “This particular interview went rather well, didn’t it? I think you did an amazing job.”

“Thank you.” I feigned a smile. “If it’s okay with you, I’d like to sign the books and go home. Can we bypass the extra photos thing?”

“I’m ten steps ahead of you.” She placed a bag on the table. “Here are the books and there’s a pen inside. Are you still up for a dinner with readers tomorrow?”

“Always.”

“Great. I’ll go tell them we’re leaving shortly and be right back.”

As she left, my phone vibrated against my thigh. My heart stopped.

Jake?

I unlocked the screen and opened my email app.

Not Jake.

Not even close.

It was Ben.

Subject: Fate.

I know that your book is really about us. You didn’t have to make me a pilot to make it more interesting. A stockbroker is just as impressive. I’m here for you and I will take better care when we get back together. I want to take you out for dinner sometime this month. Can you wear the dress I prefer this time, though? It’s only fair, since you want me just as much as I want you.

—Ben

Ugh...

GATE C47

GILLIAN

Pittsburgh (PIT)→ Salt Lake City (SLC)

Another interview came to an end, another stack of books quickly signed, and another bouquet of flowers were placed into my hands three days later. This time though, I didn't sit in the green room to kill time. I headed straight to a waiting town car, prepared to sleep more thoughts of Jake away.

As soon as I slipped into the backseat, my phone rang. My mother.

"Yeah?" I answered, not bothering to say hello.

"Did any of this come about because we didn't give you enough attention, Gillian?" My mother's voice came over the line as I stepped into the green room. "Is that why you felt the need to lie to us about quitting your job and hiding this novel business?"

"It was never about any of you," I said flatly. "Everything can't always be about you, you know."

"If you'd gone to MIT, I wonder if any of this would've happened."

I bit my lip, trying to hold in my anger. To my surprise, my family was stunned by the release of the book, but not in a good way. It didn't matter that I'd accomplished something none of them had done. It was "mindless writing," "words that could've been put to better use in a research setting." It still wasn't good enough. I still wasn't good enough.

"Your father and I are going to fly up to see you for lunch next month. We want to discuss the best way to attack this head on. We need to figure out a way to field questions our colleagues have about your...Your book."

"You know what?" I couldn't hold it in anymore. "Don't bother coming to visit me. Ever. Until you and everyone else in the family gets your heads out of your asses. I published two books. Two. And instead of having relatives who say, "Congratulations, we're proud of you." You still manage to make me feel like a disappointment."

"Gillian, I'm impressed with all you've done, I'm just trying to make a connection with you."

"I'll send you my signing schedule. If you want to see me, buy a ticket...Since none of you have even bought a book yet, that would be nice, I think." I hung up before she could say anything else.

My phone immediately vibrated and I saw that she'd sent me a text.

Mom: I'm sorry. Let me make it up to you...Not at a signing though. One on one. So I can apologize in person. So we ****all**** can apologize in person...

I started to text her "No thanks," but another text from her came through. A series of pictures of my sisters, my brother, and she and my father holding my book.

I stared at the pictures for several minutes, failing to hold back tears because I didn't want to believe that the pictures were real.

Me: I would like that very much...

GATE C48

JAKE

New York (JFK)

I stepped off the elevator at my condo, ready to get some sleep after a particularly long flight, but my cell phone rang before I could open my door. Unknown number.

“Who is this?” I answered.

“Is this Mr. Weston?” It was a male voice.

“Depends on who’s calling.”

“This is Dr. Armin from Infinity Assisted Living. Is right now a bad time?”

“No.” I swallowed, fearing the worst.

“Great. I was actually calling because—”

“Are you calling my Jake?” My mother’s voice was in the background. “I’ve told you to stay the hell out of my room unless he’s with you. I don’t trust you or your staff, and I swear to God if you’re talking to someone other than Jake right now, I will make sure he sues you for malpractice.”

“Mr. Weston.” The doctor sighed. “Are you by chance close enough to get to Newark right now?”

I hung up and took the elevator downstairs, catching my car before the valet could put it away.

I sped toward New Jersey, toward the care facility, without a second thought, nearly getting in several accidents along the way.

When I arrived, I didn’t stop at the visitor’s desk. I walked right by the receptionist, giving her a look that dared her to get in my way. As I approached my mother’s room, I hoped she’d still have a few more minutes, that I hadn’t missed her in that state yet again.

I opened the door to her room and she sat up, staring at me.

Tilting her head to the side, she furrowed her brow.

“You look terrible, Jake,” she said. “What the hell has gotten into you?”

Exhaling, I walked over and hugged her.

“Jake?” She squeezed my arms. “Are you okay? You don’t normally hug me for so long.”

I hugged her for a few more seconds before letting go. “How long have you been up?”

“Since six this morning. Why?”

“No reason. Do you know what year it is right now?”

“2014.” She shrugged. “2015, maybe.”

“Close enough,” I said. “How old do you think I am right now?”

“Depending on the year you’re thirty-eight or thirty-nine.”

“And what do I do for a living?”

“From the way this conversation is going, you host a version of Jeopardy.”

I laughed and she smiled.

“You fly planes like you should, Jake,” she said. “You also get angry so often that you’re considering a way to be paid for testing stress balls.”

“I’ve *never* considered that.”

“You should.” She laughed, patting a spot on her mattress. “Sit down.”

I took off my jacket and obliged.

“My questions are far more interesting than yours. Is it my turn?”

“Yes. Ask away.”

“Are you trying to have any babies yet?” she asked. “Any mini-Jakes I need to look forward to?”

“No. Can we talk about something else? How you’re feeling perhaps?”

“I’m great,” she said. “For now, anyway. Not sure how long this will last.”

“It’s already been worth the drive for me.”

Laughing, she pointed to her stack of blankets in the corner, and I covered her in a new one, taking my seat next to her again. When her laughter stopped, she got serious all of a sudden. “If I ask you something, do you promise to tell the truth?”

“Only if it won’t hurt you.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Okay, that’s fair enough. When was the last time I was like this? Lucid for more than an hour at a time?”

“Please don’t make me answer that.”

“Tell me.” She smiled faintly. “I probably won’t remember this moment in a day or two anyway.”

I kissed her forehead. “Two years ago.”

“*Years* ago?” Tears welled in her eyes.

I nodded. “You’ve had moments, hours here or there, but full days? Two years ago.”

“Is it true that you’re the one who sends me the blankets and care packages every day? It’s you?”

I nodded, noticing the tears rolling down her face.

“And, the catering company that only delivers to me. Is that you, too?”

“Yes.” I wiped away her tears. “You hate the food they serve here. You won’t even eat their ice cream. You don’t trust it for some reason.”

She laughed, holding her stomach. “Thank you, Jake. Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome.” I asked her more questions, trying to soak up as much time as I could, trying to enjoy the company of the only person in my life worth talking to.

Occasionally, she would interrupt my questions and say, “Okay...What’s her name?” because she swore all of my relationship questions meant something other than casual conversation. That I was thinking about someone, but I wasn’t. I hadn’t thought about Gillian until just now.

“Before I forget—ha!” She snorted, pulling a notebook from underneath her pillow. “I apparently told the staff to give me this notebook if I was ever lucid for more than a day.” She flipped the pages open. “I need you to speak with your father and your brother when you get a chance.”

“No.”

“Jake—”

“Absolutely not. They’re the reason you’re like this. They’re dead to me.”

“It’s important.” She looked sincere. “Really important.”

“Then why can’t *you* tell me?”

“Because you need to hear it from them.” She flipped to another page. “You also need to deliver a few messages for me. For your father, you need to tell him that I forgive him for all of his lies, and I do wish him the best with Elite. I really do.”

I touched her forehead, certain she was coming down with something, that she couldn’t be serious.

“Also, tell your brother that I miss him. That I love him and his children very much. Even though well, you know...” She frowned. “I’d rather not think about how he erased you.”

“What about Riley? Since I’m going on a hate tour, would you like me to deliver a message to her as well?”

“No.” She scrunched up her face. “I never did like that cunt. I had a feeling she was always a little too nice to your father, and I warned you about her, even. You should’ve listened.”

This time it was me who laughed. “Lesson learned.”

“Is it?” She closed her notebook. “If it truly is, whatever woman you’re currently over there thinking about—I can tell, so don’t try to deny it..Whoever she is, maybe settle down together, have some grandchildren that I’ll be lucid enough to enjoy for a few hours another two years from now?” She squeezed my hand. “I’m always right, Jake. Just do what I say.”

I tried not to laugh again, but I couldn’t help it. I held her close and changed the subject, listening to her talk to me for the rest of the night, enjoying every second of her company.

I told her I loved her, repeatedly, as her hand clasped mine atop the blanket and our time slowly ran out.

Before she fell asleep, she hugged me hard and kissed my cheek, pleading with me to meet with my father and brother.

I stayed by her side until she opened her eyes again, to see if she would make it for the second day in a row.

She didn’t.

She had no idea who I was, but she said I looked a lot like her oldest son. She asked me to leave a picture of myself at the front desk so she could show him, and then she told me to get the hell out of her room so she could get some more sleep.

GILLIAN

~BLOG POST~

Present Day

This will be the last post I ever write here...I'm not sure if any of my readers ever stumbled upon this site since I've refused to check analytics or comments in months, but if you somehow stopped by, thank you. Thank you very much for allowing my words into your life, for reading my book, and for reading through all the blog posts that remained after publication.

Since this post will remain here, I figure it should say something poignant, or something true and heartfelt as well.

Dear You Know Who You Are,

I love you. I truly love you and have never felt for anyone else what I felt (and still feel) for you. I'm well aware that you'll probably never speak to me again, but I want you to know that you are undoubtedly the love of my life and no other man will ever come close.

Love,

Your anomaly.

Gillian

30,806 comments posted

GATE C49

JAKE

New York (JFK)

I was in the middle of reading Gate C49 when a loud knock came to my door Saturday morning.

At first, I did what I normally did when I had an unexpected visitor—shrugged and ignored it.

Unfortunately, the knocks became louder and louder, and after half an hour of this asshole not getting the point, I dragged myself out of my library. I didn't bother looking through the peephole. I had a long list of words I was going to fire off when we came face to face.

I twisted the doorknob and flung the door open, finding myself face to face with Evan. "What the fuck do you want?" I asked. "And how the hell do you people keep getting past Jeff?"

"You. Me. The Red Bar. Now." A look of defeat was in his eyes. "We only need five minutes."

"We?"

"Me and Dad."

I started to slam the door, but he wedged his foot between the wood. "Five minutes and we'll never bother you again."

"Is that a promise?"

"Yes." He nodded. "That's a promise."

"I'm not sure you know the definition of that word, so I'll pass." I suddenly remembered what my mother said and held back a sigh. "Move your foot away from my door. I'll be out in ten."

He stepped back and I managed to close the door without slamming it. I dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, grabbing my wallet off the dresser. I placed *Turbulence* into my jacket.

I'd read the remaining few chapters during my flight tonight.

I opened the door and found Evan leaning against the wall. "Where am I meeting you?"

"The Red Bar. I can drive if you like."

"I don't think so." I hit the elevator button and the doors glided open.

"Then I'm going to ride with you there," he said, stepping inside.

"The Red Bar is a fifteen-minute drive, Evan. You promised that I'd never have to hear from you after I gave you five."

"Consider the drive a part of the fine print."

"I'd rather not."

"If I'm not going to be able to talk to my own flesh and blood after today, you could at least let me get every second possible."

"Please refrain from pulling the 'family means everything' bullshit." I stepped off the elevator at the parking garage level. "We both know it doesn't."

"Jake—"

“Get in the car,” I said, unlocking the doors. “But I meant what I said about the five minutes. Don’t talk to me on the way over.”

“Deal.”

I kept my eyes straight ahead as I drove away, unable to keep the images of Gillian and me from playing in my mind. She was invading all of my dreams now, and every now and then, I’d find something of hers in my apartment—something tucked away in her former hiding places.

“There,” my brother said, pointing to a parking spot.

I pulled over and turned off the car, more than ready to get this meeting over and done. I walked inside and spotted my father sitting in a corner booth alone.

“You promised,” Evan said, noticing that I wasn’t moving. “Give him five minutes.”

“It’s a shared five minutes,” I said. “Won’t you be coming along for the reunion, too?”

“I’ve already spoken to him.” He sighed. “I’ll be at the bar. You can give me whatever seconds are left. If there are any.” He looked at me, a bit of hurt in his eyes. “I’d really like you to know that I’m sorry about Riley. I should’ve told you what she was doing behind your back instead of siding with Dad and erasing you from our lives. And I’m sorry for ruining what we had as brothers.”

I said nothing. I just pulled out my phone and checked the time. Then I headed to my father’s table and sat down.

“It’s four thirty,” I said. “You have my attention until four thirty-four.”

“Four thirty-four?” He smiled. “Zero plus five is five isn’t it?”

“I’m deducting a minute for that terrible ass suit you’re wearing. My eyes can only take so much in one day.”

He laughed and leaned back in his chair, adjusting his cufflinks.

“Can I get you something to drink, sir?” A waitress stepped in front of me.

“I won’t be staying long enough for a drink.”

“He’ll have a Coke,” my father said. “I’ll have a double.”

“Yes, sir.” She walked away.

“Careful,” I said, looking at my watch once more. “I wouldn’t waste conversation time on drinks, if I were you.”

“I’m not wasting time at all. When you hear what I have to say, you won’t want to leave. It’s that important.”

“I wouldn’t count on that.”

The waitress set down our drinks and walked away.

My father picked up his glass and brought it to his lips, taking the slowest sip I’d ever seen.

“I wanted to talk to you because…” He hesitated. “I’m dying.”

I blinked.

He took another sip of his drink and his hands shook as he set it back down. “Are you going to say anything, Jake? Anything about what I just revealed?”

“I’m waiting to hear the part that’s going to keep me from leaving.”

“Fuck you, Jake.”

“That’s my cue.” I tossed back my Coke and stood up. “Would you like to be buried or cremated? I’m all for honoring a man’s last wish.”

“Wait.” He grabbed my sleeve. “Please. Please listen to what I have to say.” He begged.

“Without the time limit. If you don’t speak to me after today fine. Just give me today.”

“So, you *still* have a problem sticking to your word.” I yanked my arm away from him but sat down. “I’ll give you until my flight.”

“Fair enough.” He motioned for the waitress to refill our drinks and waited until she was out of earshot. “You knew your mother didn’t die in that plane crash and you’ve known for quite some time. You

could've easily outed me, but you didn't."

"Not because I didn't want to."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Because it would've hurt her too much," I said. "That's what you do when you love someone. You don't intentionally hurt them."

"No, not intentionally..." He sipped his drink. "You've also known that throughout his entire career, Evan has never flown a commercial plane and you could've easily outed him as well. Why not him?"

"Leverage."

"Are you sure? Sure there's not another 'L' word you're looking for?"

"No. 'Future Ruin' is two words and it starts with an 'F'."

"Okay fine." He shook his head. "I'll make this conversation super quick. I want to give you my legacy, the airline."

I raised my eyebrow. "You honestly think I would ever accept that from you?"

"What's the difference between that and what you're doing now?"

"I'm not perpetuating a fake image or continuing to build an empire on top of ugly lies."

"Yet, you're flying for me and cashing my checks."

"Out of circumstance. I'll be filing my resignation next week. You're welcome."

"I spoke to your mother about this years ago. Back when you know..." He looked genuine. "She said it was the only way she'd ever forgive me."

"Was that before or after you designed the plane with her death date on it?" I asked. "Before or after you decided that having a wife with a brain disease was no good for your image anymore?"

"Jake, please. I'm trying here."

"Why not Evan? He's as despicable and morally twisted as you."

"Exactly," he said. "He's just like me and we've already discussed why you're the better fit."

"Even if I was stupid enough to accept anything from you, how do you plan on explaining handing over your airline to a random stranger? You only have *one* son, remember?"

"I'd come clean."

"About your first wife as well?"

"Yes." He nodded. "I would tell everything. So, is that a yes to my offer?"

"It's a *hell no*. I appreciate the offer, though. If you don't mind, I have a flight to France in a few hours. I wish you and Evan well."

"You said you'd honor a dying man's wish. This is mine, Jake. This is what I want, and I also don't want to die with you hating me."

"You've lived with it all these years. Shouldn't make that much of a difference when you're six feet under."

"Aren't you going to ask me how I'm dying?" He looked more vulnerable than I'd ever seen him. "What disease it is at least? What symptoms?"

"Doing so would imply that I cared." I motioned for the check. "Congratulations on the success of the completed merger. I wish you nothing but the best, before you die, that is."

"I know that goddamn book is about you," he said, hissing. "I know that girl is referring to her relationship with *you*."

"Then that makes two of us." I spotted the waitress following my dad's 'Hold off on the check' signal instead of mine.

"Your brother and I covered all the tracks. He was the one who put you two on so many similar flights."

"Are you expecting a thank you?"

“I’m expecting some consideration. I’m covering for you in a lot of ways and I would like something in return. Would it kill you to at least consider it?”

“No. That answer will always be the same.” I stood up. “By the way, out of pure curiosity, how many people have FCEs at your airline?”

“Just you.”

“Stop bullshitting me.”

“It’s true,” he said. “Just you. A few people have ECFs, which are Executive Clearance Forms. It means they’re high up and untouchable unless they do something heinous. I think HR just assumed the FCE was the same thing.”

“And what exactly does FCE stand for?”

“Future CEO of Elite.”

I stepped away from the table and walked away. I rushed back to my car and cranked the engine, quickly speeding away.

I had the sudden urge to call Gillian and talk to her about the meeting with my father, but I suppressed it; she was still a disappointment, just like everyone else.

