THE BOSS
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But mostly, thanks to everyone who went along for the ride. This has been the most fun I’ve ever had in my entire career. I was convinced the universe had made a mistake and was working to replace me. I was ready to give up writing entirely, and then 2012 turned into a miracle. Thank you all for helping me see what a bad choice quitting would be.
Chapter One

There are days that just feel off, and you don't know why until something momentous happens. Then you look back on your morning - on the coffee you spilled on your ghost white Yamamoto jacket, the persistent smell of garlic from the break room fridge, the lipstick you had on your teeth while you flirted with the breakfast guy - and it all makes perfect sense.

I was having one of those days.

For the past year and a half, every day of my life has been a roller coaster, so I'm usually ready for anything. As the first assistant to Gabriella Winters, Editor-in-Chief of Porteras magazine, I spend company time doing anything from ogling male models at a Calvin Klein underwear shoot, to taking a chronically constipated Yorkie to his monthly colonic. It's certainly not how I envisioned my career in the fashion industry, but I'd like to think I'm starting to get a handle on things.

This morning, I reported at eight-o'-clock as usual. On my way I picked up Gabriella's breakfast, an egg white omelet and Nova Scotia salmon from Barney Greengrass - made specially for her before opening every day except Fridays, when she fasts - and grabbed coffee for myself and Penelope, the second assistant. I came back to the office, set out the breakfast on Gabriella's preferred Waterford china, and ahead of her projected 8:15 arrival, emailed a copy of her schedule to all pertinent office staff. I thought things were going pretty well so far when I noticed it was 8:12, and hadn't yet heard a peep from Gabriella.

That was really strange. I usually would have received a breezy, borderline rude phone call from her by now, demanding something seemingly impossible. I slumped into my office chair, took a sip from my still scalding latte and choked, bubbling a bit over my lips and down the front of my jacket.

At least you got the drama over early today, I thought, shaking my head as I dabbed the stain.

Oh, I wish I had been right.

When Gabriella's car didn't arrive by 8:30, I started to get worried. When I called her phone and couldn't leave a message because her voicemail was completely full, I panicked. I buzzed Jake, one of the editors on the floor. While his line rang, I looked out the tall glass doors. I couldn't see the outer office from my desk, just Ivanka in reception, drumming her fingertips and shooting worried glances at the elevators. The glare from the fluorescents showed me the faint shadow of my own reflection, all dark hair and pale skin and what looked like two black voids for eyes. Creepy.

"Jake," he answered, and I jumped. His tone was short, and I could immediately imagine the look of worry on his face. His big blue eyes would be wide, and he'd probably be leaning one tattooed elbow on his desk, a hand buried in his sandy hair as he hunched over his laptop.

"Do you know what's going on this morning?" I asked, rising to venture to Gabriella's gleaming lacquered desk. There was a fingerprint beside the leather blotter, which I rubbed away with my sleeve. "Everyone is acting really weird."

"It's not good, Soph. We're still waiting for confirmation from Bob, but it looks like Gabriella is out."

"Out where?" I squinted some hand sanitizer into my palm. As soon as it absorbed, I hovered my hand over the rapidly cooling omelet to check the temperature. Gabriella hated microwaved food almost as much as she hated germs.

"Out, as in, fired."

This is fixable. You call Barney Greengrass and ask them to remake the omelet. Penelope can pick it up on her way in if you catch her right now -
A record scratched somewhere in my brain, jarring me back to what Jake had said. "What?"

Jake hadn't caught on to my disbelief. "I don't know the details. But I think it's safe to say, Gabriella won't be coming back." He paused, and I could hear his irritation, not with me, but with every facet of this day, in his noisy exhale. "I have to go."

After I hung up, I wandered around the office a bit. Gabriella was... fired? Did that mean I was fired? Should I start looking for a job?

I sat on the floor beside Gabriella's desk and reached up for the china plate. I stared disconsolately at the weave of the low-pile carpet as I ate the expensive imported salmon my boss wouldn't be enjoying this morning. Oh shit, I paid for the fish on my credit card. They would reimburse me for that, right? I didn't know she was fired when I picked it up.

I mentally calculated everything I hadn't bothered to get reimbursed for this month. The only way Gabriella was out was if the magazine was folding, so would they be able to pay me? There was no way Porteras could run without her. She was like the single support structure in a badly built house or something.

I stopped chewing at that thought. I'd never really thought of Porteras in a negative light before. But Gabriella really had been the glue holding the whole thing together. In the sixteen years she'd run the publication, she'd only ever taken two sick days, and they were the stuff of legend. "The day Gabriella missed work for Princess Di's funeral," people whispered, with a touch of manic fear in their eyes. Gabriella taking an unscheduled day off plunged the office into a near-cannibalistic frenzy, apparently.

There was no way I was going out that door today. My cell rang. "Sophie, what the hell is going on up there?"

Holli. Thank God.

I clutched the phone tight to my ear and scrambled to keep the eggs from hitting the floor. "I have no idea. Gabriella isn't here." I suspected Holli was headed into the building, based on the loud lobby noises distorting in the background. "Is the shoot cancelled? I just saw someone crying and carrying a printer out the front door."

"I don't know." Holli is my roommate. She's also a model, and today she was supposed to be at the spring jacket shoot on the seventh floor. By spring, would Porteras still be on the stands?

"Well, if this place is going down, I'll just go home. I have hours of Real Housewives DVRed that I have to catch up on." Holli sounded almost bored at the idea of the top fashion magazine in the country going into a tailspin. Probably because no matter what happened, she would be fine. Holli didn't have an ego about her job, and would just as happily do cleaning product commercials as high-fashion shoots. I often used her somewhat lackadaisical approach to her career to get some perspective on my own.

But right at that moment, I didn't want perspective. I wanted to run around screaming with my hair on fire, just like everyone else. "No, I'm sure the shoot is still on." Possibly. Probably not. "Go up to seven and see what they say. I don't want you to get in trouble with your agency."

"Will do, boss," Holli chirped, then gasped like a scandalized young miss in a Jane Austen movie. "O. M. G. What if they gave you Gabriella's job? Like, since you're her second in command?"

"I'm not her second in command. I'm her assistant. And that kind of thing only happens in the movies." But that left me with a very good question I hadn't come up with during my moping. Who would be the new Gabriella?

The doors from reception opened, and masculine voices drifted in. I shifted my phone from one hand to the other and balanced the plate of eggs and salmon on my arm as I rose on legs clumsy and prickly from sitting in one place too long. "Holli, I have to go."

I didn't wait for her response before I ended the call. I dropped the phone on the desk and slid the half-eaten breakfast back into its place, just as muted footsteps entered the room.

I smoothed down my black skirt and raised my head, trying to project an air of confidence that
crumbled the moment I saw the man who'd lead the way into the room.

Not him. No. I knew him. Or, didn't. My pulse drowned out every other sound in the room as I took him in. A sleek, sharkskin-gray suit, no tie, open collar, so different from the casual attire we'd scattered all over that hotel room floor six years ago.

My throat was so dry I thought it might seal itself off. That was probably a good thing, because it meant I wouldn't be puking up eggs and salmon all over his shiny, expensive black leather shoes.

"Are you..." I watched his perfect lips form the words. Recognition flickered across his face and he raked his dark ash blonde hair back from his brow with his fingers. I braced myself for the impact of the words that followed: "Gabriella's assistant?"

Anger and mortification fought over which was going to send my blood into my head. I tried to will myself pale as I nodded. "Um, yeah. Yes."

He put his hand out. "Neil Elwood, Elwood and Stern."

I wanted to snap, "Yes, I know that! We slept together!" There was no way in hell I was going to say anything of the sort. Not if he didn't remember me. Also, I didn't technically know who he was. When we'd spent the night together, he'd told me his name was Leif, and that he wrote for a car magazine. Apparently he'd misspoken, because Neil Elwood didn't write for magazines. Neil Elwood owned magazines.

"Bad luck," he said apologetically. It sounded much more polite in his posh English accent than it would have if some guy from New Jersey had just said, "Bad luck," about my losing my freaking job. His voice had caught my attention the day we'd met, and it did wicked things to me now.

I took his hand and shook it, ignoring the zings of awareness that travelled straight up my arm, lighting up every pleasure center in my brain. I knew that hand. Both of them. Had committed every detail about them and what he'd done to me with them to memory. I smiled with clenched back teeth. "You're telling me."

"Look, I don't want you to panic." I think that was what he said. My concentration had kind of a dreamy-around-the-edges quality with tiny pinpoints of blackout rage scattered around. It made it difficult to concentrate.

*I can't believe he doesn't remember me. I can't believe I'm losing my job.*

"In the meantime, can you stay on here for a few weeks? You can train whoever ends up as your replacement, and we can find you something here that's a better fit."

I smiled in a really great impression of a human with a functioning brain and said, "I would be happy to stay on until you find someone."