GATE C50

JAKE

In-flight—> France

I stared out the windscreen of the plane, unsure as to whether I was coming or going. Everything from last week to this evening had been a blur, and I needed a break. After I made my return trip on this route, I was going to request a month of personal leave.

“Captain Weston?” A low, familiar voice asked, interrupting my thoughts. “Captain Weston?”

“Yes, Ryan?”

“Um...We’re clear for takeoff, sir. We’ve been clear for three minutes. If we sit here any longer, control is going to think something is wrong.”

“Right...” I put my hand on the control, driving the plane forward—staring straight ahead. This time, there was no adrenaline rush, no release of anxiety.

I couldn’t feel anything anymore. I just sat still as the plane coasted through the clouds for hours, wishing I could somehow re-do the past few months of my life.

“Can I trust you alone for twenty minutes?” I asked him, unbuckling my seatbelt. “I need a Coke.”

“Why can’t you just ask one of the flight attendants to bring you one?”

“Yes or no, Ryan.” I rolled my eyes. “Can I fucking trust you for twenty minutes or not?”

“You can trust me.”

I couldn’t trust him. I left the cockpit and stepped into the relief pilot’s space, letting him know I was stepping away for twenty minutes. I walked straight to the galley and unlocked one of the drink cases. I pulled out the first two drawers, but there was no Coke in sight. There was everything else except Coke.

“Old habits dies hard, huh?” The sound of Miss Connors’ voice made me turn around.

“I guess so. Where is my Coke?”

“With me.” She smiled and opened a different compartment, taking out two Cokes and handing them to me. “I moved them all once I realized you were going to be flying with me.”

“How mature.”

“Thank you.” She laughed and leaned against the wall. “Has anyone figured out you’re the guy in the book?”

“What book?”

“Funny.” She rolled her eyes. “Did you know that she called me ‘The Hawk’ behind my back all this time?”

“Yes. Why?”

“No reason.” She shrugged. “I actually liked that part. I could’ve done without knowing all the disgusting filthy things you two did in layover cities though. And did you really have sex in the bathroom in-flight? Please tell me she made that part up...”

An image of Gillian leaning against the door and fucking me as we flew over Paris suddenly crossed my mind.

“She made that part up,” I said.

“I knew it was true.” She winked at me and handed me another Coke. “Do you want your dinner at seven?”

“Eight is fine.”

She patted my shoulder and walked away, leaving me alone. I started to call after her to ask if she’d spoken to Gillian lately, but the plane suddenly began to shake violently and the seatbelt sign flashed on.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking.” Ryan’s voice came over the speakers and the plane swayed violently to the left. “We’re experiencing an unforeseen mechanical issue with one of our engines right now. Please return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts.”

The plane swayed to the right and the passengers’ fearful murmurs became louder with each second that passed by. Glasses from the first class cabin shattered onto the floor, and the overhead bins at the back of the plane flew open, forcing luggage to topple into the aisle.

I braced myself against the wall and made my way back to the cockpit. “What the hell is happening, Ryan?” I asked. “What mechanical issue?”

“If I knew, I would’ve said specifically what it was.” He was sitting in my seat, his hands nervously tapping the controls. “It’s the storm ahead, see? I just thought I would say mechanical issue instead of tropical storm. Sounds better to the passengers and makes them feel safer, don’t you think?”

Jesus Christ...

“Just call control and ask to climb,” I said flatly, taking his seat as the plane continued to shake.

“You should know the answer to this issue after finally passing all those simulator sessions.” I waited for him to make the call, but he simply sat there, tapping the buttons. “Ryan, call control and ask to climb.”

“I tried that right before you got here...” He swallowed. “We lost contact with them an hour ago.”

“An *hour* ago?”

“Yeah, I told you that. I said that and you just stared ahead, remember?”

I attempted to call control on my own, getting no signals in return. I attempted to send off emergency notices, but it was no use.

“We’re in a stall.” His voice trembled. “Do I thrust up?”

“No. Just hold steady.” I pulled the mechanical manual from the seat. “We’ll just reset it until we’re in steadier air. As long as you didn’t already attempt to do that without me, we’ll be fine.”

“And if I did attempt to do it?” His eyes widened as the plane suddenly tilted forward, then down toward the ocean. “If I did attempt to do it, is there another plan?”

Fuck...

GATE C51

GILLIAN

New York (JFK)

I woke up to ten missed calls from Meredith, five from my parents, and three from Kennedy. Turning my phone off, I figured it was just the same thing as any other day. More questions about interviews, more work that needed to be completed.

I adjusted my position in the bed and tucked a pillow under my head. I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV, flipping through the channels. I skipped Lifetime, Nickelodeon, CNN, and just as I was about to give up and settle on a DVD, I stopped at NBC—gasping when I saw the headline. When I saw Jake’s employee picture.

What?

The anchor was saying “Here’s what we know so far,” and the ticker at the bottom of the screen was repeating the same lines: “Elite Airways Flight 491 Missing,” “Plane Hasn’t Had Contact with Base for Two Hours” “Two Hundred Eighty-Three Aboard.”

I vomited on the floor.

Refusing to believe the news was true, I shakily powered my phone back on.

I called Meredith first, letting her calm me down until she boarded a flight to return to New York. It was midnight when we were forced to get off the phone, but I needed to talk to someone else. Someone else to keep me sane.

I called Kennedy.

“Gillian, listen to me,” she said as soon as she picked up. “I need you to turn off your phone and your internet. Only leave the TV on.”

“What? Why?”

“Just do it.” Her voice was solemn. “I’m actually on my way over right now, so if you haven’t done it, I will.”

I didn’t move.

“Gillian?”

I cried.

My chest heaved up and down and I attempted to say something, but nothing came out. My head was spinning with theories, regrets, and even though I didn’t want to believe it—I knew Jake was gone.

Memories of our recklessness played in front of my eyes like a film reel—the airport bathroom fucking, the carelessness on the international flights, the blatant dating, and I felt foolish.

I could have tried so much harder to make him listen to me. Could’ve tried so much harder to keep us...

I didn't realize that Meredith and Kennedy were actually in my apartment until six in the morning, when I forced myself to go to the restroom.

They had all three of the TVs set to different news stations. All the anchors were reporting the same thing, and while Meredith was pacing the floor, talking on the phone, Kennedy was feverishly typing on her cell phone.

"Hold on a second, Georgia." Meredith held her phone against her chest and looked at me. "How are you feeling?"

I shook my head.

She walked over and patted me on the back. "They've sent out the Coast Guard, and a few other countries have mobilized their own search as well..." She gave me a soft smile. "They're saying there's a slight chance they could have landed."

I'd done enough book research on aviation years ago to know they had no chance, but I returned her smile. "I'm sure."

"It's not impossible," Kennedy said, still trying. "You, of all people, should know all about the successful water landings by planes."

"There have only been two." I stepped back, heading toward the bathroom. "One was in the Hudson. *A river*, not an ocean. The other was in the Pacific. The plane survived. Not the passengers."

By afternoon, the total missing time of Flight 491 was eight hours. Long range helicopters, military aircraft, and coast guard boats had all been sent to scour the area where the plane last had contact.

Jake and his copilot's employment histories were being repeated over and over again, with the news media questioning as to why Jake was listed as the Pilot-Non-Flying instead of the less experienced Clarkson.

Elite Airways had yet to issue a formal statement regarding the incident, but a cameraman caught CEO Nathaniel Pearson watching a TV in an empty gate at JFK. He's been slumped in a chair, crying.

My phone was still off per Kennedy's suggestion, but hers had been ringing nonstop.

Interviewers wanted me to call in to their programs and speak about what I thought regarding the event, but they also wanted to know if I ever knew either of the pilots aboard.

Kennedy handily rejected every request, and in between her and Meredith taking care of me like I was some sort of small child, she distracted me whenever I wanted to talk about Jake's funeral arrangements.

In the middle of me begging her to listen to me about the type of flowers I would want there, she "Shh'd" me and turned on the TV.

There was breaking news on CBS.

The brunette anchor cleared her throat and hazy images of an ocean and fog played on the screen behind her.

"Good evening, loyal viewers," she said. "We now have an update on Flight 491. According to several sources, the plane was successfully ditched in the Pacific Ocean. The area where the plane lost contact with the control towers was three hundred miles outside of the rescue team's previous search efforts, but they are all redirecting their efforts." She touched her ear piece. "Sources are reporting that several passengers were able to make it off the aircraft and onto the plane's emergency flotation rafts, but at this time we do not have a number. We will keep you posted..."

My eyes remained glued to the TV for hours, devouring every little morsel the news offered: There were actually five crew onboard, not six. Jake Weston was the lead pilot, not Pilot-Non-Flying. The Coastguard had successfully helped seventy percent of the passengers onto its boats for treatment of hypothermia, shock, and severe injuries. No crew members were being reported alive.

I watched until the evening hours and not a single crew member was reported alive...

OFFICIAL ELITE AIRWAYS PRESS RELEASE

It is with sincere sadness that we offer our condolences to the family members of the eight passengers who succumbed to their injuries shortly after the water ditching of Flight 491.

We would also like to offer our prayers to the lead captain of Flight 491, Jake Weston, and first officer, Ryan Matthew Clarkson, who were seriously injured in their efforts to get every passenger off the plane.

GATE C52

JAKE

New York (JFK)

My head was throbbing and my throat felt as if someone had set it afire.

I attempted to sit up, but I couldn't move. My limbs felt too heavy, and as I strained to open my eyes, I saw Gillian sitting next to me.

Even though she was sleeping, her face was red and her cheeks were wet. Her hand was resting on my chest, and she was holding a collectible Coke can in her lap.

I glanced at the other side of the room and saw hundreds of flower arrangements, balloons, and "Get Well Soon" posters. I attempted to sit up once more, but the more I tried, the wearier I became, so I shut my eyes and sighed.

I wasn't sure how long I lay like that, but the next thing I heard was my father's voice.

"Gillian?" he called. "Gillian?"

"Yes?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"You've been here two weeks straight. Go home and get some rest."

"No, thank you."

"Maybe he'll wake up for more than a few seconds tomorrow," he said. "You need to take care of yourself while we wait."

"I said, no thank you. I'm okay. Trust me." She sounded sincere, but even in my state, I knew she was lying.

"With all due respect, Gillian," he said, "I'm not asking you. I'm *telling* you."

"Then who stays here? You? He hates you."

"I don't think you're in his best graces either right now, *Taylor G.*"

Silence.

"Get some rest for two days and come back. If he wakes up between now and then, you'll be my first call." He actually sounded believable. "And you can stay at the hotel across the street. I already set up a room in your name."

She sighed.

"And thank you very much, in advance, for continuing to stay mum on your visit here, *Taylor G.*"

She didn't respond to that, and the next thing I felt were her lips pressed against my forehead. I heard her whisper, "I love you" and then I couldn't force myself to stay awake another second.

Weeks later...

“Sir! Sir!” A nurse walked into my room. “Sir, get back in the bed. Now.”

“I’d rather not.” I looked out the window. “Where’s the doctor? Tell him I’d like to be cleared today.”

She walked over to me and crossed her arms. “Mr. Weston, I’m going to ask you very nicely to get back into your bed.”

“Okay.” I remained by the window. “I’ll wait for you to actually *ask*.”

“Mark!” She yelled. “Mark!”

Within seconds, a bulky man dressed in all white entered the room.

“You, again?” he asked, shaking his head at me. “Please don’t make me pick you up and put you in your bed. I’ll be forced to use a hand strap on one of your arms this time, sir.”

Groaning, I rolled my eyes and walked over to the bed, slipping under the thin sheets.

“Thank you.” The nurse smiled at Mark, then scowled at me.

“According to your chart, you’ve suffered a laceration to the head, hypothermic shock, severe right ankle sprain, and two broken fingers on your left hand. Do you honestly think you’re clear to go today?”

“It clearly doesn’t matter what I think.”

“It doesn’t.” She smiled and checked my vitals. “You have a visitor. Are you up to seeing anyone?”

“Depends on who it is.”

“It’s a Mr. Pearson,” she said, quickly lowering her voice. “The CEO of your airline, I believe.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Is that a yes or a no for him?” she asked.

“He can come in.”

“Alright, great.” She took my temperature and headed to the door. “Do not get out of that bed again, Mr. Weston.”

I stared at the doorway and within seconds my father appeared, looking nothing like himself. He was dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, and the usual look of confidence in his eyes was nowhere to be found.

“Why does it look like *you* were in a plane crash?” I asked.

“Funny.” He smiled, walking over to me. “I take it you haven’t looked at yourself in a mirror lately.”

“I will once they take the bandages off my head.”

He laughed. “Yes, well, I’m sure your growing fan-club outside will continue to love you either way...I just need five minutes.”

“You said that last time and it turned into thirty.”

“Fair enough.” He pulled a packet of paper from his pocket, tossing it to me.

“What’s this?”

“It’s the piece that’s going to run in *The New York Times* next week. I wanted you to see it first.”

“I’m not taking over your airline, so if this is your sad attempt to get me to think about that again, it’s still a no.”

“Jake—”

“I’ll never forgive you for what you did with Riley, I’ll never forgive you for what you did to my mother,” I said, looking him straight in the eye—wondering if he was worth the rest of what I wanted to say. “But I can forgive you for being *you*. I don’t want your airline, though.”

“I’m not asking you to think about anything. I just want you to read the paper.” He leaned over me and hugged me against my will. “I’m sorry, and I always will be...Remember that.” He looked at me one last time and left the room.

For the second time in months, I found myself face to face with some shit I didn’t really want to read, but curiosity won me over, yet again. I flipped open the packet and couldn’t force myself to look away from the article’s headline if I tried:

The Truth About Flight 1872 & How I “Lost” My Wife, How I Really Built Elite Airways, and Why I Want My Oldest Son Back.

GATE C53

GILLIAN

New York (JFK)

“How do you think the literature lovers of America would feel if they knew that their latest beloved novelist was a slob?” Meredith asked as she drew the curtains in my bedroom, letting what was left of the sunset seep through my windows.

“I’m not a slob.” I groaned, tossing the latest copy of *The New York Times* across my bed. “I’m just depressed.”

It’d taken everything in me not to call Jake when I’d read all of the confessions from his father in the press, when I saw what was the first to come of media backlash for all those hidden lies. I wanted to ask him how he was feeling about everything, if he could see himself ever forgiving his family now.

Then again, since he was probably the one who so quickly banned me from his visitor’s list at the hospital, he probably wouldn’t have picked up my phone call anyway.

“You’re not depressed, Gillian. You’re *pathetic*.” Meredith was still talking, picking up my clothes from the floor and tossing them into a pile in the corner. “This whole Jekyll and Hyde thing—smiling for the cameras during the day and crying at night has got to stop, and it’s got to stop now.”

“Tomorrow.” I rolled across the bed. “I promise I’ll be better tomorrow.”

“You’ll be better *tonight*.” She yanked the covers off me. “You’ll also start writing your next book, you know the one that’s due in six months, the one your agent keeps “checking in” on you about. As your friend, I’ll give you a couple more hours to mope, but then we’re going out.”

“Out where?”

“A party.” She gave me an ‘Is that a serious question?’ look. “Where else? Remember how heartbroken you were when you and Ben came to an end all that time ago?”

“No.” And I honestly didn’t...

“Yeah, well, *I* do,” she said. “And the way you got over him is the same way you’re going to get over Jake. I can’t deal with your daily pity party anymore.”

“You can’t *force* me to do a one-night stand.” I dodged her pillow toss. “I’m not ready for that.”

“Trust me, I’ve learned my lesson. You and one night stands don’t work. I’m only suggesting a party—something non-book related, something non-Jake related so you can start moving on.”

“Do you think he’s seeing someone else? Do you think she’s more his type?” I knew I asked her these questions every day, knowing damn well she had no idea, but I couldn’t help it. I was *not* over Jake, and there was a part of me that didn’t want to ever completely get over him. A part of me that was still holding out hope.

“Gillian...” She sighed and walked over to my closet, opening the doors. “You and I are going to leave for a friend’s private party in exactly two hours. For those two hours, and the four to five hours we spend at the party, there will be no mentions of Jake, Elite Airways, the newspapers, nothing. The only thing I

want to talk about is what you're drinking, what you're wearing, and who you're interested in bringing home. That's it."

"The first night we met, Jake told me that he didn't have a type," I said. "I wonder if he was just saying that to get me to go home with him...What do *you* think?"

She pulled a blue dress out of my closet and threw it at me before walking toward the door. "Be ready in two hours, Gillian. *Two hours.*"

GATE C54

GILLIAN

New York (JFK)

I was certain that the fates above were huddled together and laughing hysterically at my expense. The “party” Meredith brought me to wasn’t on some secluded rooftop via an abandoned building like last time. It was on the rooftop of The Madison at Park Avenue, and although residents were supposedly not allowed to attend, being here only made me think of the one who currently lived right below us in Unit 80A.

Every twenty minutes, Meredith went out of her way to introduce me to someone new, someone “cool,” but the attraction was never there. At least, not in the intense way I knew it could be.

Almost every man at this party was a self-made suit or a rising visionary in the world of fashion art, but I couldn’t last in a single conversation for more than five minutes. My mind was always elsewhere, my heart too stubborn to give anyone new a chance.

Grabbing a glass of wine from a waiter’s tray, I walked over the roof’s railing and looked up at the sky as a white plane hovered over The Hudson.

“Cool plane, right?” a voice to my left said. “Probably military. Probably a turbo glider or something, probably getting ready to head somewhere on the other side of the world right now.”