I would also be happy to pay my half of the rent, which would be difficult if I were unemployed. Still, I couldn't believe how cool I was being about all this.

Then I realized that it was all going to hit me, eventually. My job was over. My boss was fired. I was probably tainted, and I was going to see it in the face of every person I interviewed with for the next five years. I might as well move back to Michigan and start cashiering at Pat's Foods.

I'd practically tied one of those horrible polyester aprons on when I realized that all was probably not lost.

"Great. We'll be meeting with the editors at nine, which is in about..." Neil or Leif or whoever he was pretending to be today checked his watch, which was roughly the size of a damn bread plate. "Ten minutes. Look, I don't really need you for that, but what I will need is some coffee, and something to eat. Can you do that for me and be back here by ten, for the office-wide announcement?"

"By ten?" He didn't want it fifteen minutes ago? Wasn't he going to snap his fingers at me?

"Is that not enough time?" He raised an eyebrow, and I was sucked painfully back to that night in Los Angeles six years ago. Even the way he lifted a brow was ingrained in my memory, and he didn't
know who I was. Just another in a long line of airport conquests, I supposed.

"No, it's plenty of time." Way more time than Gabriella would have given me. "What would you like?"

I noticed a subtle shift in the room. One of the men who'd come in with Neil - I hadn't paid much attention to them, since their arrival hadn't thrown me into an oh-god-we-fucked-before panic - coughed into his hand, and another openly rolled his eyes.

Neil, on the other hand, didn't react at all, waving me off with a, "Bagels would be fine, get enough for all of us."

"Coffee?" I asked, mentally calculating whether I could walk or if I would need a cab.

"Do they not have coffee makers here?" the eye-roller asked with a "tch" of impatience. I resisted the urge to glare at him.

"Of course we do." I hoped I sounded cheerful and helpful. "Do you prefer Bolivian, Columbian, we have a great dark roast from Chile that was profiled last month – "

Neil took a step toward me, his hands pushing back his jacket as he slipped them into his trouser pockets. "I know that Gabriella was very particular about things around here. I'm not saying that I won't be particular about your work, I will be. But I'm not going to fire you if you bring me the wrong coffee."

"Very good. Bagels and coffee." I was fairly certain my frozen smile had irreparably damaged my facial muscles. Once I was out of the office, I rubbed my aching cheek.

It might seem odd to complain about a boss who isn't picky, but when you're someone's assistant, it really helps if that person is high-maintenance. Coffee and bagels? What kind of coffee? Cream? Sugar? Mug or disposable cup? If disposable, should it be 100% recycled material? My job was made so much easier by Gabriella's very specific demands. Without them, I had to make independent decisions, which went against every one of my subordinate instincts.

Okay, so I knew I wasn't going to be a subordinate forever. Someday, I was going to get promoted into a job I really wanted, and probably even have an assistant myself. But that's the food chain of the working world. You bring someone else their ridiculous coffee order until the day you can order someone to bring you ridiculous coffee. It's like The Lion King but without animal hair on everything.

If he wanted bagels, I could get him bagels. And I hoped he choked on them.

I stopped on the seventh floor, and I was unsurprised to find it entirely empty and dark. Which meant the shoot had been cancelled, and Holli had probably gone home. I got back in the elevator and headed down to the lobby.

I spotted Holli as soon as the doors opened. She’s not hard to spot. 5’10”, magnificently, naturally blonde, and wearing the most ratty, just-rolled-out-of-bed clothes that had ever graced the lobby of my esteemed workplace, she stood by the security desk, frowning down at the iPhone in her hand.

"Holli!" I ran at her, then remembered I was at work and slowed my steps. Gabriella might be out, but I was still her assistant, and I couldn't be giving people the impression that it was time to panic.

Holli frowned. "You spilled something on yourself." I brushed at the front of my jacket. "Way bigger problems. I really have to talk to you, like right now!" Holli followed me out of the building and onto the street.

We hurried down the block and into a small coffee shop most of the Porteras staff wouldn't be caught dead in, because the drinks weren't expensive enough. We slid into one of the high backed booths.

"What the hell is going on upstairs?" Holli half-whispered as she scanned the menu. "Yesterday it was all, 'don't be a minute late or you'll be punished' and then I get there today and it's cancelled. No call to my agency or anything."

"Gabriella is fired," I whispered back. What had once seemed like the most important detail of the
situation seemed insignificant in the face of my mortification. "Something... worse has happened."