“No,” I said, “That’s an MD-88. It’s only for short range flights.” I turned to look at him, but he was blinking rapidly in intimidation and slowly stepping away from me.

I watched as the small plane flew higher, as it continued to make its ascent.

“So, you’re still spreading the wrong information...” The deep, low sound of *that* voice made my heart jump, made me turn around and come face to face with Jake.

He was still fucking perfect; still sexier than the last time we were together.

Wearing an impeccable black suit in a way that only he could, he was smiling at me, eventually taking the place right next to me at the railing.

“It was an MD-90, *Miss*.” He didn’t say my name. “You were close though, very close.” He glanced at my lips.

“I’m Jake.” He extended his hand, and the second I took it, every nerve in my body instantly came to life. “And you are?”

“Gillian.”

“Hmmm. What do you do for a living, Gillian?”

“I’m a bestselling author... You?”

“I’m a pilot, senior captain actually.”

“You look a little too young to be a captain,” I said, easily mimicking our very first conversation the night we met.

“Well,” he said, planting a light kiss on my forehead. “My high number of flight hours say differently.”

Silence.

For several minutes, the two of us simply stood staring at each other, and I knew, right then and there, that my heart was still tethered to his, that there wasn't a chance in hell that I would ever fall for anyone else the way I fell for him.

His eyes never left mine and he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me closer as if he was going to reclaim my mouth with his, but he stopped before our lips could touch.

"I have something I would like you to sign." His hands skimmed my hips and he looked into my eyes. "Will you do that for me?"

I nodded and he slowly let me go, reaching into his blazer and pulling out a paperback copy of *Turbulence* and a pen.

"You can sign it under the dedication," he said. "Right under, *For you, only you.*"

I took the pen from his hands and wrote, "Even if you've moved on, you're still **my** anomaly" on the title page. Then I signed under the dedication.

Smiling, he took the book from me. "You're *still* my anomaly, Gillian," he said softly. "You always will be."

"Does that mean you're not upset about the book anymore?"

"I'm fucking *livid* about the book." He narrowed his eyes at me. "And actually, since we're on that topic, let's get a few things straight: One, your use of aviation terminology is terribly executed throughout the book. You thanked your content editor in the credits so I had high hopes, but after three times of going through it with my highlighter, I'm still finding mistakes."

"You've read my book three times?"

"Seven," he said. "And I'm not done. You have a lot of errors you need to know about."

"It's already published."

"I don't give a fuck." He was smiling. "You need to know about each and every one of them." He clasped my hand. "Why did you change where we first had sex? It was against the bookshelf, but in your book it's on my desk."

"My editor thought that was a better place."

"My eyes skew towards a lighter blue, not dark blue."

"Another editorial change."

"We fucked on way more than one international flight, and you sucked my cock for the first time in New York, not a stopover hotel."

"Once again, *editorial.*"

"I also don't ever recall saying that I loved you that soon in our relationship." He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "I said what we had was messy and I *liked* it."

"So, you don't love me?" I asked.

"That's not the point."

"*Care to get to it?*" I mocked his voice, and he smiled again.

"The point is, I haven't seen or fucked you in months, and I haven't seen or fucked anyone else in months either." He pressed his lips against mine. "And that, no one else will ever compare. I miss and I love you, and only you. And most of all, I miss fucking you."

"You really could've left that last part out..."

"No, it was very much needed." He wiped one of my stray tears away. "I love you, Gillian. No matter what, and I think we need to leave this party. Now."

"Not until I ask you a few questions. I need to know what type of man I'm dealing with tonight."

"The type that's going to fuck you the second we make it to the elevator, the type that's going to take you to his place after that and fuck you all over again."

I blushed, but remained still. "Why did you take me off your visitors' list at the hospital?"

“I didn’t want you to see me that way,” he said, looking genuine. “Plus, you’d already been there two weeks in a row and I was fine. I wanted you to worry about yourself.”

“Are you the anonymous person who’s been upgrading all my flights to first class for all my recent book signings?”

“Of course not,” he said, smirking. “Only someone who still loves you would do something like that.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re very welcome. Is that the end of your questions?”

“No, I have two more.”

“I’ll answer *one* more.”

“Fine. Is this the part where you propose?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He pressed his mouth against mine and kissed me so hard and reckless that I nearly lost my balance. Then he squeezed my hand and began to lead me toward the elevator. “This is the part where we start a new chapter, one we can write *together*.”

****The End****

NAUGHTY BOSS



NAUGHTY BOSS

He
definitely
wasn't
supposed
to get that
email...

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WHITNEY G.

SYNOPSIS

He definitely wasn't supposed to get that email ...

Subject: My Boss.

Have I already told you that I hate my boss today?

Sexy as hell or not, this pompous, arrogant, ASSHOLE asked me to pick up his dry cleaning the second I walked through the door. Then he told me that I needed to take his Jaguar to a car wash that was ten miles outside of the city, but only *after* I needed to stand in a never-ending line to buy some type of limited, hundred-dollar watch.

I honestly can't wait to see the look on his face two months from now when I tell him that I'm quitting his company and that he can kiss my ass. KISS. MY. ASS.

All those former fantasies about him kissing me with his "mouth of perfection" or bending me over my desk and filling me with his cock are long over. OVER.

Your bestie,

Mya

PS—Please tell me your day is going better than mine ...

Subject: Re: My Boss.

No, you haven't already told me that you hate your boss today, but seeing as though you've sent me this email directly, I know *now* ...

Yes, I did ask you to pick up my dry cleaning the second you arrived to work to day. (*Where is it?*) And I did tell you to take my Jaguar to the car wash and pick up my *thousand*-dollar watch. (Thank you for taking five hours to do something that could be accomplished in two.)

You don't have to wait two months from now to see the look on my face when you tell me you're quitting. I'm standing outside your office at this very moment. (*Open the door.*)

No comment on your "fantasies," although I highly doubt they're "long over."

Your **boss**,

Michael

PS—Yes. My day is definitely going *far* better than yours...

THE BOSS

Michael

Manhattan, New York

The last time my face was plastered across the front page of a tabloid, the headline was at least somewhat true. What I was currently staring at in this moment was beyond far-fetched, even for someone with a scandalous and sex-filled reputation like mine.

Playboy CEO of Leighton Publishing Leaves Woman Crying in Hotel Lobby After Hours of Loud Sex on Balcony

I flipped through the pages of *The National Enquirer*, skimming the details from the so-called “trusted source” while resisting the urge to roll my eyes. According to them, I’d had sex with this woman in the penthouse suite of a hotel and simply put her out so I could have sex with someone else. And according to the woman who’d clearly concocted this bullshit story, she said my exact words to her were, “Thank you for letting me fuck your pussy. It’s time for me to fuck someone else’s now. You can see yourself out.”

There was no mention of the fact that this very same woman was recently convicted for lying to a grand jury in a theft case, but tabloids were never interested in the truth. They only wanted to sell papers.

I managed to get through the entire article without a reaction, but I couldn’t help but laugh at the last line: *Rumors are now swirling that the ‘naughty’ CEO engages in sex with two different women for every day of the week. He apparently keeps a private schedule for his sex-life.*

I shook my head.

It’s only one different woman for every day of the week...

Tossing the tabloid into the trash, I remembered to send a generic text to the women I planned on seeing this week. There was Lisa on Tuesday, Mariah on Wednesday, Hannah on Thursday, and Tiffany on Friday.

Michael: Looking forward to seeing you this week.

Their responses came in exact succession.

Lisa: Looking forward to seeing you, too :)

Mariah: Can’t wait to fuck you again ...

Hannah: Let me know if you want to change it to an earlier day :)

Tiffany: Anytime :)

With a few minutes to spare until my six o'clock meeting, I set a box of potential front-list novels on my desk. I made two pots of coffee and opened new notepads. Then I impatiently waited for my executive assistant.

I'd long given up on her arriving early to meet me for anything because she was always five minutes late. She literally lived right across the street from the building and she never ceased to amaze me with her endless excuses as to why she couldn't be on time.

Ten minutes past six, I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. Fifteen minutes past six, I wondered if my previous thoughts of her being the most incompetent assistant I'd ever had were true, and at twenty minutes past six, I caved in and called her desk.

"Yes, Mr. Leighton?" she answered on the first ring.

"Did you forget that we're supposed to discuss the winter selections today?" I asked. "You know how I feel about things needing to be *on time*."

"Oh, right! I am so sorry! I got caught up on these reports, but I'm on my way."

She hung up, and within minutes she walked into my office carrying a box of assigned novels. She placed it on my desk and sat across from me.

"Wait." She held up her hand. "Before we start, can I ask you something personal?"

"No."

"What if it's something important?"

"It can't be important if it's something 'personal,' because you're not entitled to know anything about my personal life."

"Are you really as bad as all the tabloids say you are?" She raised her eyebrow. "Like, when do you possibly find the time to sleep with so many women since you're always here working?"

I could've sworn I said no ...

I gave her a blank stare.

"I deserve to know what type of man I'm working for," she said, crossing her arms. "Especially if this man wants me to keep the truth about how difficult he is to work for under wraps."

"Are you threatening to blackmail me?"

"No." She smiled. "I just really want to know if your sex life is as exciting as the press makes it seem. I actually think it's pretty hot, and off the record, I am totally willing to look past the non-fraternization policy if you ever want to try me out." She lowered her voice. "I can be naughty in the bedroom, too. I can let you have my pussy, and you can leave me hanging in the hotel lobby afterwards, if that's what you're into."

Jesus...

"Can we please get started with the work?" I rolled my eyes. "I need your thoughts on the titles you were assigned so we can send them down to marketing tomorrow."

"So, right after that I can go?"

No, right after that I can 'fire' you ...

"Yes." I cleared my throat. "What did you think of Grisham's latest?"

"His latest *what*?"

"His latest book." I pointed at the box she'd brought in, at the advanced copy of *The Whistler*. "It was one of the three legal thrillers you were supposed to read this month."

"Oh, yeah." She picked up the hardback and flipped through its pages. "I thought it was very good. Very legal, very *thrilling*."

"Can you please be slightly more specific than that?"

"I really liked the book's cover a lot." She ran her fingers across the cover. "He really pulled me into the story with it, you know? This image of the boats docked at an orange sunset sea was quite compelling. I think the graphic artist definitely deserves an award."

Silence.

“We’ll come back to the thrillers,” I said finally. “You were also supposed to read five romance novels. Which one would you recommend the most?”

“Well,” she said, leaning forward and pouring herself a cup of coffee. “It was a hard choice, and I do mean a really hard choice, but ... Out of the amazing ones I was assigned, I think loved the one that ended in a happily ever after the best.”

“*Every* romance novel ends in a happily ever after, Penelope.” I felt my blood pressure rising. “That’s what makes it a fucking romance.”

“Really? Wow. I never knew that. So, I guess I loved them all!”

I stared at her, clenching my jaw. I always thought she was on the incompetent side from the very day she started, from the moment she said, “So, you’re a literary publishing company and you only publish books? Why not movies?” And somehow, I’d managed to look past that. But *this*? This was bullshit and she was far worse than any of my other failed and fired assistants.

“Have you read *any* of the front-list books, Penelope?”

“No, but only because I didn’t know that I personally had to.” She slurped her coffee. “I mean the books got *read*, but you never said that I was the person who actually had to read them.”

“What the hell are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I’m working really smart here. I hired a virtual assistant and paid her a couple hundred bucks to read all of them. Oh, and I sent a few of them to some book bloggers on Facebook that I follow. They like, totally live for this reading stuff so they’ll probably have those ARCs done even sooner. Can you believe they like, actually enjoy reading?”

“Let me get this straight ...” I tried to keep my voice calm. “I hired you to be my executive assistant and you outsourced all of your work to other people?”

“Not all my work. Just the stuff I don’t want to do. I mean, occasionally, I’ll read a page or two to keep my brain refreshed, but reading isn’t really my thing. And you only gave me a month to read ten books. *Ten*, Mr. Leighton... That’s technically hard labor and I could sue.”

“This is a fucking—” I caught myself. “This is a *publishing* company. We publish books, and books being ‘your thing’ is the very first thing we asked about on your application.”

“Oh, I lied about that part, but only that part. Everything else I wrote was honest, especially the part about wanting to work under a sexy CEO for a change.”

“Penelope ...” I held back a groan. I didn’t need to waste any more of my time with this. “You can get the hell of out my office now.”

“Really?” She stood up smiling. “I was hoping we’d get out of here early. My favorite show will be on in an hour. You know, maybe you should ask me to review TV shows—I’m sure I’d impress you that way.” She shrugged and headed to the door. “See you tomorrow!”

The second she left my office, I sent my advisor, Brad, an email.

Subject: Tell HR to Fire My Executive Assistant.

Now.

Right now.

Michael Leighton,

CEO, Leighton Publishing

I walked over to my beverage cabinet and unlocked it, pouring myself a much needed shot of scotch. I downed it and quickly poured another. As it was burning its way down my throat, Brad's ringtone sounded on my cell phone.

"Yes?" I answered.

"You want to take one good guess as to what I'm looking at right now?"

"Depends on if I'll win a prize for getting it right or not."

"I'm staring at the cover of *Page Six* with an undeniably-not photo-shopped picture of you. It's definitely you and one of your ridiculously expensive watches with a Cuban cigar between your lips."

"Sounds like a very good photo. Feel free to send me a copy."

"Oh, but that's not the best part of this photo. The best part is the three bikini clad women with messy hair who literally look like they've all just fucked you. Would you at least like to guess the headline?"

"You still haven't mentioned a prize. Is there a prize?"

"*Playboy CEO Beds Three Busty Blondes in Belize*. What do you have to say for yourself, Michael?"

"Not much." I walked over to my desk and clicked on the picture he'd emailed me. "They did a brilliant job with the use of alliteration in the title, though. They must have finally hired a competent editor."

"God, Michael ..." He sucked in a breath and sighed. "Do we have any grounds to threaten them with retraction and defamation, or is this true?"

"It's partially true."

"Which part?"

"The part about me being in Belize."

"Please stop fucking with me."

"Fine." I smiled. "I only 'bedded' two of the busty blondes. Not three."

"Oh, just two. Well that's quite comforting and I guess they owe you an apology. *Not*. Anything else?"

"Yes. The article says I'm wearing a Rolex in the photo. I haven't worn a Rolex in over five years."

"Ugh." He groaned. "I'm using one hundred thousand dollars of our public relations account to prevent them from running this on Friday. I'm also sending them an additional two hundred to three hundred fifty thousand to refrain from mentioning your name or running your picture for the next two months."

"Thank you."

"Please don't. I'll need a list of everything you've done over the past eight months so I can clean it up in advance. And you know, for someone who plans to take his company public within the next two years, I would think that you would try a lot harder to clean up your image and stay out of the press. Otherwise, the only investors you'll attract will be me and you."

"Noted." I poured one last shot of scotch. "Did you get my email about needing a new executive assistant?"

"Another one? This is number seven."

"Eight. However, I've yet to be sent a competent one. Perhaps if you used a different screening agency, or at least let me sit in on some of the interviews—"

"No. I'll tell you what I will do, though. But only if you do something for me."

I was silent, so he continued.

"Could you kindly keep your dick in your pants for the next twelve months and try not to fuck anyone?"

Twelve months? "Anyone?"

"ANYONE. ANY-ONE." He enunciated every syllable. "At least anyone who will definitely draw attention to you and your unfortunate, insatiable ways. And that includes all the women you have lined up for this week. Your assistants may not have known what those small blue dots on your digital calendar

mean, but I do. Cancel them all right now. You can sleep with whoever you want again after you successfully go public.”

I hesitated for a long while, but I realized that what he was saying made perfect sense for the sake of the company and my image.

“Fine,” I said at last, begrudgingly sending them all my standard, “Something just came up. I’ll have to reschedule,” message and walked over to my windows.

“I’m not going to use our partner agency to find your new assistant. I’m going to handle this personally. Any requirements on your end?”

“Hiring someone who is capable of reading a book is a good start. I’d also prefer someone ten to fifteen years older than me, married or already engaged, submissive enough to complete tasks without sarcasm, Ivy League education, and someone who knows how to tell the goddamn time.”

“Yeah, okay. Let’s put up the job description in those exact words and see how much of a field day the press has with that one.”

“I’m willing to bend on the Ivy League part if it’s a college with a good reputation. I’m not bending on anything else.”

“We’ll see.” He was definitely rolling his eyes, and I could tell he was about to give me his much repeated lecture about hiring laws and blind interviews, so I beat him to it.

“Just get me the best person for the job. I’ll wait however long it takes since this “fire today, hire tomorrow” approach isn’t working. And actually, just get me someone who impresses you, because if that’s the case, I know this person will impress me.”

“Now, you’re finally thinking smart,” he said. “Give me six weeks. I’ll screen the hell out of everyone and make sure the next executive assistant you have is someone who’ll last over a year.

“Thank you, Brad.” I hung up, wanting to feel optimistic, but with my track record, I knew the odds of me employing the same executive assistant for a year were highly unlikely. Just like I knew the chances of me going twelve months without fucking someone were too unbelievable to completely fathom.

I’ll try it though....

THE EMAILS

Mya

Subject: Manhattan Publisher Seeks Executive Assistant

So ... I'm pretty sure this job listing is for that "sexy" CEO we sometimes see on all the tabloids! You should definitely apply for this. You'd be perfect.

Check out the attachment below.

Your bestie,

Amy

-----Forwarded Message-----

High level executive at Leighton Publishing seeks a highly competent and professional executive assistant. Requirements and salary package attached via pdf below. Send resume(s) and contact information to Brad.Collins@LeightonPublishing.com.