I took a deep breath, ready to spill all the sordid and very personal details to my best friend, but the waitress stepped up to take our order. I waited with barely disguised impatience as Holli ordered the lumberjack breakfast with a side of pancakes. All I could think of was the rapidly gelling salmon I’d left on Gabriella's desk. I ordered a cup of coffee.

"Do you remember the guy I told you about, the one I met on my way to NYU?" I waited for the flicker of recognition to pass over Holli's face. Her huge eyes opened even wider. Holli’s face is like, ninety-five percent eyeballs.

"You mean..." She held up her hands, roughly ten inches apart.


"Neil Elwood, as in, Men's Style Quarterly? As in, Who? Magazine? That Neil Elwood?" Holli's voice rose as she listed off the Elwood & Stern publications. "Oh my god, Sophie? You slept with Neil Elwood?"

"I didn't know he was Neil Elwood then!" I flapped my hands frantically to shush her. I didn't even know Neil Elwood or his stupid company existed until I'd gotten serious about fashion journalism. And yeah, I guess the pictures I'd seen of him since then had reminded me a little of the guy I'd slept with six years ago, but somehow I'd convinced myself that they didn't look that much alike. "Keep your voice down. That's not the worst part, okay? The worst part is that he doesn't remember me."

The waitress returned with my coffee and Holli's soda, and Holli toyed with her straw wrapper as she leaned forward. "How could he have forgotten? I thought it was like, the hottest night ever."

"It was." Wasn't it? Six years later and I was still thinking about him while spending quality time with my vibrator. But I'd also learned the painful truth, in those intervening years; that two people could have sex together and have two completely different experiences.

"Well, I thought he sounded like kind of a dick." Holli sipped her cola. "He stole your plane ticket, Sophie."

That... was true. And I often overlooked that crucial point, not because hot sex excuses theft, but because it turned out to be the best thing to have ever happened to me. In a way, I felt like I should thank him. "If he hadn't stolen my plane ticket, I wouldn't have gone to NYU. I wouldn't have met you. We wouldn't be living this super fabulous life."

"I wouldn't be so quick with the 'super fabulous life' stuff, if my boss had just gotten fired," Holli pointed out. "What are you going to do?"

That was the million dollar question, wasn't it? I sipped my coffee - it had a greasy sheen on top - and grimaced. There wasn't exactly an agony aunt column that could deal with this kind of shit.

I couldn't drink the rest of the coffee. I couldn't even sit still. "I have to bail, Holli. Are you going to be around tonight?"

She nodded as she swallowed. "Yeah, in all evening. Don't stress out today, okay?"

I couldn't agree to that, and Holli knew it. We said our goodbyes and I headed out onto the street. The sun was shining and the sky was blue. A beautiful October day in Manhattan. I hated when the weather refused to match my mood.

As I waited in line at some no-name deli to pick up the bagels, my mind drifted over and over that night six years ago. I'd met Neil - or Leif - while waiting for my plane to Tokyo out of LAX. I was supposed to have gotten on a plane to New York, to start college at NYU, but at the last minute I'd chickened out, and charged an international flight on my emergencies-only credit card.

He'd been forty-two, super duper old by my naive, eighteen-year-old standards. But he'd had the two things going for him that I most desired in a man. He was older than me, and he had an English accent. When our flight got cancelled, I spent the night with him, doing things I had only read about on
the internet. In the morning, I'd woken up to find him gone, my ticket to Tokyo with him, and four thousand dollars wrapped up in a note that advised me to get the next plane to New York. I'd been furious, and yeah, six years later, I was still pretty peeved about it. He'd had no right to change the course of my life that way. He hadn't even known me. But if he hadn't done that, I wouldn't be where I was now.

That realization made me furious all over again. Where I was now was soon to be jobless and working for a man who'd fucked me once and didn't seem to remember me. In a single morning, everything had gone from great to horrible.

In my ride up to the office, I made a resolution to not think about that night. Obviously, Neil hadn't, so why should I? I would not remember the sound of his voice, low and close to my ear, telling me all the things he was going to do to me. I would not remember his hands on me, or the feel of his naked skin. I would not remember my hands tied behind my back, or ice cubes on my -

I might as well have thrown the bagels in the trash and headed straight to the unemployment office, if that was my strategy. There was no way I would forget any of that, especially working with him every day.

Every day until you train your replacement, I reminded myself as I passed my desk. Penelope still wasn't in. Had someone tipped her off? Had Gabriella tipped her off? Why wouldn't she have called me?