—Bachelor's degree from an accredited college institution (master's preferred)

—A minimum of five (5) years of experience working for high level corporate executive

—Passion for literature

—Ability to work under high stress and for at least 50-60 hours a week

—Ability to draft error-free press releases and PR copy at a moment's notice

[Salary&Benefits@LeightonPublishing.pdf](#)

Subject: Re: Manhattan Publisher Seeks Executive Assistant

It can't be. There's no way a guy like that would post a job like this on Craigslist, is there? And with that huge salary range?!! O.M.G!

Wait. I thought he was the "naughty" CEO? Isn't that what they call him?

Your bestie,

Mya

PS—I definitely applied. :-)

Subject: Re: Re: Manhattan Publisher Seeks Executive Assistant

"Naughty." "Sexy." Same thing. And who knows? Maybe he's desperate?

According to *Page Six* and his former EA, he can't keep an assistant for more than two months at a time. She claims he was "really demanding" and asked her to do "hard labor."

Then again, I'm sure the real reason no women last around him is because they're all distracted by how big his cock is.

(If you get hired, please find out how big it is. Do it for me, at least.)

Your bestie,
Amy

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Manhattan Publisher Seeks Executive Assistant

The Brad guy from the ad just called me and told me to be at Leighton Publishing next Friday for an interview. AN. INTERVIEW!

Wish me luck!

Your bestie,
Mya

Subject: Did you get the job?

Haven't heard anything from you in two weeks! The two of us aren't *that* busy these days and you stay right across the hall! What gives?

Did you meet Michael Leighton during the interview?

Your bestie (Do we really have to continue signing off like this on every email, like we're still teenagers?)

Amy

Subject: Re: Did you get the job?

Sorry, I've been swamped with some massive reading and pre-research. (Don't ask.) But yes! I got hired On. The. Spot! The Brad guy (Leighton's advisor) even doubled the initial salary offer in the middle of our negotiations.

I didn't technically get to "see" Mr. Leighton until this morning when I went to officially sign the paperwork and I lie to you not, the man is the sexiest man I've ever seen in my life. Hands down.

He made me wet after he shook my hand and said the words, "Welcome to my company, Mya." That's honestly all it took...

Sexy as ever or not, I'm determined to last way longer than all of his other assistants. He can't be that bad, right?

Your bestie (Yes. It's tradition to sign off like this :)),

Mya

ONE YEAR LATER...

THE ASSISTANT

Mya

Manhattan, New York

I stumbled into the glittering lobby of Leighton Publishing, balancing a small box of files in one hand and a binder of reports in the other. I was over an hour early, but I knew that wouldn't be enough for my boss.

Taking the elevator straight to the top floor, I rolled my eyes as the golden numbers lit up above the doors. Michael Leighton insisted on having the entire top floor to himself, and only allowed me and the lowly secretaries access when we had a morning meeting like today. Or when he was too lazy to travel down one flight of stairs, when he would call and say, "Come up to my office."

The second the doors sprung open, I headed toward the massive conference room that was right across from his office. I unlocked the doors and hit the lights, pulling down the projector screen as I made my way around the room.

I set out notepads and pens at each chair, and then I dialed the breakfast caterer.

"Fifth Avenue Catering," a woman answered on the first ring. "How may I help you this morning?"

"Hello, this is Mya London with Leighton Publishing," I said. "I was wondering what time your delivery person was going to—"

"They're on the elevator right now, Miss London." She interrupted, a slight smile in her voice. "We know how your boss feels about time. No worries."

"Thank you." I ended the call and dialed the literary agent who was due to arrive for a separate meeting later today, letting her know that we would only have time for a twenty-minute pitch. Then I emailed each and every staff person a reminder to arrive to the boardroom at least ten minutes early.

As soon as I hit send on the message, an email from Mr. Leighton popped onto my screen.

Subject: What I Need Today.

Coffee from Dean & DeLuca. Mary Kubica's new book. Ad report. Hotel confirmations for next Saturday night, two. Q3 revenue reports. Travel itinerary for January. Files for meeting at 3 o'clock on my desk by noon.

Michael Leighton,
CEO, Leighton Publishing

There was never any point in responding to his first email of the day. One hundred percent rhetorical and two hundred percent rude, he always sent them at exactly seven o'clock and they were always comprised of staccato-like sentences. There was never a "Hello," "Good morning," or a mere, "Hope all is well today." The asshole never even said, "Please."

And even when I completed everything on his ridiculous lists in record time, instead of saying, “Thank you,” he had the audacity to say, “You’re welcome.”

“No, no, no.” I picked up a plate of banana muffins the second the catering assistant set them down. “My boss is extremely allergic to these. Can you replace them with blueberry ones?” I quickly looked over the other things she was starting to set out, making sure nothing else was suspect.

“You sure you want me to replace them?” She smiled. “He’ll die a lot faster if I don’t.”

“I’m sure.” I said. “I’m not trying to kill him ... *yet.*”

She laughed and took away the offending pastries, and before I could call Dean & DeLuca to order his overpriced coffee, he sent me another email.

Subject: Time.

You were two minutes late to work yesterday, and one minute late to the noon meeting.

Don’t let it happen again today.

Michael Leighton,

CEO, Leighton Publishing

I started to respond with “Eff you and your obsession with time, you egotistical asshole,” but I wasn’t going to let him get to me today. I sent him a curt “Okay,” ordered his coffee, and scrolled through my inbox, looking for correspondence from any of the countless jobs I’d recently applied to, but all I saw was spam.

Ugh....

Dialing my personal town-car driver, the best benefit that came with being his executive assistant, I begged him to retrieve the coffee for me. And then I told him to buy whatever else “looked pretty” in that café and add it to the purchase account.

“Are you sure about that, Miss London?” he asked.

“*Absolutely.*” I hung up. I was only supposed to use the “CEO credit card” for Mr. Leighton’s coffee and meals, but since he’d been increasingly mean to me over the past few months, I’d been using it on whatever came to mind. He could more than afford it.

The sudden sound of the elevator stopping on the floor made me look over the room one more time, made me realize that another day with him was just beginning.

“Good morning,” I said as several staff members began to fill the room and take their designated seats. “Good to see you all today.”

They all offered me their usual warm “Hellos” and slight looks of sympathy in return.

“Thank you all for being early,” I said. “As you all know, this month is going to be extremely busy in regards to our front-list, and today you’ll be asked which books you’d like to push from your departments and how much of the budget you’d like to spend on promoting each title.”

Mr. Leighton suddenly entered the room as I spoke, turning the head of every woman at the table. He was dressed in an impeccable three-piece navy blue suit and matching tie, and the diamonds in his newest designer watch gleamed against the room’s soft light.

His beautiful eyes met mine as I continued my short introduction, and for a split second, I was reminded of how utterly gorgeous and captivating he was.

His face was flawlessly sculpted with piercing almond colored eyes that pinned me to the spot any time we were alone. His lips looked as if they were handcrafted for kissing, his jet black hair was always

cut low enough for a woman to run her fingers through it, and the way his suits fit over his muscles, consistently invaded my dreams more times than I cared to admit.

When I was finished talking, he stared at me—giving me a familiar look he gave me from time to time. One I had yet to figure out. It was a cross between the way he looked in my fantasies when he was burying his head between my thighs, and when he was asking me to stay late after work. A look that said he might not be as horrible a boss as I often made him out to be.

“You can take your seat now, Miss London,” he said. “Unless you’d like us to spend the rest of this two-hour meeting staring at you.”

Fantasy over...

I sat down in my chair. I only halfway listened as he went around the room and condescendingly questioned the staff members, one by one, requesting client novel updates, publication schedules and budgeting concerns. And as he directed his venom at the staff member next to me, I stared at his mouth of perfection. Then I discreetly pulled out my phone under the table and sent Amy an email.

Subject: I Wonder If He Eats Pussy...

I’m currently staring at his mouth as he’s (surprise, surprise) being an utter jerk and telling the staff all the things he wants them to redo and the thought just crossed my mind. Like, his lips are beyond incredible and if he could keep them shut, he’d be A LOT sexier, but I wonder if he ever puts them to use behind closed doors....

Your bestie,

Mya

PS—If he tells me I was “one minute” or a mere “two minutes” late one more time....

Her response was immediate.

Subject: Re: I Wonder If He Eats Pussy...

Probably not. If he’s anything like you say, he’s probably more of a taker in the bedroom. I mean, I’m sure he’s a *good* taker, but I can’t see a hot-shot guy like him using his tongue for anything other than sarcasm.

Your bestie,

Amy

PS—Why haven’t you poisoned his breakfast yet?

“Miss London?” Mr. Leighton’s deep voice made me look up from my phone.

“Yes?”

“The morning meeting is over now. Feel free to leave my boardroom with everyone else.”

I bit my tongue and stood up, forcing a smile as I headed toward the door.

“Oh and Miss London?” He walked over to me before I stepped into the hallway.

“Yes?”

“You were about to leave without your files for our Friday meeting. I’m pretty sure you’ll need them if you plan on doing your assigned work between now and then.” He handed me my massive binder. “*You’re welcome.*”

THE ASSISTANT

Mya

Manhattan, New York

Friday was supposed to be the best day of the week, that one day that stood between the final hours of the work week and freedom, but Mr. Leighton had managed to make it my worst day for over a year.

He insisted on meeting in the executive boardroom at three o'clock until seven o'clock. And then he always sat at the head of the table, which would be normal if he was holding a meeting, but we were the only two people in the room and there were always several seats between us.

Today he was wearing my favorite suit—a three piece black one with a navy blue tie for accent. His cufflinks, monogrammed “ML” were gleaming underneath the room’s bright light, and I swear, the way he was looking at me made me think he wanted to fuck me.

“Do you plan on staring at me for this entire meeting or would you finally like to start?” He raised his eyebrow.

Bastard ... “I’d like to start.”

“Good.” He opened his folder. “What did you think of the latest Grisham?”

“Absorbing.” I flipped through my notes. “Reminiscent of what made me fall in love with his writing during his *A Time to Kill* era.”

“I felt the same.” He wrote down a few words. “Do you think it’s front list worthy for the next quarter?”

“It’s John Grisham, so that shouldn’t even be a question,” I said. “Although, in a perfect world, I’d say no. But only because his next book is far more commercial and I think we could do a lot more for that one.”

His lips briefly curved up into a smile, but he didn’t let it remain. “Which romance novel would you like to recommend?”

“One second ...” I flipped through another page of my notes. “*Castrating Her Boss.*”

“Excuse me?” His eyes met mine. “What book did you just say?”

“*Casting Her Boss.*”

He narrowed his eyes at me before writing down my suggestion. “Anything in particular that stood out? Favorite parts?”

“Probably when the asshole boss redeems himself and stops treating the heroine like shit ...” I muttered under my breath, but then I cleared my throat. “The realism was great. The heroine was a movie director and I learned a lot about Hollywood while reading.”

“What about your Young Adult selection?” He continued to go through all twelve genres I’d been assigned to read—asking follow-up questions here or there, but as usual, he never let our conversation go off topic or get remotely personal.

When we finished the book recommendations, we transitioned into the month's e-book revenue and promotional adjustments, and by the time he decided that I was "free to go," it was nine o'clock.

Nine. O. Clock.

"Mr. Leighton?" I said as I slipped into my coat.

He didn't answer. He was still writing, looking down at his paper.

"*Mr. Leighton?*" I repeated with a little more bite in my voice, enough that it made him finally look up at me.

"*Yes?*"

I hesitated, hating the fact that something as simple as his eyes meeting mine was enough to make my panties wet.

"This is the fifteenth Friday in a row that you've kept me past six.

"No, this is the fifteenth Friday in a row that the *work* has kept you past six. If you completed more of it throughout the week, then maybe you'd be able to leave earlier."

"Regardless," I said, keeping my voice firm. "I'm going to need to leave at six o'clock on Fridays like everyone else here so I can enjoy a full weekend. If I'm not out of here by six, I'm going to deduct time from my Monday arrival and start time."

He set his pen down and leaned back in his chair. "*Come again?*"

"Like today." I picked up my purse and slung it over my shoulder. "Today I'm leaving at nine o'clock which is three hours past acceptable, per section 83B in the company handbook. So, on Monday, I'll be arriving three hours past my normal time at around eleven o'clock. I will also—"

"You're going to arrive here at *eight o'clock.*" He cut me off, his voice deeper than usual. "And you're going to stay in these Friday meetings until we get the work done because that's what you get paid very generously to do."

"No, I'm not." I wasn't backing down. "I'll see you at eleven o'clock on Monday, Mr. Leighton."

"Be sure to bring a pen to sign off on your write-up papers because first of all," he said, looking me up and down. "You're *not* like everyone else here ... You're salaried, not hourly. And per your contract and section 89B in the company handbook, Friday meetings can go as late as eleven o'clock, depending on the season. So technically, I've been doing you a favor since the day you started here." He paused. "*You're welcome.*"

"Furthermore," he said, "if you want to talk about following rules to the letter, we can easily discuss how you've been using my credit card to buy things for yourself. Things like overpriced gifts and breakfasts at Dean & DeLuca, unnecessary office supplies from the most expensive stores on Fifth Avenue, and a bunch of other personal things I don't recall ever authorizing. I believe any other boss would say that that's technically stealing, and that's immediate grounds for termination, is it not?"

He slowly stood up and walked over to me, making my heart race a mile a minute. "We could also get really technical and discuss how you use your assigned town-car to drive you around to all types of non-work related places on the weekend with your best friend. Amy is her name, correct?"

My cheeks had never been so hot, and I struggled to say a single word. Before I could come up with a rebuttal, he stepped so close our chests were touching. Then he slipped his hand into my coat pocket and pulled out my cell phone, hitting stop on my "record conversation" app—clearly realizing I was hoping to catch his asshole ways on tape for future use.

Smiling, he returned the phone to me. "See you Monday, Miss London. *Eight o'clock.*"

Two hours later...

“So, let me get this straight.” Amy poured me a glass of wine in her condo later that night. “He literally just emailed you and told you that he changed his mind and you need to come into work at six o’clock in the morning on Monday? And you think it’s because you complained about leaving late today?”

“That’s definitely why.” I tossed back the wine in one gulp. “It’s like he purposely pushes back at me or does things to get under my skin because he feels like it. He knows exactly how to piss me off, and I still can’t read him for some reason. I don’t understand why.”

“He’s an asshole, that’s why.” She poured me another glass. “I told you to start keeping track of all those overbearing task emails he sends to you. Start highlighting the ones where he’s at his rudest and least professional.”

“That won’t work,” I said, quickly downing the fresh glass and reaching for the bottle. “He’s the ultimate professional in communication. Besides, you can’t interpret his tone from an email, and no judicial team in their right mind would read anything into those short sentences he sends me.”

“Well, have you tried recording your meetings like I told you to weeks ago? Guiding him into a conversation that makes him say something questionable?”

I shook my head, neglecting to tell her that he’d easily out-manuevered that attempt, just hours ago.

“My only hope is a new job. I’m just going to stick it out until one of those other places finally calls me.”

“You know, you could just quit tomorrow and use up all the leave time you’ve acquired. You’ve got what? Six weeks paid for all those crazy hours of overtime you’ve worked?”

“Seven.”

“See! And you’ve never even used a sick day! You could at least use some of those. And while you’re at it…”

I tuned her out, nodding along as she suggested endless options, but I knew I’d never be able to follow any of those to the letter. Amy was far too removed from corporate culture and she didn’t understand the inner-working politics or the bigger picture.

If Mr. Leighton was any other boss, I would happily take sick leave any time he got under my skin, but if I started doing that now, I wouldn’t have any left. Not only that, but he seemed like the type of asshole who would actually send someone to check and see if I really was sick. The type who would actually attempt to ‘get even’ if he found out I was lying.

“You know what?” I said to Amy. “I’m just going to apply to ten times as many jobs, and work super hard while avoiding him as much as possible. No matter how big of a jerk he is to me, I’ll remain professional and never let him see me crack until I can yell at him when I do finally leave.”

“Okay, sure.” She didn’t look convinced, but she smiled. “Good for you. Worst case scenario, at least you still get to have an up close seat to one of the most gorgeous men in the city and you can continue to use his face for your fantasies until you quit. How big did you say his cock is?”

“*Huge.*” I was more than certain it was. I’d witnessed it hard during a meeting here or there, witnessed him crossing and uncrossing his legs under the boardroom table. “I’ll be sure to take a more dedicated look at it before I leave.”

“Please do. For both of our sakes.” She turned on the television. “Okay, your boss no longer exists for the rest of our weekend. Let’s talk about something else. ASAP.”

THE BOSS

Michael

Manhattan, New York

I stepped off the elevator the following Monday evening, noticing that the lights were still on in the boardroom. Confused, I headed over to shut them off, but I saw Mya sitting alone at the end of the table. She was flanked by several boxes of files and holding one of my best designer pens between her teeth.

I stared at her as she flipped through her notebook, remembering how I'd once attempted to find numerous ways to get rid of her when she first started. How I really tried to get her to quit.

It was never personal, and never because she was awful. She was actually the smartest woman I'd ever met, the best executive assistant I'd ever hired, but her unfortunate flaw was being sexy as fuck. *Beyond* sexy as fuck.

Absolutely stunning, her light hazel eyes perfectly complemented her long brown hair and puffy, pink lips. Her light, raspy laughter was sexy enough to catch any man's attention, and she possessed a never-ending wardrobe of curve-fitting dresses that I actually looked forward to seeing every day.

For months, I'd wanted to see her smart ass mouth wrapped tightly around my cock. I'd wanted to bend her ass over my desk and fill her pussy with my cock while fucking her from behind, but I knew better than to ever attempt to make that fantasy a reality.