I rapped on the half-open door. He was already on Gabriella's phone, talking confidently about the May issue. I wondered if I would still be here then, or if I would see it on the newsstand and start crying right there in front of the box I would be living in. Neil glanced up, then away again as he motioned me in. The eye-roller was looking through a rack of sequined miniskirts, stopping occasionally to pull one out and drop it on the floor. He looked up at me with pursed lips.

Oh, so we're going to play the "I don't know you, but I hate you already" game? That was fine by me. I wasn't best friends with everyone in the office and I wasn't about to start now. I raised my chin as I strode to Neil's desk and dropped the bag of assorted bagels and condiments neatly on the desk.

He covered the mouthpiece of the phone with his hand. "Thank you, Sophie."

I nodded and stepped back before turning away from the desk. I frowned at the eye-roller, who pretended he wasn't keeping tabs on me. Then it struck me where I had seen him before. In the pages of *Vanity Fair*, always at some party or another in the Hamptons or a trendy TriBeCa loft. He was Rudy Ainsworth, costume designer for the Metropolitan Opera, among other illustrious companies. What was he doing pawing through Michael Kors minis?

That mystery held my fascination for about thirty seconds, until I had closed the door to Neil's office behind me. Then it hit me. He'd said, "Thank you, Sophie."

And I hadn't given him my name.
Chapter Two

Remember that promise I'd made to myself, that I wouldn't think about how I'd had sex with Neil? Yeah, after I decided that he was just pretending not to recognize me, that promise flew right out the window.

We assembled in the main office for the big announcement. Elwood & Stern had purchased Porteras from our former parent company, but the format and the styling would stay roughly the same. Neil addressed everyone briefly then let members of the new management team take over. While they talked about gradual changes to policies and procedures, Neil looked around the room, clearly assessing each employee he'd purchased.

All I could think was, *I bet everyone can tell I've had sex with him.*

Of course they couldn't possibly know that, but I knew it. And that was enough. I went through the morning in an insane state of hyperawareness and total paranoia. When Jake stopped me on my way through reception to ask what I thought about the new boss, I practically shouted, "I don't think about him!" before I could stop myself.

"He's not Gabriella," I said, because it was a safe answer, and true in every context. Neil had spoken to everyone in a natural, unthreatening way. If Gabriella had been there, she would have eviscerated him with lasers from her eyes.

"Did you hear he's nixed the Versailles shoot?" Jake swore under his breath. "I know it's shitty to complain about losing an all-expenses-paid trip to France, but that was supposed to be my crowning achievement here. I might have gotten a book deal."

For over a year, Jake had been orchestrating a massive photo shoot at the Palace of Versailles. Designers had submitted special pieces. It all had been meant as a framework to showcase Jake's essay on pre-Revolution French fashion and its influence on contemporary design.

"What?" I took him by the arm and pulled him aside, so we didn't block the flow of traffic as the office resumed normal operations. "He's cutting it?"

"No, he's not cutting it." Jake leaned his shoulder against the wall. "But we're not going to France. His idea was to shoot on a set, with the models in Baroque frames. 'The flavor of French nobility, without the expense of French nobility.' And I can't really say I blame him. I mean, if the magazine is doing poorly - "

"How poorly?" I interrupted. It was something I was dying to know. If Porteras was going down, why hadn't we heard rumors about it? People were consistently rooting for us to fail, because we were, without a doubt, the top.

Jake frowned. "He didn't say. I don't think we'll ever know the whole story."

No, we probably wouldn't. But that was no excuse for me to start thinking well of Neil Elwood. "Canceling the shoot is bullshit. That spread was your baby, and now this guy just comes along and stabs it in the throat?"

Jake's frown deepened. "Ew."

Okay, maybe I should have left out the baby stabbing. But I couldn't stand it if Jake turned Team Neil in one day. I'd seen how everyone had gone from nervous about the fates of their jobs to being charmed by their charismatic new boss within seconds. It seemed unfair, and I was totally taking it personally.

"I am leaving!" Cassidy, one of the copy writers, pushed past us carrying a carton that appeared to hold her entire desk.
"Whoa, Cass, what's wrong?" Jake caught her as she stalked by, and she whirled on us. I can only assume she was so full of venom that it had to go somewhere. The fact that we were the ones who milked her fangs was just bad luck.

"I am not going to work for him! I came here to work for Gabriella Winters." She lifted her chin a bit when she said that holy name. "Where's the prestige in working for a magazine owned by the same people who publish three major tabloids and All Woman Weekly? That's a fat people magazine!"

Cassidy could drag "fat people" into several syllables by extending the consonants. She said it like, "fffffffat peoplellllle," as though her rage over their very existence caused a chronic speech impediment.

I thought of all the size twenty-eight dresses hanging in my mom's closet at home, and I realized I wouldn't miss Cassidy all that much.

But she did have one good point. Porteras wasn't just a fashion magazine, it was the fashion magazine. It was fashion, and what got printed in its revered pages dictated what was worn by the Western world. Would it still be respected and admired by the people who mattered if it shared a parent company with magazines that paid top dollar for paparazzi shots of pregnant celebrities in bikinis?

I went back to my desk and checked my itinerary for the day. A lot of stuff got crossed off by virtue of my boss not being my boss anymore. I wouldn't be driving Gabriella's dog, Empress Catherine, to her pedicure. I wouldn't be attending a luncheon meeting with the Calvin Klein advertising people either, which was a shame. I leaned my elbows on my desk and contemplated Penelope's empty one across from mine. Where the hell was she?

My iPhone alerted me to a new text. I didn't recognize the number, but I could guess who it came from when it said: May I see you in my office?

I rose and took a deep breath. I hadn't even realized Neil was behind the closed door. Probably in there with the testosterone brigade, still.

When I knocked, Neil called, "Come in."

I stepped into the office, and my mood flipped from relieved that his goon squad wasn't with him to dread that I was in his office with him, alone. As nerve-wracking as it was to speak to him in front of people, it was even worse on my own. He didn't appear to be uncomfortable at all. His jacket was off, his sleeves were unbuttoned and rolled up, and he smiled at me with genuine warmth as I stood in front of him.

Well, of course he wouldn't be uncomfortable. He didn't remember having sex with me. Or he did. I'd decided that him knowing my name was definitive proof, but it really wasn't. He could have just asked someone while I was out getting bagels.

He gestured at the sophisticated white chair in front of Gabriella's desk. "Have a seat; there are some things we need to discuss."

I held my breath. He did remember me, after all, and he was just waiting for the right time to bring it up. Now he was going to fire me.

"First of all, lunch." He leaned back in Gabriella's chair. I never realized it tilted, because she had always sat up so ramrod straight. "No red meat, no MSG."

I almost sighed in relief. Not fired yet, and as a bonus, he'd given me a somewhat specific request. I reached for the notepad beside the blotter and gestured to the pen beside it. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all." He watched me as I wrote down "No red meat. No MSG," on the top line, then continued, "I'll usually have breakfast at home, so you don't have to worry about that. I will be having lunch in today, though, and I need this - " he pushed a manila envelope across the desk, "- to the clerk's office at City Hall before closing."

I took the envelope and dutifully wrote "Clerk" in my notes, my pen hovering over the paper as I awaited his next instruction.
"That's all," he said, and I looked up to meet his amused expression. "I'm not a demanding boss. I may need you to bring me coffee or mail something occasionally, all the usual assistant's duties, but I'm not going to send you all over town caring for my dog."

"Do you..." I cleared my throat. Someone had told him about Empress Catherine's frequent trips to the holistic vet. "Do you not have a dog?"

His lips quirked. I remembered that half-smile so well. Just like six years ago, I couldn't tell if he was smiling because he thought me utterly ridiculous, or if he liked me.

He'd smiled like that when I'd finally gotten up the courage to cross the seating area by the gate. I'd felt so gross and unattractive after my first flight of the day, wearing a faded pair of comfortable jeans and a black "To Write Love On Her Arms" t-shirt. I hadn't straightened my hair, just pulled it into a sloppy ponytail. I'd wanted so badly to sound grown up and world-weary. I'd gestured to the gate and said, "First time going to Tokyo?"

And he'd smiled that mysterious half-smile and replied, "No. But I bet it's yours."

The man before me now was six years older, with a few more lines on his face and little more gray in his hair. But he still made my traitorous knees weak. I was caught between hating him, and wanting to jump into his lap. Not my finest working girl moment.

"No," he replied, the tilt to his lips never fading. "I do not have a dog. Do you have any other questions?"

Was he playing with me? I couldn't tell. But the way I saw it in that moment, I had nothing to lose. "Yes, I do." I envisioned myself saying, "Did you once pick up a girl at LAX, fuck her brains out, and take her plane ticket?" But my mouth seemed to be, wisely, in agreement with the part of my brain screaming, No! No! Instead, I asked, "Do you know when Penelope is going to be back?"

"Penelope?" He frowned a moment. "The other assistant, right. No, I believe, um, Ms. Winters has retained her services outside of the company. Or so Human Resources has informed me. One of my staff will take over for her."