There were only a few times when I'd been careless—when I'd let my gaze linger on her for a little too long, or when she wore a particular shade of dress that left little to the imagination.

Coughing, she suddenly looked up and noticed me staring from the doorway. Her cheeks flushed pink and she cleared her throat. “May I help you with something, Mr. Leighton?”

“I don't recall giving your permission to come onto my floor today.”

“That's because you didn't.” She shrugged. “So?”

“So, unless you personally hear me say the words, ‘Step into my office,’ or ‘Yes, you have permission to sit in my boardroom and do your work’ your ass is currently trespassing.”

“Oh, really?” She shrugged again. Then she took out her cell phone and smiled, hitting ‘record’ on that goddamn conversation app. “Could you kindly repeat what you were just saying, Mr. Leighton? I.e. Michael Leighton of Leighton Publishing? Particularly that ‘*Your ass is trespassing*’ line...”

I shut the door, immediately walking to my own office.

The second I hit the lights, Brad turned around from the beverage cabinet and held up a bottle of champagne.

“Congratulations to you!” He uncorked it, letting the frothy foam drip onto the carpet.

“What's the occasion?” I took off my jacket and sat behind my desk.

“Three things, actually.” He poured two glasses and walked over, handing me one. “For one, the most obvious, you've had the best year for any publisher in the country.”

“Two, you’ve gone an entire year without appearing on the cover of a tabloid or getting involved in any sex scandals.”

“That shouldn’t be an accomplishment, Brad.”

“It is when it comes to you. Trust me.”

I tried to think of the third thing and beat him to it, but I didn’t have a clue as to what it could be.

“And three ...” he said, “You’ve seemingly done the impossible. You’ve kept the same executive assistant for over a year. You can thank me a million times later for finding Mya London.”

I tossed back my drink at the sound of her name and rolled my eyes. I was considering walking right back into that boardroom and telling her to bend over the chair.

Or maybe I should fuck her on the table ... No. The floor...

“Um. *Hello?*” Brad waved his hand in front of my face. “Are you there, Michael?”

“My apologies. What were you saying?”

“I was saying that it’s quite ironic that the one time you find an assistant who lasts a year, she decides to leave.” He laughed. “Crazy, right? I’ll make sure we find someone half as good when she leaves.”

“*What? What do you mean when she leaves?*”

He tossed back his drink. “She put me down as a reference for a few jobs she’s received interviews for and they’ve left voicemails requesting me to call and answer a few of their questions.” He pulled out his phone. “Speaking of which, I need to schedule those at some point tomorrow.”

“Which companies?” My blood was suddenly boiling.

“The usual thieves of great employees.” He laughed again. “Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon.”

“And why the hell didn’t she—” I changed my tone. “Why didn’t she use me as a reference?”

Or even fucking tell me she was leaving?

He shrugged. “Probably assumed you’re busy enough and you wouldn’t have time to call the people back. Or maybe she rightfully assumed that *I’m* the better choice.”

He changed the subject and started talking about our next quarter projections, but I could only halfway listen. I was furious at the audacity of Mya to even *think* about leaving.

I was paying her more than double what I paid any of my previously EAs—deservedly so, and her benefits package was specifically tailored for her: The day I found out she loved and preferred the hardback version of novels, I added a mandate to her contract that she receive five hundred dollars’ worth of hardback books per month from any bookstore she wanted. The day I found out she didn’t have her own car and was taking a cab back and forth to work and conferences? I added a mandate to her contract that gave her unlimited access to her own private town car and driver. (No other executive assistant in the building had ever had his or her own town car, and I’d made sure no one else in the company knew about this arrangement. Even Brad.) And the day I found out she’d actually wanted to be a professional assistant and eventually rise to the ranks of CEO of a company someday, I thought I’d found a potential business partner for the future.

But now, I wasn’t so sure. Add that to the fact that she wouldn’t even tell me that she was considering quitting?

This was fucked up.

This was *war*.

“So, I’m thinking.” Brad was still babbling. “If we put more of an investment into the audio production for the second quarter of next year—”

“How much are the other companies offering her as a salary?” I cut him off. “Are they paying significantly more than we are?”

“What?” He stepped back. “Did you hear any of what I said over the past five minutes?”

“Not at all.” I didn’t even try to pretend otherwise. “How much are they paying her?”

He blinked.

“Actually, don’t even answer that,” I said. “Forward me those company inquiries, and any other new ones you may get. *I’ll* be her reference....”

THE BOSS

Michael

Manhattan, New York

“Here’s every report you requested, your print-out of next month’s front-list, and your coffee.” Mya set down a mug and a stack of folders in front of me the following afternoon. She was wearing a bright blue dress that clung to her hips and exposed the top of her breasts, and my cock had gotten hard the second I saw her this morning.

Even during her presentation to the interns hours ago, I’d sat still in the boardroom and tried to focus on anything else while words left her alluring mouth, but it was no use. The thoughts of bending her over every surface in my office were only getting worse by the day.

“Would you like anything else, Mr. Leighton?” She adjusted her exposed bra strap, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“What about the Danbury report?” I asked.

“Did it.”

“The Porterfield files?”

“Did it *weeks ago*.”

“Have the backlist titles from—”

“Faith Sarandon been contracted and signed?” She cut me off and crossed her arms. “Yes. As have all of the remaining backlist catalogues from the other twenty-two authors you asked me to acquire. They’re very happy with your so-called *generosity*. Anything else?”

“Actually, yes.” I ignored the way she’d said ‘generosity’ and opened my desk drawer. I pulled out her personnel file and set it on my desk. “I was looking at your employee contract and making sure it was up to date. You’re currently signed on for two more years. Is that still correct?”

“To the best of my knowledge.” She smiled. “That sounds about right.”

“So, *nothing* has changed and you’re quite happy working here?”

“Sure.” She looked away from me and cleared her throat. “Is that all you need from me, Mr. Leighton? I have tons of work to do today. We have that Somerstein meeting at noon.”

I picked up a pen and slid the contract across my desk. “I made a salary adjustment to the contract. If you initial it, it can be processed as early as this Friday.”

She picked up the paper and finally looked at me, her stunning hazel eyes meeting mine. “I um...Do you mind if I look at this later?”

“I *do* mind. Look at it right now.”

She parted her lips, but she didn’t say a word. She flipped through the papers, stopping at the salary page and her eyes widened.

“This is ...” She blinked a few times. “This is quite an increase.”

“It is.” I narrowed my eyes. “I think you should sign it.”

“Wait a minute ... You added a non-compete clause,” she said, reading softly. “I, Mya London, agree to remain at Leighton Publishing for a minimum of forty-eight months, and unless terminated, will never pursue any competing opportunities.”

“There’s a set of pens in front of you. I prefer black.”

She set the papers down and stepped back. “I need time to think about it.”

“What exactly do you need to think about?” I was beyond confused. “That offer is triple what you’re currently making, which is saying something since you’re currently making double what every other executive assistant here makes.”

“I guess I don’t like committing to something unless I’m one hundred percent sure that it’ll at least be good and somewhat enjoyable for me.”

“It will definitely be more than ‘good’ and *extremely* enjoyable for you.”

“Are you referring to this job, Mr. Leighton?”

“What else would I be referring to?”

Silence.

“Um ...” She cleared her throat, taking another small step back. “Surely you, yourself, don’t sign contracts after only reading them once.”

“I would if it was a contract like this.”

She muttered something under her breath I didn’t quite catch, and then my desk phone rang.

Keeping my eyes locked on hers, I answered it.

“Yes?” I said.

“Hey.” It was Brad. “Glad I caught you before the Somerstein meeting. I just got a call from Hilton Corporate and gave them your direct line, so try to be available for their questions in a few hours. I already told them Mya was amazing, but they need a second, more direct reference. They want details I don’t have, so try to be specific.”

“I’ll definitely do that.” I hung up, still looking at Mya. “So, how much time would you need to look over my proposal?”

“A couple months should be enough.”

“*Months?*” I clenched my jaw.

“Yes.” She glared at me. “*Months*. Working for you for an extended period of time is a lot to think about.”

Silence.

“Fine.” I picked up the papers and returned them to my drawer. “You can get the hell out of my office now.”

She shook her head and glanced down at my pants, blushing before leaving the room.

I sat back down in my chair and shook my head. I was confused and upset at the fact that she’d not only blatantly lied to my face, but she was also refusing to admit she was seeking other jobs. That, and she was still getting under my skin with her sexy bullshit.

Then again, if she wanted to play games, I could do the same...

THE EMAILS

Mya

Subject: The Ass-holery Report #235 (Can You Believe I'm Still Keeping Track of These?)

Today we're supposed to go over the top literary fiction titles that will be rolled out in the spring. I emailed him my top picks LAST WEEK but since he "doesn't remember," he asked me to RE-DO the entire 200-page report in an hour. An hour!

Of course, I made way more than one copy of it, so I'm not **really** re-doing it, but fuck him.

Fuck him hard.

Your bestie,

Mya

PS—Is it sad that, ass-holeness aside, he still makes my panties wet more than once a week?

Subject: Re: The Ass-holery Report #235 (Can You Believe I'm Still Keeping Track of These?)

You mis-typed! We're on ass-holery report #335, not #235! :) And BRAVO for making copies! Way to think smart!

Ugh, I can't wait until you quit! I mean, wherever you end up next, you probably won't get all those over the top benefits, but you won't have to deal with him, so that's more than a fair trade-off.

Your bestie,

Amy

PS—No, but only because you're still sadly single.

Subject: His cock has to be at least nine inches ... (At least)

This is going to sound totally insane, but I swear this man was rock hard during my entire presentation today. Like, he *had* to be, and he had to know I was stealing glances at it because he sat in the back of the room, leaning back with his legs wide open, and he kept his eyes on me the entire time.

Your bestie,

Mya

Subject: Re: It has to be at least nine inches ... (At least)

You delete these emails, right? LOL I'll take your word for the nine inches. I'm sure he didn't earn his former playboy reputation for nothing....

Maybe you can give him a huge kick in his nine-inch cock before quitting?

Stay focused on leaving + start limiting these emails that compliment him and his cock. (Otherwise, you may start to subconsciously believe that you should stay there. O_o).

Your bestie,

Amy

THE ASSISTANT

Mya

Manhattan, New York

I couldn't believe that Mr. Leighton had the audacity to offer me an extended contract after the way he treated me, couldn't believe that he'd included a mention of it in every one of his emails since the day he brought it up.

As I stared outside my town car window, I decided that I needed to tell him that I really was looking for another place of work. That it wasn't personal, but I wanted to go someplace where I'd actually be appreciated.

And somewhere where he won't be such a distraction...

The second the driver pulled in front of Leighton Publishing, my phone buzzed with his usual morning email.

Subject: What I Need Today.

Coffee. Stephen King's new book. Reports for the two o'clock meeting. **Your signature on the employment extension contract.**

You're welcome.

Michael Leighton,

CEO, Leighton Publishing

I sighed. I'd done my best to avoid that last line on all of his task requests, simply not addressing it via email or simply saying "I need more time to think about it," if he brought it up during one of our meetings. And even though the sexual tension between us was at the highest levels it'd ever been, I couldn't afford to let that cloud my judgment.

His overbearing sexiness was not a good enough reason to stay, and the odds of us having sex were slim to none. (Not that having sex with him was a good enough reason to stay either.)

After securing a copy of Stephen King's newest book from Barnes & Noble and a cup of his favorite expensive coffee, I rushed inside the building and headed right up to his office.

I knocked against his door five times and waited for his familiar, "Yes?" before opening the door.

The second I stepped inside, I felt his deep brown eyes watching my every move, and I tried not to make eye contact as I walked over and set the book and the coffee on his desk.

"Is there something on your mind, Miss London?" He waited for me to look at him, and I finally gave in. "Any particular reason why you're currently mumbling?"

“No, Mr. Leighton. It’s just—” I decided to be honest, to finally get this over with. “I’m not interested in signing the extension contract.”

He raised his eyebrow. “Are you referring to right now, or *ever*?”

“Ever.” I stepped back, waiting for his reaction, but there wasn’t one. His face remained stoic and he simply picked up his coffee and took a long sip.

“Fair enough,” he said. “Thank you for telling me. After you settle into your office, I need you pick up my dry cleaning from Midtown. There should be fifteen suits and twenty shirts in my name.”

What the hell? “Would you like me to pick up anything else?”

“Not at all.”

I forced a smile and headed toward the door. “Thank you for being understanding about the contract, Mr. Leighton.”

“Anytime, Miss London.”

I left his office and took the steps to my own, quickly printing out the two o’clock reports so I could save time since I had a new dry cleaning mission. As I was stapling the first set of sheets together, my phone buzzed with a new email from him.

Subject: Something Else I Need Today.

My Jaguar needs to be washed. Take it to the place I like in New Jersey, ten miles across the bridge.

Michael Leighton,

CEO, Leighton Publishing

Is he being serious?

I dropped my reports to the floor, barely getting a chance to reread the message to see if my eyes were playing tricks or me or not, before he sent me another email.

Subject: And Also...

I forgot to pick up a particular watch I ordered weeks ago on my way to work this morning. You’ll need to stand in line at Audemars Piguet on 57th Street by noon to ensure that I receive it today.

Michael Leighton,

CEO, Leighton Publishing

I slammed my door shut to prevent myself from screaming. I paced the floor a few times before responding to him with a curt “Okay.” Then I headed down to the private parking garage.

I took the keys from the lockbox and tried my best not to think about using them to leave major scratches against his car, and I quickly slid behind the wheel. Instead of immediately heading toward the dry cleaners, I took his Jaguar for a half hour joyride first.

I took my time driving through the city streets, stopping for ten-dollar coffee and charging five cups worth to his card every time. I spotted a beautiful cashmere scarf through a window dressing at Macy’s and rushed inside to buy it in all twenty-five colors. On my way out, I noticed a new fashion line at the

nearby lingerie store, so I took his precious credit card and purchased ten matching sets of overly priced panties and bras.

Screw him...

Still feeling reckless and far less professional than I'd ever felt in my life, I picked up his dry cleaning and tossed it in the back seat. I drove across the George Washington Bridge and sat in the back of a café for half an hour.

I checked my email and saw that my bastard boss had emailed me yet *again*.

Subject: Timing.

I refuse to believe it takes three to four hours to pick up my dry-cleaning and a watch. Even considering getting my car washed, you should be back by now.

Michael Leighton,
CEO, Leighton Publishing

I immediately deleted it and noticed that there were several other new emails in my inbox. Emails I actually *wanted* to see.

Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon all sent positive, personal messages that all read to the likes of, "Congratulations! You've made it to the final round of interviews! We simply need to verify your information and references. Afterwards, we'll make an internal decision behind closed doors."

I nearly jumped up from my chair, screaming about my pending freedom. I knew there was no way in hell that I wouldn't receive a formal offer from at least one of those jobs, and since I was still awaiting to hear back from twenty more, I felt more emboldened than ever before. I felt like I could quit Leighton Publishing right now and leave Michael's Jaguar in the middle of New Jersey for him to find by himself tomorrow.

It took all of one minute for me to realize that I wasn't that bold. That, and I needed a way to get back to New York City.

Annoyed, I vented all of my frustration in a long-ass email to Amy, and per her previous advice, I deleted it the second I hit send.

Subject: My Boss.

Have I already told you that I hate my boss today?

Sexy as hell or not, this pompous, arrogant, ASSHOLE asked me to pick up his dry cleaning the second I walked through the door. Then he told me that I needed to take his Jaguar to a car wash that was ten miles outside of the city, but only *after* I needed to stand in a never-ending line to buy some type of limited, hundred-dollar watch.

I honestly can't wait to see the look on his face two months from now when I tell him that I'm quitting his company and that he can kiss my ass. KISS. MY. ASS.

All those former fantasies about him kissing me with his "mouth of perfection" or bending me over my desk and filling me with his cock are long over. OVER.

Your bestie,

Mya

PS—Please tell me your day is going better than mine...

THE EMAILS

Mya

Subject: My email.

Did you get my email from this afternoon?

Your bestie,

Mya

Subject: Re: My email.

No ...What email?

Your bestie,

Amy

Subject: Re: Re: Re: My email.

The one about my boss and all the shit he asked me to do today. :-(. I would resend it to you, but I deleted it...

He's so ridiculous, Amy.

Can I call you in like twenty minutes when I get back to the office?

Your bestie,

Mya

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: My email.

Of course. I'll be waiting.

Your bestie,

Amy

THE ASSISTANT

Mya

Manhattan, New York

I slumped in my office chair minutes after returning Mr. Leighton's Jaguar to the garage. I didn't bother bringing any of his dry cleaning inside, though. If he wanted those suits, he could go down to the garage and get them himself.

Now, more than ever, there was a huge part of me that wanted to pack up all of my things and never come back. Yet, I knew I couldn't leave this place without personally telling him to go fuck himself first. I'd more than earned that.

When I'd finally let go of enough anger, I picked up my desk phone and dialed Amy's number.

"Hey, there!" She answered on the first ring. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Not at all." I sighed. "I don't know if I'm going to make it to the two-month mark anymore, Amy. I really don't."

"You can do this," she said. "This is just one bad day and I'm sure by the time you get home later, you'll feel differently. Don't let him get to you. Ever." There was a sudden loud banging noise in her background. "Ugh! Let me call you right back, Mya. The neighbors are being ridiculous with their music today."

She ended the call before I could say goodbye, and I heard a ping from my inbox seconds later, knowing she'd sent me one of her usual "Stay Calm" emails.

I opened my email—expecting to see something inspiring, but the second I saw the subject line and the sender, my jaw dropped to the floor.