"Gabriella..." My throat stuck closed. I had to stop to clear it.

Neil jumped directly in. "Took her along." He paused, understanding transforming his puzzled expression to one of concern. "She... didn't offer?"

"No." I pulled down the front of my coffee-stained jacket. "No, she did not 'offer.' Will that be all?"

He seemed momentarily perplexed at my curtness, like he'd never seen actual human emotion before. Very quickly, he said, "Yes, I believe it will, Sarah, thank you."

Sarah? That was it. The cherry on the shit sundae that was my day. My career. Hell, my entire adult life. The woman I had thought of as a mentor apparently thought of me as office furniture. The man I'd compared every potential lover to for the past six years didn't remember having sex with me. And judging by the fact that he couldn't even remember my name, my job was looking more temporary by the second.

"Are you quite well?" Neil asked, alarmed.

I wasn't well at all. I was going to do the most dreaded, horrible, career killing thing it was possible to do at Porteras. See, I have the bad luck to be one of those people who cries when they're angry. And right then, I was furious.

When I'd first started working for Gabriella, I'd been second assistant. The girl who had been first assistant got left at the altar, and returned to work the same week they started shooting for a June bridal feature. She had dabbed her eyes a little too obviously, and within a week, everyone was talking about "Miss Havisham" the jilted spinster who'd had a total mental breakdown at work. I could not cry,
especially not in front of Neil.

I got to my feet, and he rose as well. I backed away with a hand at my throat, desperately afraid he would try to touch me, comfort me. There was no way I could take that. "I'm fine. I just... choked on my own spit."

Smooth.

I turned and hurried to the door. How dare Gabriella choose Penelope over me? She could have offered me the job. Hadn't I been a good assistant? At least good enough that she could have given me a heads up before I'd been ambushed by the new regime.

"I know you must be very upset. Perhaps you'd like to take the rest of the day - "

I turned. "You're right. I am upset." I weighed the pros and cons of what I said next, and the meter landed directly on fuck it. If I ended up working at Cats Monthly, so be it. I looked him dead in the eye and said, "Crown Plaza. Los Angeles airport. That's why I'm upset."

The color drained from his face. I took a second of sadistic pleasure from his sudden and obvious discomfort. If he didn't remember me before, he sure as hell remembered me now.

And then I realized, nothing had changed. I had just blown off my job, but Gabriella wouldn't be sitting outside my apartment, begging me to come work for her. Life wouldn’t magically return to the way it had been yesterday, and I still had a latte stain down the front of my fifteen hundred dollar jacket.

I had never so badly wanted the floor to open up and swallow me as I did at that moment. Neil tried an apologetic smile, and when he couldn't keep it up, he looked away, out the huge windows I'd personally spot cleaned for smudges for the past two years. "Yes. Well. As I was saying, perhaps you should take the rest of the day. We'll talk tomorrow."

I left and closed the door behind me. I hesitated beside my desk, trying to decide if I should clear it out right then and save myself a trip. But that would require staying in the office a moment longer, and that was something I couldn't stand to do. I got my coat and purse and left without saying a word to anyone.

* * * *

In times of great crisis, I can always count on my very best friend to point out the silver lining, to talk through the problem at hand, and to bring some perspective to the chaos that is my world.

Also, to do all that while providing much appreciated weed and booze.

"Whether or not he recognized you the moment he saw you, he does at least remember you," Holli squeaked out as she exhaled a truly impressive cloud of pale blue smoke. "And you didn't recognize him from pictures in magazines. Face it, Soph, it's not like you guys had some kind of lasting commitment and he forgot you. You were a one-night stand."

"I know." I nodded miserably as I took my next hit. "But who has anal sex with someone and forgets all about it?"

Holli nodded enthusiastically as she swallowed her sip of wine. "My friend Alexis! Like two days ago she was all, 'So there I was, bent over the kitchen sink with a vibrator in my pussy and my boyfriend fucking my ass,' and today I mentioned it and she was like 'I have no idea what you're talking about.'" She gingerly took the joint from my fingers and lifted it to her lips. "But she has mad pregnancy brain right now."

I shrugged. As soon as I'd gotten home, I'd changed out of my expensive work clothes and washed off my eye makeup. I should have felt much more relaxed in my flannel turtle jammies, but I still didn't know what was going to happen at the office tomorrow. I wasn't sure there was enough cannabis in the entire universe to overcome my anxiety.