Subject: Re: My Boss.

No, you haven't already told me that you hate your boss, today, but seeing as though you've sent me this email directly, I know *now*....

Yes, I did ask you to pick up my dry cleaning the second you arrived to work today. (*Where is it?*) And I did tell you to take my Jaguar to the car wash and pick up my *thousand-dollar* watch. (Thank you for taking five hours to do something that could be accomplished in two.)

You don't have to wait two months from now to see the look on my face when you tell me you're quitting. I'm standing outside your office at this very moment. (*Open the door.*)

No comment on your "fantasies," although I highly doubt they're "long over."

Your boss,
Michael

PS—Yes. My day is definitely going *far* better than yours....

Oh. My. Fucking. God!

I felt all the color draining from my face, and I swear I didn't breathe for over a minute.

I shook my head in utter disbelief, refusing to accept that I'd sent my rant to him instead of Amy. I refreshed my computer screen again and again, hoping that this was some type of joke.

A loud and sudden knock came to my door and my heart nearly fell out of my chest, but I didn't get up. I didn't make a single move.

The knock came again, much louder this time, and this time I heard his voice. "Miss London?" He knocked once more.

I slowly stood up from my desk and looked outside the peephole. Mr. Leighton was looking down at his watch, his face still impossibly perfect and flawless. His full lips pressed into an angry flat line.

He looked up from his watch and stared through the peephole, letting his eyes meet mine.

I jumped back from the door and considered my options. I could open the door and listen to whatever he had to say, or I could leave through my office's side exit door.

It was a no-brainer.

I grabbed my coat, my laptop, and shut down my computer. Then I rushed out of my side door and took the freight elevator down to where my town car was waiting.

My driver eyed me suspiciously as I literally ran through the garage, but he didn't protest when I begged him to hurry up and get me home.

I didn't wait for him to open the door for me or wish me a good day when we arrived. I practically jumped out of the car and rushed straight into my building—making a beeline for Amy's place.

"Amy?" I knocked on her door. "Amy!"

"Coming!" She swung open her door immediately and pulled me inside. "No need to bang on my door like that, Mya. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I think I just got fired."

"What? How do you *think* you just got fired? You either did or you didn't."

"Okay, okay. I didn't get fired yet, but I'm pretty sure he's going to fire me. He's definitely going to fire me. Oh god, oh god, oh god...."

"Mya, slow down." She placed her hands on my shoulders. "Speak English, slowly. Very slowly."

"I accidentally sent him one of my complaining emails, a complaining email that was one hundred percent meant for you."

"Was it worse than the one you sent me yesterday morning?"

"Way worse. I mentioned my fantasies about his cock in this one.... I called him an asshole and said I used to want him to bend me over his desk."

Her face turned red as well, and she opened her mouth to say something, but the sound of my phone ringing caught both of our attention.

I pulled it out of my pocket and damn near dropped it at the sight of Mr. Leighton's name on my screen. Unsure of what to do, I tossed it onto her couch.

"Is that *him*?" Amy asked.

I could only nod.

"Do you plan on answering it?"

"No." I stared at it until it went to voicemail. But then it rang again.

And again.

Rolling her eyes, Amy picked up my phone and hit 'answer' before tossing it to me.

"Hello?" I answered, my voice was basically a whisper.

“Hello, *Miss London.*” The sound of my name falling from his mouth made me take a seat. “Did I catch you at a bad time?”

I shook my head, as if he could see me.

“Are you there, Miss London?” His deep voice sent warmth through my body. “Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Not really...”

“Good. Where are you right now?”

“Oh, um ...” I looked to Amy for help, but she was smiling, looking as if this shit was actually funny. “I just ran down to the copy room.”

“So, you’re still in the building?”

“You could say that.”

“I saw you getting in your town car half an hour ago.” There was a smile in his voice. “You’re definitely not in the building right now.”

“Yes, well ... Is there something you need from me right now?”

“There is actually,” he said, his voice even deeper, sexier. “I came to your office this afternoon because I needed to discuss something private and very important that pertains to you and me, but I missed you somehow. So, I need you to come into work an hour early tomorrow so we can have this private and important conversation. Can you do that?”

I nodded, slightly turned on by the way he’d said the word “private.”

“Miss London,” he repeated. “Can you do that?”

“Yes....”

“Good. I’ll see you in the morning.” He ended the call, and a large glass of wine was immediately thrust into my hand via Amy.

Shit. Shit. Shit....

She tried her best to distract me from today’s epic mistake by making me watch terrible Netflix shows, and letting me crash on her couch for hours, but it was no use.

I woke up twice in the middle of the night, hoping this was some type of bad dream. And for a moment, it seemed like it really was, until I checked my phone and saw that Mr. Leighton had sent me a message minutes before midnight.

Subject: Tomorrow.

Arrive one hour earlier than normal.

Don’t forget. (*I won’t.*)

Michael Leighton,

CEO, Leighton Publishing

THE ASSISTANT

Mya

Manhattan, New York

There was no “What I Need Today” email from him this morning, no last minute request for coffee, new release novels, or breakfast.

As I headed to the office one hour earlier like he requested, I noticed his Jaguar wasn’t in his designated spot. Somewhat relieved, I took the elevator to my floor and unlocked my office—unsure as to whether I should start organizing my things for an upcoming termination or not.

Whenever he decided to bring up my email, I knew I was going to have to choose between three options when I responded. Plan A: Deny. Deny. Deny. Plan B: Deny *more*. Deny *more*. Deny *more*. Plan C: Suck up my pride, admit I was wrong, and hope he doesn’t fire me because I haven’t received an official job offer from anywhere else yet.

It has to be Plan A...

Just as I was about to sit down, my desk phone rang and his office number appeared on the screen. Taking a deep breath, I picked up the receiver. “Yes, Mr. Leighton?”

“Come up to my office.” He hung up without a single word, leaving me confused.

I locked my purse in my drawer and took the steps, knocking three times until his familiar, “Yes?” greeted me and made me open the door.

He was sitting in his chair, his back facing me. At the sound of my heels clacking against the floor, he slowly spun around—his deep brown eyes meeting mine.

His suit today was one I hadn’t seen before, a dark grey one that perfectly complemented the new silver watch on his wrist. The watch he’d far too recently made me stand in line to get.

“Have a seat.” He motioned for me to sit in front of his desk.

I sat down and he picked up his coffee, taking a long sip.

“You know, *Miss London*,” He emphasized every syllable of my name. “I honestly thought you and I were on better terms, especially after working together for over a year. But it seems I was *clearly* mistaken.”

He looked as if he was waiting for some type of explanation in regards to my email, and I still wasn’t sure if I wanted to go for Plan A, B, or C. As if he could sense that I was weighing my options, his lips curved up into a smirk.

I tried to avert my gaze, even for a second, but I couldn’t look away from him at all.

“Are you going to say something?” he asked. “Or are you going to continue sitting there as if you have no idea what I’m talking about?”

“Is this about me leaving early yesterday?” I settled on Plan A. “I was feeling a little ill, that’s all.”

“This is about a particularly inappropriate email where you make a mention of me *fucking you*.”

My cheeks were on fire and I knew he wasn’t going to let me avoid this at all.

“I’m sorry,” I said, the words rushing out. “I had no idea that I’d accidentally—”

“This is also about ...” he said, cutting me off as he raised his hand. “Me possibly needing to go to human resources and file a complaint. *A sexual harassment* complaint.”

What?

Slowly standing up, he walked in front of his desk—keeping me pinned to the seat with his angry gaze, making me soaking wet with every slight lick of his lips.

“Sexual harassment is a very serious offense here at Leighton Publishing, Miss London.” He looked me up and down. “I’ve had people fired for far less egregious offenses, and I technically should be doing the same to you right now, as that would only be more than fair.” He didn’t let me get a word in.

“Especially since I don’t think you fully understand why what you did was so offensive.”

“I do ...” My voice was a whisper.

“Oh really?” He raised his eyebrow. “Can you imagine if I accidentally sent a similar email to someone about you, the way you did me?”

I didn’t answer.

“Let me put this in perspective for you.” He leaned forward, so close his knees were touching mine. “If I sent an email to you—*accidentally* that is, and it said that I’ve wanted you to sit your pussy on my face since you started working here ... Or that I’ve wanted to bend your ass over my own desk and fuck you until you begged me to stop every time you wore a particular shade of dress, don’t you think I would need to be reprimanded somehow?”

I was speechless at his words, and I wasn’t sure if he was simply giving an example or if he’d really thought about me the way I’d thought about him.

“Answer me, Mya.” The way my name fell from his lips made me suck in a breath. “Don’t you think there would be an uproar with serious consequences?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? No, *definitely*.” He adjusted his tie. “In fact, there would be such an uproar that I think the IT Department would be forced to go through all the emails I’d ever sent on any company device since nothing sent on a company server is ever truly deleted. In fact, they’d probably have to investigate and see if this was a one-time offense or a particularly interesting pattern....”

I felt my jaw dropping and struggled to keep my lips together.

“I mean,” he said, looking somewhat serious, “depending on what they found, they’d have to personally address me and assess the damages. And if the person I was talking about ‘fucking’ in my emails wanted to, I’m sure she could make my life very miserable.”

Silence.

He picked up a folder from his desk and slowly set it on my lap—somehow managing to turn me on even further without even touching me. “Three hundred and sixty-seven emails between you and your ‘bestie’, Amy.”

That’s it?

“That’s *this month alone*.” His voice was clipped. “I didn’t have time to read more than a few of them, but I’m assuming we won’t be seeing any more of these in our IT database. Or will we?”

“No.” I shook my head.

“Good. I had them all permanently deleted. *You’re welcome*.” He stood up and glanced at his watch. “Those Roberto files are due before our morning meeting with Lockwood.” He walked over to the door and held it open, waiting for me to leave.

Avoiding his gaze, I stood up and headed into the hallway.

“Oh, and one last thing, Miss London,” he said, making me look over my shoulder.

“Yes?”

“For the record, per your email with the subject heading, ‘I Wonder If He Eats Pussy’ ...” He looked me up and down. “I *do* eat pussy, and if I ever was going to eat your pussy ... If that thought had ever been filthy enough to cross my mind and certain circumstances between us were different, you wouldn’t be able to walk for days after I was done with you....”

THE BOSS

Michael

Manhattan, New York

I'd read every single email I pulled from the IT Department. Every. Single. One.

They were easy to track since apparently she and her friend labeled all the ones in regards to me as "Ass-holery Report," "My Boss," or "This Man Today..."

It was quite apparent that she "hated" me and I almost regretted taking out my sexual frustration on her by demanding so much. Almost.

Her mind was damn near as naughty as mine when it came to sex, and it was slightly gratifying to know that the attraction wasn't one sided, even if there was little I could do about it.

I'd never mixed business with pleasure before, and I wasn't going to start now. I just needed to get through all eight of our meetings today without thinking about what I'd seen in her emails, without thinking about the fact that maybe it wasn't mixing business with pleasure if she was so hell bent on leaving soon.

If I was 'letting' her leave soon, that is.

Fuck....

THE ASSISTANT

Mya

Manhattan, New York

Subject: What I Need In Two Hours

The Lexington files. Transfer papers on the acquisition of Lerner and Taylor. Your front-list report. The notes from this afternoon's meeting.

Michael Leighton,
CEO, Leighton Publishing

I closed his email and sighed. I was starting to wish that he'd simply fired me. Ever since that meeting in his office two days ago, he'd been twice as domineering. Twice as unbearable.

It'd taken everything in me not to walk out on the all-staff meeting when he purposely put me on the spot and asked me several questions about a book he knew I hadn't had the chance to read yet. Then again when he chastised me in front of everyone for submitting incomplete reports that weren't even due for another four weeks.

There was no way I was going to complete every objective in his most recent email within two hours, so I wasn't even going to try. I grabbed the work I'd already finished and headed up to his office, sending Amy an email on the ride up.

I didn't care if he caught this message on the company server or not.

Subject: Horrible Boss+ Typical A*hole Behavior + Long Day = Wine. Stat!

I'm leaving work early today. Can I come over and drink wine at your place for the night?

Your bestie,
Mya

Her response came through in seconds.

Subject: Re: Horrible Boss+ Typical A*hole Behavior + Long Day = Wine. Stat!

Of course.

I'll head out now and buy your favorite.

Your bestie,

The second the elevator doors opened, I headed straight for his office and I didn't bother knocking.

I opened the door and saw him reading a book at his desk.

"May I help you with something, Miss London?" He looked up at me.

"Here is my front-list report." I slammed a huge binder of paperwork on his desk. "The Lexington report, the part I managed to finish anyway, should be in your inbox within minutes."

"You didn't need to come up here to say that. You should've just sent me an email..." His gaze went to my lips, but then he narrowed his eyes at me. "You know I hate when people come into my office without permission."

"You hate a lot of things." I shrugged. "Maybe you should just learn how to deal with them like everyone else. I'll be bringing my notes from this afternoon's meeting up here when I finish—*without knocking*, since I'll probably have to bring you a late lunch, and then I'm officially done for the day."

"No." He flipped a page in his book. "You'll just *think* you're done for the day. I need you to stay until eight o'clock today."

"I can't," I said firmly. "I have plans."

"I know," he said, putting down his novel. "Your plans involve staying here until eight o'clock."

"Mr. Leighton ..." I looked him right in the eyes. "With all due respect, which you deserve none of after the way you've treated me this week, I'm *not* staying today. I don't have time. And actually, you know something else?" I knocked the folder I'd just set on his desk onto the floor, sending hundreds of loose report sheets to the floor. "I'm not going to pick that up, and I'm not going to do anything else today. I'm going home. *Now*."

"*Miss London ...*" He gritted his teeth. "Don't make me—"

"*What?* Fire me? Please do." I turned away from him and rushed out of his office with my blood boiling and my frustration at an all-time high.

Seething, I took the steps down to my office and slammed the door shut. I logged into my scheduling portal and sent email cancellations for the remainder of my meetings. I also sent Human Resources a message that confirmed I was leaving early for "personal reasons" and that I might need to request additional time off in the coming days.

I made sure all the emails went through, and then I shut down my computer and closed all of the binders on my desk.

As I was slipping into my coat, my door swung open and Michael stormed inside my office.

"Going somewhere?" He hissed, clenching his jaw. "Did you not hear what I said when we were upstairs?"

"I did." I picked up my scarf. "Did you not hear what *I* said? I'm. Leaving. You can stand there and threaten me with your stares all you want, but I'm going home."

"Mya ..." He shut the door and locked it, then he stepped toward my desk. "I'm not going to ask you to stay here again."

"Good." I shrugged. "Then that makes it that much easier for me to leave." I slung my purse over my shoulder and headed for the side door, but he grabbed my elbow from behind and spun me around to face him.

"Why are you being so goddamn difficult?" He pressed his forehead against mine. "I really need you to stay here with me today..."

"Then I need you to give me a worthwhile reason to."

His lips suddenly crashed against mine and his arms went around my waist, his fingers deftly unfastening the belt of my coat. Keeping his mouth against mine, he pulled open my lapels and pushed the

coat off my shoulders and onto the floor.

Biting my bottom lip, he slid his hand up my dress, slowly tearing off my soaked panties. He kissed me until I was breathless, gently pushing me backward and against my desk.

Briefly letting my lips go, he pushed all of my binders and files onto the floor. My office line began to ring, and he immediately knocked the phone to the floor, too.

Without saying a word, he grabbed me by my waist and lifted me up, firmly planting me on the top of my desk. My bare ass cheeks hit the cold mahogany desktop and I sucked in a breath as I caught sight of his hardened cock through his pants.

“Spread your legs for me,” he commanded.

The sound of people talking outside my office made me want to jump up, but he placed his hand against my stomach and stared into my eyes.

“They won’t be able to hear us,” he whispered. “Do what I told you to do. *Now.*”

I slowly moved my legs apart and he loosened his tie, keeping his gaze between my thighs.

He stepped between my legs and pressed his thumb against my swelling clit, applying just enough pressure to make me murmur.

“I need you to promise me that you’re not going to scream,” he said. “They *will* hear that...”

I nodded, unable to respond as he bent down and sucked my clit into his mouth. “Can you promise me that, Mya?”

“I ...” I nodded again, breathing slowly as he blew against my skin. “Yes ... I promise I won’t ... Scream when you fuck me...”

“I wasn’t referring to when I fucked you.” He lifted his head up, smirking. “I have to eat your pussy first.” He suddenly grabbed me by my ankles and pulled me closer to the edge of the desk, quickly positioning both of my legs over his shoulders.

Without wasting another second, he buried his head between my legs and pressed his mouth against my pussy—sending every nerve in my body into overdrive. His tongue darted against my clit relentlessly and I cried out as he slid two thick fingers inside of me, as he groaned.

My hands went to his hair—gripping it hard as I begged him for mercy, but he continued to torture me with pleasure. In between moans, I threatened to scream, but he only laughed and the strokes of his tongue became more powerful.

As his hands held my legs steady against his mouth, I felt myself on the verge of an orgasm, felt my entire body beginning to shake.

“Michael, I ... I ...” I struggled to get another word to fall out of my mouth. My body convulsed against the desk, forcing me to break my promise and scream so loudly I was sure everyone on the floor could hear me.

I felt him pressing his fingers against my mouth, heard him commanding me to be quiet, but I shut my eyes and tossed my head back—losing all control.

I wasn’t sure how long I continued to shake, or if any of my coworkers heard me, but when I opened my eyes again, my legs were still around Michael, and he was staring at me.

I thought he was going to say something, to find a way to break our heated silence, but he simply moved my legs from around his shoulders and unbuttoned his pants. My eyes widened as far as they could go as he pulled out his cock, as I realized he was thicker and more well-hung than I’d imagined.

He smiled at my shocked reaction, tipping my chin up with his fingertips. “Bend over the desk.”

I gasped. “*What?*”

“You heard me.” He grabbed my hands and pulled me up. Then he gripped my hips and spun me around so my back was to his front. “Bend over the fucking desk.”

Slowly obliging, I pressed my chest against the metal.

I heard the sound of his pants hitting the floor, the sound of him unwrapping a condom. From behind, he slowly pushed my dress up to my waist.

Slapping my ass, he slowly slid his huge cock into me, inch by inch.

Moaning, I struggled to maintain my balance as I adjusted to his impressive length.

When he was completely inside of me, he grabbed a fistful of my hair and pulled my head back until our eyes met, whispering, “Is this how I fucked you in your fantasies?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer. He pounded into me relentlessly, keeping one hand in my hair and slapping my ass each time I cried out.

He bit my shoulder as I said his name, as I shut my eyes once more and realized he was ten times better in reality than any fantasy I’d ever concocted.

He let go of my hair and slid a hand up to my breasts, squeezing them as he whispered, “I’ve wanted to feel your pussy on my cock ever since you started working here....”

I gasped, unable to react as my legs began to shake all over again.

“Michael ... Michael ...”

“Mya ...Mya ...” He mocked me, a slight smile in his voice.

“I ... I ...” I gripped the edge of the desk as he slapped my ass again. He whispered my name as the tremors continued to build inside of me, and I heard him say, “Wait for me,” but I was already there.

My pussy throbbed in pleasure and another orgasm wracked its way through my body, leaving me limp and breathless against the desk. Leaving me wondering just how long he’d fucked me.

Holding me still, he found his own release seconds later, and I struggled to catch my breath.

The two of us remained entwined, and he kissed the back of my neck.

“Are you okay?” he asked softly.

I nodded.

“Can I let you go now?”

“No.”

He let out a low laugh and held me against him longer, waiting until I gave him the okay to let me go. Kissing the back of my neck once more, he slowly pulled out of me and tossed the condom into the trash. Then he wrapped his arms around me and spun me around so I was propped against the desk.

As if he could tell I was unable to fully function on my own, he readjusted my dress and helped me into my coat. Then he ran his fingers through my hair and looked me over before picking up my heels and helping me slide into them.

“You should call your driver now,” he said softly, picking up my desk phone from the floor and handing it to me. “I’ll walk you downstairs.”

I nodded and dialed my driver, watching Michael slip into his pants and adjust his tie. His eyes never left mine, and as soon as my driver said, “I’ll be downstairs in five,” I hung up.

Michael handed me my purse and I wobbled on my heels as I attempted to walk—earning a knowing, sexy smile from him. He pulled me against his side and thoughtfully walked me toward the freight elevators so no one would see us.

I avoided looking at him as we rode the elevator. I was in complete and utter shock that I’d actually fucked him, that the leading man in all my fantasies had easily put every single one of those to shame with reality.

When we stepped outside together, I was immediately confused as to why the sky had fallen dark so quickly.

Michael walked me right to the town car and opened the back door, waiting for me to get inside. He looked as if he expected me to say something, but for whatever reason, I could only think of one thing.

“Thank you for being so understanding, Mr. Leighton,” I said, not wanting to give the driver any type of impression about what the hell had just happened between us.

“For understanding what, Miss London?”

“That I wasn’t staying until eight o’clock today. Glad we could come to that understanding.”

A slow smile spread across his face and he glanced at his watch. “I think you’re highly misinformed right now, Miss London. It’s *nine o’clock*.” He took one last look at me and shut the door. “See you Monday.”

THE EMAILS

Mya

Subject: I slept with him.

Like, I *really* slept with him...

Your bestie,

Mya

Subject: Re: I slept with him.

You “really” slept with *who*? The blind date guy?

*And why are you emailing me from a brand new Gmail account?

Your bestie,

Amy

Subject: Re: Re: I slept with him.

My boss....

*Super long story.

Your bestie,

Mya

Subject: Re: Re: Re: I slept with him.

What the FUCK? Are you OUT OF YOUR GODDAMN MIND, MYA?

What the hell is wrong with you???

(How was it though ...? :))

*I like super long stories.

Your bestie,

Amy

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: I slept with him.

It was the best sex I’ve ever had in my life.

Like, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to stop replaying it in my mind. And I don’t think I can go back to work on Monday and look at him with a straight face again after this....

I’ll be at your place in five.

Your bestie,

Mya

THE BOSS

Michael

Manhattan, New York

My weekend flew by in a restless blur, punctuated by mental replays of fucking Mya in her office. I'd honestly never thought about the same woman after I was finished having sex, but the more I attempted to stop thinking about Mya, the more images of her writhing against my lips came to mind. The more images of her bent over her desk and saying my name invaded my every thought.

Not only that, but I hadn't heard from her today. She hadn't answered my "What I Need Today" email with her usual "Okay," and she was already more than two hours late. I figured she was trying to pull that "I stayed late Friday, so I'm coming late Monday" bullshit, so I decided to think nothing of it.

I tried my best to distract myself until our two o'clock meeting because she knew better than to miss any day of work for the next month since it was acquisition season.

As I was reading through the newest stack of approved book deals, a soft knock came to my door.

"Yes?" I set my papers down, expecting to see Mya, but it was only Brad and a catering delivery guy.

"Morning," Brad said as he walked over to my desk. "I wanted to come early and treat you and Mya to a late lunch, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind." I lied, motioning for the delivery guy to set out the food on my desk.

"Wild weekend?" Brad asked.

"No. What makes you ask that?"

"You look like you're on edge, like you haven't slept in days or you're stressed about something. Or maybe it's ..." He paused, letting out a long exasperated sigh. "Are you bracing to tell me about an upcoming tabloid story?" He shook his head. "You were doing so well, Michael. So well..."

"No." I rolled my eyes. "And I'm not on edge. If you must know, I didn't sleep well last night and I still have to get through a three-hour session with you and Mya that starts at any moment."

"Speaking of Mya—" He started to say, but I interrupted him.

"She's allergic to garlic," I said to the delivery guy, picking up the basket of bread he'd set down. "Can you replace this with wheat rolls?"

"Yes, sir."

"And this." I gestured to a bottle of caramel syrup he'd set out. "She'll think this is hazelnut and have a coughing spell if she drinks a sip of it. Take this as well and bring up chocolate syrup instead."

"Yes, sir." He picked up the offending items and headed to the door. "Be right back."

Brad raised his eyebrow, looking completely confused. "Have you always memorized your assistant's food preferences?"

"Only the ones who last over a year."

"Ah." He laughed. "Well, like I was saying, Apple and Microsoft called to tell me that you still haven't returned their calls about her reference so you really need to do that at some point this week. You

do plan on giving her a good recommendation, don't you?"

My phone rang before I could address that question.

"Yes?" I answered.

"Good morning, Mr. Leighton," a soft voice said. "This is Shelby in Human Resources. I'm sorry I'm notifying you so late, but your executive assistant called in earlier and put in a notice for a week of sick leave."

"A week?"

"Yes, sir. Would you like me to fill her space with a temp during this time?"

"No, thank you." I hung up and leaned back in my chair. Mya never used sick leave, even when she was actually sick. She'd come to countless meetings coughing and sneezing when she probably should've stayed home, so I wasn't sure if she was using our recent tryst as leverage, or if she'd somehow become deathly ill in a matter of forty eight hours.

"Michael?" Brad attempted to get my attention. "Michael?"

I ignored him, pulling out my phone and sending Mya an email.

Subject: Sick Leave.

You better have a goddamn doctor's note....

Michael Leighton,

CEO, Leighton Publishing

Her response was immediate.

Subject: Re: Sick Leave.

And if I don't?

Mya London,

Executive Assistant to Leighton Publishing CEO

Subject: Re: Re: Sick Leave.

If you don't, I suggest you call HR right now and rescind your "sick leave" since I already know it's fake. Then I suggest you magically appear in my office within the next hour so we can prepare for next week's round of author acquisitions.

Michael Leighton,

CEO, Leighton Publishing

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Sick Leave.

Oh, that's right. Next week *is* very important....

I'll probably be sick next week, too.

(I'll probably still be "recovering" from something.)

Maybe if I'm gone for a while, you'll see how hard my job really is. Maybe then you'll appreciate me more.

Mya London,
Executive Assistant to Leighton Publishing CEO

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Sick Leave.

You will not “probably be sick” next week.

You will bring your ass to work.

(It doesn’t take two weeks to recover from getting properly fucked.)

I’d appreciate you a lot more if you came into work today....

Michael Leighton,
CEO, Leighton Publishing

I closed my inbox, not waiting for her response. I looked up and noticed Brad staring at me as if he’d just seen a ghost.

“*What?*” I said.

“You fucked Mya, didn’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” He didn’t flinch. “You slept with her ... You slept with her, and that’s why you haven’t called those companies back. That’s exactly why you don’t want her to leave.”

“That’s not why I don’t want her to leave.”

“So you’re *admitting* to the part about fucking her?”

“No,” I said, denying it and spending countless minutes attempting to calm him down. I knew he’d have a heart attack if he knew the truth.

When I was sure he was convinced, I pulled out the files for today’s meeting so the two of us could go through them alone.

As he began to organize his own files, I opened a new tab in my browser and looked up a local florist so I could order “Get Well” flowers for Mya—so I could send her a more direct “Bring your ass to work” note.

I picked out a seven-layer bouquet of lilies since she’d once mentioned loving those in a novel meeting, and I was halfway to the purchase screen when I stalled.

What the hell am I doing?

I closed the screen and clicked my pen.

I could definitely survive a week without her help since she wanted to continue to play games. I was pretty sure I could do her job even better than she could.

It couldn’t be that hard.

THE BOSS

Michael

Manhattan, New York

One week of “sick leave” later...

Subject: My Boss...

I still can't believe I fucked my boss last week....
You think he would be mad if I called in sick for a second week?
Your bestie,
Mya
PS—Is it sad that I desperately want to fuck him again?

Subject: Re: My Boss...

I still can't believe that you haven't learned to double check who you're sending your emails to....
Yes, “he” would be quite furious if you called in sick for a second week.
Your boss,
Michael
PS—It's not sad at all, considering he wants to fuck you again as well.

I hit send on my email and put my phone away. She hadn't shown up to work this morning—no advance notice to Human Resources at all, but I wouldn't dare file a write-up or even so much as verbally reprimand her. I'd damn near lost my mind over the past week by attempting to do everything she normally did for me, and I was starting to wonder if I really was as terrible a boss as she said I was.

Even now, as I sat across the table from an author we were attempting to acquire, I was seconds away from saying, “You know what? I don't feel like being here right now,” and asking her to reschedule. And I was very much tempted to drive to Mya's house to address that last “PS” note in her email.

I was also regretting hosting this meeting over dinner instead of at my office. In fact, the only reason I'd scheduled a reservation at this five-star restaurant was because three months ago I'd overheard Mya telling someone she wished she could afford to dine here someday. Of course, I'd deny that fact if she ever asked, but since she wasn't even here tonight, I didn't see a point of me being here either.

“So ...” The author across from me, a pretty brunette in her mid-thirties, cleared her throat. “If I sign with Leighton Publishing, I'm going to need some promises from you.”

“What type of promises, Miss Sutherland?”

“Well, I’ll need you to actually promote my book.”

“We promote *all* of our books.”

“Well, I know that. That’s why your reputation is so great, but that’s only the basic level of promotion. I want you to promise me a movie deal within two years, six figure advances for every future book I write, and I want a world tour at only the best bookstores.”

“This is your *debut* book...”

“I know. And I could totally self-publish this thing on Amazon and have it live in five seconds. Yet, here I am, taking a risk on you and offering you the next smash *New York Times* bestseller on a silver platter.”

I rolled my eyes and took a long sip of wine. I started to change the subject, but she started talking about which actors and actresses she would prefer to read her audiobook, which ones we “better” promise her, so I easily tuned out her voice.

This was usually the part where Mya would step in and tell the author to have realistic expectations, the part where my fraying thread of patience wore even thinner and I’d have to excuse myself to get more coffee. Without her here, I was minutes away from cracking and telling this woman to shut the hell up and get over herself.

“You know what I mean?” Miss Sutherland’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “Don’t you hate when Hollywood turns books into movies, but then they strip away the best parts? I honestly can’t sign a deal with you unless you promise that won’t happen to me.”

“*Miss Sutherland ...*” I tried to keep the annoyance out of my voice. “The chances of Hollywood taking your debut book, which is a goddamn cookbook filled with catfish recipes, are so fucking low that ___”

“I’m sorry I’m so late.” The sound of Mya’s voice stopped me from saying another word.

Dressed in a short, black cocktail dress that exposed her long legs, she looked absolutely stunning. Her lips were painted in a bright, alluring red, and her hair was piled high on top of her head in a pretty bevy of loose curls.

She walked over to Miss Sutherland and shook her hand, and then she mouthed “Stop it” to me as she sat down.

“I think what Mr. Leighton is trying to say—” Mya faced Miss Sutherland, “is that we should focus on doing all we can in the cooking sphere for this book. Then we can discuss ideas for your next collection of recipes so we make sure your future catalogue with us is as strong as it can be.”

I stared at her and remained silent for the remainder of the meeting, appreciating how she smoothly steered the rest of the conversation.

By the time we were done, Miss Sutherland was signing the contract and wishing us both well. When we all stood up to leave the restaurant, I pressed my hand against the small of Mya’s back and noticed how she attempted not to react.

The second Miss Sutherland was tucked away in her cab, Mya looked up at me.

“*You’re welcome.*” She smirked.

“Thank you. I appreciate it,” I said, looking her up and down once more. “You look pretty damn good to have been ‘sick’ for a week.”

She didn’t answer. She simply stared at me, and it took every ounce of restraint not to take her hand and pull her into my car for the night.

“Are you planning on coming to work tomorrow or are you keeping me in suspense?”

“I’m not sure yet. It depends on how I feel when I wake up, or if I want you to see even more of how much you put me through when you have to do everything yourself.” She held up her hand for the town car and he pulled right in front. “But I must say, I’m happy you finally said those two precious words to me in regards to my work.”

“What two words?”

“*Thank you.*”

I said nothing. I just watched as her driver opened the back door and motioned for her to get inside.

I slid inside next to her before he could shut the door.

“What the—” She buckled her seatbelt. “What are you doing?”

“Driver, roll up the partition, please.” I waited for the driver to give us some privacy. “Mya London, do you really think that because we’ve fucked, I won’t fire you?”

“Michael Leighton,” she said, mocking me. “I *know* you won’t fire me and it has nothing to do with the fact that we’ve slept together.”

“We haven’t ‘slept together’, we’ve *fucked.*”

“Fine.” She lowered her voice. “Fucked. But I know you wouldn’t dare fire me.”

“Would you like to bet?”

“Not with a man who knows that I’m the best damn assistant he’s ever had.”

I smiled, unable to come up with a rebuttal for that. Before I could fire back, the driver’s voice came over the intercom.

“Miss London, are you still going to the AMC in Times Square?”

“Yes, Archer. Thank you.”

I shut off the speaker button. “What’s at the AMC in Times Square?”

“I have a date with a complete and utter gentleman.” She looked away from me, as if she was somewhat embarrassed. “It was set up weeks ago. I didn’t want to be rude and cancel at the last minute.”

“What’s his name?”

“None of your business.” She turned to face me again. “And unless you want to be a third wheel, are you going to have Archer take you back to your Jaguar while we’re in the movies? We’re going to need the car for dinner later, and no offense, but you’re not good dinner company.”

“*What’s his name?*” I repeated.

“Taylor,” she said. “Would you like to know where he works and how old he is, too?”

“I would. Tell me.”

“He’s an analyst for ABC studios, and he’s twenty-seven. Happy?”

“He’s too young for you,” I said. “And at that age he doesn’t have any real rank in that company. You can do better than that.”

“You’re referring to yourself?”

“No, I’m *the best,*” I said. “But you can at least do better until you realize that.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, but she didn’t say anything further.

“And if this is the guy from the email with the subject heading, ‘It’s Been a Week and He Hasn’t Called or Texted Me at All’, then you probably already know I’m right. No man in his right mind would wait a week to call *you*, unless he was your boss, that is.”

Her cheeks turned bright red and her jaw dropped.

“We’re here, Miss London,” her driver said, pulling in front of the theater.

Mya unbuckled her seatbelt and waited for him to open the door.

I walked ahead and held the door to the theater for her, following her as she walked toward the ticket counter.

“I’m only picking up two tickets,” she said to me. “You’re not really going to follow us into the theater are you?”

“No, but I’ll wait until he actually appears, if you don’t mind.”

“I *do* mind.”

“Tough shit.”

“Fine.” She picked up her tickets from the clerk and I followed her to a couch in one of the theater’s private lounges. She pulled her phone out of her purse and smiled at the screen. “He says he’s in traffic but he’ll be here in twenty minutes. I’ll be sure to tell you all about our night at work tomorrow, since you’re so concerned.”

“I’m not concerned at all, but thank you for confirming that you’re coming to work tomorrow.”

“You’re not worried he’ll compare to you?”

“We’ve discussed this. *No one* compares to me.” I smiled. “And you know that. You also know that you have no desire to fuck him tonight because I’m willing to bet you’re still thinking about fucking *me*. This is either a pointless date you’re too scared to cancel, a ploy to make me jealous, or both.”

She blushed and looked down at her phone.

Fifteen minutes passed and she didn’t look up again. She simply refreshed her phone’s screen again and again.

I looked at my watch. The movie was due to start in ten minutes and her date was a no-show.

Her phone suddenly buzzed in her lap and she smiled, tapping the screen. She held it up to her face, her smile fading by the second.

She typed a few words, and then she looked at me. “He said something came up so.... Okay. You can go ahead and make me feel like shit now. I’ve missed it at work, so now you can apply it to my personal life, I guess.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know, tell me how dumb I was to invite a guy who previously stood me up twice, instead of letting him ask me out. And then you can say how dumb I was for wasting my time getting all dressed up, trying my best to make you jealous—”

I cut her off with a kiss, softly biting her bottom lip until she moaned. Until she stopped attempting to talk and gave in. “Let’s go.”

THE ASSISTANT

Mya

Manhattan, New York

I sat still in the passenger seat of Michael's Jaguar as he drove, still in shock that he'd demanded to spend the rest of the night with me. He'd asked my driver to take us back to the restaurant to retrieve his car, to ensure we had complete privacy for the rest of the night.

I wasn't sure why, but when he looked over at me at a stoplight, I couldn't help but think that a part of this felt right. That when he wasn't being my boss—even for a split second, he was more than likeable.

"It'll be pretty hard to get a reservation at this hour in New York City," I said, finally breaking the silence.

"We don't need a reservation for where we're going."

"I'll take your word for it, but for the record, I need to apologize in advance."

"For what?"

"Because you're just assuming I'll like where we're going instead of being a gentleman and asking me," I said. "I'm a very picky eater and I'm allergic to a lot of things."

"I'm aware." He turned right at the light. "You don't like seafood; you only eat chicken if it's prepared a certain type of way; you're lactose intolerant, yet you still eat certain types of cheese, and if you would like, I can break down an entire list of random shit that seems to make you sick for some reason." He looked over at me. "Would you like me to?"

I shook my head, stunned.

"Good," he said. "I didn't ask because I don't have to, because contrary to what you may think of me, I do pay attention to you. Are you going to give me a chance to be nice or are you going to spend the night acting like we're at the office?"

"I'll give you a chance...."

"Good." He placed his hand on my exposed thigh. "Because I've been trying very hard not to fuck you since you showed up at dinner tonight, so the second you want me to stop trying, please don't hesitate to let me know."

I blushed and leaned back in the seat, staying quiet for the rest of the ride as he steered through the snow-lined streets.

Thirty minutes later, he pulled into the turnaround of a high rise tower. Valet approached his car and he walked over to my side to open the door for me.

He pressed his hand against the small of my back, and as the doorman opened the door for us, he looked down at me and whispered. "Did you really wear that dress to make me jealous?"

"Depends. Did it work?"

"Very much so." He led me up a short flight of steps and onto a glass elevator that faced the bright and glittering lights of Manhattan.

We rode it all the way to the top level, and the second the doors gave way, a waiter greeted us and gestured for us to follow him into a private room.

A hearth blazed warmly in the corner, and there was only one table in the center that faced the floor to ceiling windows.

The waiter smiled and took our wine orders before disappearing.

“Is this place normally set up for private dinners?” I asked.

“Not at all.” He looked at me. “But I don’t think either of us would like to be spotted together right now, considering our relationship.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want people thinking I slept with the ‘Naughty Boss’ or Tabloid CEO to get my job.”

“Me either.” He looked amused. “When are you really coming back to work?”

“You mean, when do you really get to fuck me again?”

“No, I’m going to fuck you *tonight*,” he said. “I truly mean, when are you coming back to work?”

“Once you admit that you need me a lot more than you think you do, and once you apologize for being so rude to me over the past year that I’ve worked for you.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Well, amazing sex aside, I have three more weeks of sick leave and some very generous vacation days I can make use of. As a matter of fact—”

“I need you and I’m sorry.” His words came out in a rush. “And I really do need you to come back to help me, until you “quit” that is....”

I knew he wanted me to say that I wasn’t quitting, that I would at least consider staying, but one nice date and hot office sex or not, I was leaving Leighton Publishing the second I received a job offer worthy enough.

Thankfully, the waiter returned before I could get a word out, and the two of us ordered the exact same thing. A simple Swiss chicken pasta.

To my surprise, Michael steered our dinner conversation away from work and sex. For hours, we talked about all the things we had in common, which, for some reason, was a lot more than I thought.

And even though he was behaving like a complete gentleman, every time our eyes met, it was clear he was seconds away from suggesting that I let him fuck me on the spot.

At three o’clock in the morning, the waiter told us he couldn’t keep the space open a second longer, so Michael helped me into my coat and we ventured out into the city. He held me against his side as snow fell over us, and we walked all the way down to the skating rink at Rockefeller Plaza.

I gripped the railing and for several minutes we watched couples and families attempt to keep their balance on the ice.

“Can I ask you something personal?” I looked up at Michael.

“Yes.”

“Were any of those stories in the tabloids from last year true?”

“Some of them.”

“Oh.” I frowned. “Really?”

“What are you really asking me, Mya?”

“Is there any reason why you haven’t been featured in one for a very long time?”

“Yes ... It’s because I haven’t done any of the things I used to do for a very long time.” He trailed his finger against my lips. “I promised my advisor I would tone down my ‘activities’ for the sake of the company going public in the future.” He paused. “I also happened to accidentally hire a very compelling and sexy distraction working on the floor right below me.”

“In other words, you slept with your usual groupies in private.”

“I tried to.” He admitted. “But I was honestly too damn attracted to someone else to waste my time on other people.”

“I don’t believe you.” I blushed. “There’s no way you haven’t slept with anyone else since I started working for you.”

“You should, and *I haven’t*.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “I have no reason to lie to you. I even tried getting rid of you when you first started since you were such a distraction, but that clearly didn’t work out.”

“You were purposely being mean to me in the beginning, to get me to quit?”

He smiled, silently confirming it.

“That is so ...” I couldn’t believe he could look so genuine while saying that. “That is so fucked up.”

“It was.”

“No, *is*.” I looked into his eyes. “You still act as if you’re trying to get me to quit.”

“Sign the extension and I’ll be a lot nicer.”

“How about treat me better first and I’ll *consider* thinking about it?”

“How about both?” He gently pushed me against the railing. “I haven’t truly been ‘mean’ to you in the past six months. Demanding? Yes. Slightly unreasonable with the scheduling time and getting upset about you refusing to sign my contract? Maybe.”

“*Definitely*.”

“Fine,” he said. “But I haven’t been ‘mean’ to you.”

“You’ve just done your best to keep me out of your sight and far away from you, because you were thinking about having me as much as I was thinking about having you?”

“Exactly.” A smile spread across his face. “I was only protecting myself.”

I burst into laughter, feeling his lips against mine within seconds, feeling his arms wrapping around my waist and pulling me close.

“Can I take you home and fuck you now?” he whispered against my mouth. “Or do we need to do something else to make you see that I really do like you?”

“We can ...” I blushed at his last five words. “We can do the first thing you said.”

Michael unlocked the door to his lavish penthouse condo, ushering me into his bedroom that overlooked the city. The second he closed the door behind us, his lips were on mine and his arms were around my waist.

“I can’t stay with you long tonight,” I whispered. “I have to leave within an hour.”

“An hour?” He unzipped the side of my dress. “What makes you think I’ll be done with you in an hour?”

“Nothing, but my boss is highly obsessed with me being on time for work, and it’s already five o’clock in the morning. If I’m more than a minute late, he’ll send me an email and act like it’s the end of the world.”

He let out a low laugh and tore off my panties. “I think he’ll be more than willing to make an exception in this case.”

I moved my hand down to his pants, pulling his zipper. “I’m not so sure about that. He can be quite the asshole sometimes.”

“Is that so?” His pants hit the floor and he kissed me harder, trapping my bottom lip between his teeth. He pushed my dress down off my shoulders, and then he pushed me back onto the bed.

“That’s very so.” I smiled as he climbed in bed next to me, as he sucked one of my nipples into his mouth. “I’d be very surprised if he was late to work today at all.”

“He will be.” He grabbed my hands and rolled me on top of him. He put on a condom and slowly positioned me over his hardened cock—silently commanding me to lower myself onto it.

I took my time, filling myself with him inch by inch, and when he was completely inside of me, I entwined my hands with his and rocked against him.

“*Fuck ...*” He breathed as I tried to speed up my rhythm, as he gripped my hips and forced me to slow down.

Freeing his right hand from mine, he pulled my head closer and covered my mouth with his—kissing me until I was nearly breathless.

He pressed his fingers deeper into my skin, controlling the movement of my hips. He whispered my name against my lips, and my muscles tensed as I felt his cock throbbing inside of me.

“*Fuck, Mya ...*” He held onto me tightly as he came, and I felt familiar waves of pleasure rolling through me at the same time.

Panting uncontrollably, my entire body went limp and I collapsed against his chest.

I shut my eyes, expecting him to let me catch my breath, but he quickly moved me off of him and flipped me onto my stomach.

Confused, but too tired to ask what he was doing, I kept my eyes shut and groaned. The next thing I felt was his mouth against my back, leaving feather-light kisses in a soft trail all the way down my spine. All the way down to my cheeks.

Both of them.

“*There,*” he said, slapping my ass and flipping me over. “Now you can officially say I’ve kissed your ass.”

We both burst into uncontrollable laughter, and he positioned a pillow under my head.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “Do you need anything?”

“Water ... And a grand tour of your apartment later.”

“Okay. We can definitely do that.” He kissed my forehead and walked away.

I winced as I tried to stretch my legs and managed to roll over on my side. I looked around the room for my purse, spotting my cell phone flashing the tell-tale blue light of a new email from its pocket. Thinking it was Amy with an emergency, I pulled the sheets over myself and got out of bed.

Subject: What I Need Today.

You in my office for a meeting at ten.

Michael Leighton,

CEO, Leighton Publishing

What the!

I turned around immediately, finding myself face to face with Michael. “You seriously expect me to be able to get to work and hold a ten o’clock meeting with you today?”

“Yes.” He pulled me toward the bed. “I have some former fantasies of my own I’d like us to fulfill in my office....”

THE EMAILS

Mya

Subject: Non-Assholery Report #15 (Get Used to This New Gmail Account)

He bought me flowers today. Fresh white lilies from my favorite florist. (A florist I don't recall ever telling him about...)

But then he asked me to sign that extension again.

Maybe he's not that bad after all? Or is this just the sex talking?

Your bestie,

Mya

Subject: Re: Non-Assholery Report #15 (Get Used to This New Gmail Account)

It's. Just. The. Sex. Talking.

Please!

(But I will admit that him sending you flowers and getting **your coffee** every morning is a nice and necessary change ... It's still the sex talking though. :))

Your bestie,

Amy

Subject: Apple Just Turned Me Down...

Apple just called me and said they will not be able to offer me employment based on "extensive conversations with my reference." Do you think Brad said something negative about me? :(

PS—Google just called me and said the same thing...

Your bestie,

Mya

Subject: Re: Apple Just Turned Me Down...

I'm so sorry, Mya. I'm sure this only means that you're going to land a job at one of the other companies and it'll be a much better fit for you.

I highly doubt Brad said anything negative about you though. He's loved you since your first interview and practically thinks you're the reason Mr. Leighton has become a better executive. Why don't you ask him what he said?

Your bestie,

Amy

PS—Well, we won't use Google anymore! I'm switching to Bing at this very moment!

Subject: Re: Re: Apple Just Turned Me Down..

I called Brad on my lunch break. He said he had nothing but high praises for me when Apple and Google called. Then he said *Michael* was the last person who spoke with all the companies.

I can't believe he would try to sabotage me behind my back...,

Especially now that we're sleeping together. :(

Your bestie,

Mya

THE ASSISTANT

Mya

Manhattan, New York

I rocked my hips against Michael's face one morning, moaning as he slid his tongue against my clit again and again. His hands were gripping my thighs, steadying me as I began to shake.

"Oh godddd, oh godddd..." I cried out, holding on to the wall behind him as I came on his lips.

Shutting my eyes, I felt my legs go slack, felt him moving me onto his lap. When I finally stopped shaking, he picked me up and carried me over to his office sofa. I felt him wiping between my legs with a warm cloth, and then he stepped away into his private bathroom.

He returned seconds later and sat next to me, running his fingers through my hair.

"I hope you enjoyed that," I said softly, pushing his hand away. "I'm pretty sure that's the last time I'll let you fuck me."

"Excuse me?"

"Were you sabotaging my career behind my back in hopes that I'd eventually sign your extension contract? Did you honestly think you could somehow use the fact that we've had sex, or the fact that I like you, to prevent me from going to another company?"

He raised his eyebrow, having the audacity to look confused.

"Apple called me yesterday and said they moved on with another candidate because my boss, i.e. *you*, wasn't able to give me a stellar enough recommendation for their company." I stood up, preventing him from pulling me close. "Google said the very same thing. And just this morning, I received two voicemails from Amazon and Microsoft, three from other companies, and I'm sure when I go downstairs to listen to them, they'll tell me the same thing."

"Mya..."

"No." I shook my head. "I'm sorry I ever thought that there was even a slight chance that the two of us could work out when I left your company, and I'm sorry I ever thought you were anything more than a pompous, selfish, asshole because you clearly still are."

"Sexy as hell or not?"

"Yes. Sexy as hell or—" I stopped myself. "That's not the point of what I'm trying to say. I put in my notice with Human Resources before I came up here, so I highly suggest you accept it, and I highly suggest you give me one hell of a 'goodbye' package because you will not be seeing me again."

"Are you finished talking yet?"

"Yes." I rushed toward the door, but he caught me from behind and spun me around.

"I would never sabotage you, Mya." He wiped away one of my stray tears with his fingertips. "Of course, deep down I did want you to stay, but I had nothing but nice things to say about you. I even said they'd be foolish *not* to hire you, but—"

"But?" I glared at him. "But *what*?"

“But if they thought the low-ass salaries they were offering were good enough for you, they needed to increase them exponentially or move along to someone else. I thought you deserved more.”

“Is that all?”

“No,” he said, looking into my eyes. “I also needed to personally interview each of the CEOs myself. Needed to make sure each one was a good fit for you, and that whoever you worked for next was already married.”

I opened my mouth to ask him if he was being serious, but he beat me to it.

“Yes,” he said, smirking. “Yes, I ‘seriously’ did need to do that.”

“What does the CEO being married have to do with anything, Michael? What if I have no interest in seeing you after I quit?”

“You *do*, so we’re not even going to entertain that line of conversation.” He rolled his eyes. “If the CEO is already married, I won’t have to worry about ‘this’ happening at your next place of employment, and I can be somewhat less jealous.”

“How *selfish* of you.” I couldn’t believe him, but for some reason, I couldn’t help the smile that was forming on my face.

“I’m pretty sure when you listen to Amazon, Microsoft, and the other companies’ voicemails, that they’ll be offering you one hell of a deal.” He cupped my face in his hands. “At least, that’s what they all told me yesterday.”

“This still doesn’t excuse you from interfering with my job search and insisting that you be my reference over Brad.”

“I’m pretty sure it does.” He kissed me. “And now that there’s no chance in hell of you signing my long-term extension contract, and you’ve hopefully realized that I’m not sabotaging you, how about dating me long-term instead?”

“I’ll have to think about it.” I kissed him back. “It depends on what you’re offering...”

THE EMAILS

(Well, “The End”)

Mya

One year later...

Subject: My Boss.

Have I told you that I love my boss today?

One hundred percent brilliant and super kind to everyone, she doesn't make me get her dry cleaning, get her coffee, or do anything that my former bosses (Yes, plural) used to do....

I have two meetings this morning and I can honestly say I'm looking forward to them because they both involve things I really enjoy.

I'm pretty sure I can get used to this.

Your girlfriend,

Mya

Subject: Re: My Boss.

No, you haven't told me that you love your boss today, but seeing as though you're technically your own boss, I hope this will always be the case.

Your boss at Microsoft was far worse than I ever was. (I'm actually proud of you for quitting that place after three months.)

If one of the meetings you're referring to is the one in my office where we'll be fucking, good to know you enjoy it.

I'm not sure if I'll ever get used to this.

(When do you plan on changing your closing signature?)

Michael Leighton,

CEO, Leighton Publishing

Subject: Re: Re: My Boss.

Now.

See you in five minutes.

Mya London,

CEO, London Publishing

A Letter to the Reader

Dear Incredible Reader,

Thank you so much for taking time out of your life to read this book! I hope you were thoroughly entertained and enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

If you LOVED it and have any extra time, PLEASE leave a review on amazon.com, B&N.com, goodreads.com, OR [find me here on Facebook](#) so I can personally thank you :-). If you hated it, well...keep that shit to yourself! LOL (Just kidding. Feel free to let me know how I can improve next time!)

I'm forever grateful for you and your time, and I hope to be re-invited to your bookshelf with my next release. Speaking of my next release, if you'd like to be a part of my mailing list so you can be notified of my upcoming release dates and special offers, please sign up via this [link](#).

Love,
Whitney G.

ALSO BY WHITNEY G.

Erotic Romances:

Dirty Doctor: A Novella*
Naughty Boss: A Novella
The Layover: A Novella
The Landing: A Novella*
Reasonable Doubt (Full Series)
Turbulence
Malpractice*

Contemporary Romances

Resisting the Boss (A Falling for Mr. Statham Novel)
Loving the Boss (A Falling for Mr. Statham Novel)

New Adult Romances

Sincerely, Carter
Sincerely, Arizona
Over Us, Over You (Twisted Love)*
Forget You, Ethan*
The Beautiful Series*

*denotes that title is available for pre-order and/or an upcoming release