Holli leaned forward, her huge brown eyes going extra wide, like she had an amazing secret. "What if... I went out and got us Chinese food? And pizza?" She raised a triumphantly clenched fist. "And a
box of cereal."

So, here's the deal with Holli. She's super skinny, due to a metabolic disorder. Which means she has to eat like an elephant to look like a giraffe. It might sound enviable, and I did envy her, for about the first year I knew her. But then I slowly started to notice how often strangers would tell her to eat a sandwich, or assume that she was anorexic, just because she was thin and a model. I stopped saying stuff like, "That girl should eat," when I saw a skinny star in a magazine. Because I had seen Holli eat. And it was comically disturbing.

"I'm not really feeling the midnight - " I reached across the back of the couch and pushed open the blinds. "Oh god. Mid-almost-sunset pig out. I do have to go back to work tomorrow, even if it is just to get fired. I think I'm going to take a hot bath and have an early bedtime."

Holli took another deep inhale off the tiny stub of roach that was left, then carefully put it out on the edge of the ashtray on the coffee table before reaching up to boop my nose with her fingertip "You got it, kid."

I peeled myself off the couch and felt some of the depressive funk lift. It had sounded fun to wallow in my pjs all afternoon, but now I just felt tired and bored and unproductive. Maybe while Holli was eating her way through Chinatown, I could update my resume.

Or, I could take a hot bath and drink more wine.

Look, I don't want to sound like a walking cliché here, but sometimes, the bath and wine are totally necessary.

The apartment I share with Holli is amazing. A two-bedroom walk up on Canal, one of the major selling points was the big living room window and access to the building's rooftop garden. The walls in the kitchen and living room were butter yellow, the floors gleaming dark wood. The bedrooms were the size of shoeboxes, but it was still an amazing place, especially compared to our dorm room at NYU. But the bathtub is the reason I will never, ever move. In fact, when I do, I will probably try to stuff it into my suitcase and take it with me.

It's an antique, high-back, claw-foot tub with gleaming white porcelain enamel on the inside and burnished copper on the outside. There's a curtain around it and a shower hose, so you can hop in and get clean quick, but today, I was planning to spend some quality time in there.

I turned on the taps and adjusted the temperature to just above scalding. What can I say? I like to get lobsterfied. I added way too much bubble bath and a touch of skin-softening oil then headed to the freezer to get another bottle of chilled white wine.

Holli was putting on her coat. "I'll see you later!"

"Don't go to that place you got sick from last time," I advised her, and locked the door behind her. Then my wine and I headed into the steamy bathroom. To fulfill the stereotype that was my coping mechanism, I lit the sandalwood candles on the small tray table beside the tub, and pulled up some music on my phone.

While Lana Del Rey warbled a dirge-like appeal about singing the blues getting old, I sank into the blissfully hot water and leaned my head back on the cool porcelain.

As I languidly swirled my toes in the hot water, the awfulness of the office that morning melted away. So what if I lost my job? I had enough savings put aside that I could pay my half of the rent and bills for a few months. If that didn’t last, I had amassed plenty of designer handbags and clothes on the job. I could easily keep myself in consignment shop money if I needed to. Nice stuff was, well, nice, but not necessary. I'd sell it all if I had to.

Maybe Neil won't fire you, I reminded myself. Yeah, you gave him a shock, but he seems like a decent guy.

No. Decent guys did not fuck someone senseless and then steal their plane ticket.
Of course, that guilt might motivate him to keep me at the company. *Or a well-timed threat might...*

I dismissed that one almost as quickly as I’d thought of it. No way would I blackmail someone. It just wasn't in my character. Besides, I had no idea how many lives something like that would impact. He might be in a relationship. He might have a family. What he’d done to me six years ago was jerkish in the extreme, but he’d left me enough money that I could have gotten to Tokyo if I’d wanted to. And while he’d been presumptuous and rude and controlling and horrible without knowing a thing about my life or my reasons for running away, it wasn’t worth it to sacrifice my own morals and potentially destroy lives to keep a job.

It was petty of me, in light of the very serious situation I was in, but I really couldn't get over the fact that he didn't remember me. I'd spent six long, frustrating years trying to find someone who excited me half as much as he had. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't imagined him doing the same thing, never able to forget me. The worst part of it was that he still got to me. Just thinking about him brought prickles out all over my skin. It always had, and probably would even after he fired me. It was incredibly unfair.

I didn't want Neil. I wanted Leif, the charming English stranger in the airport. I still wanted him, and probably would forever.

My body throbbed, like it always did when I remembered that night. I pressed my thighs together for just a second before I slipped my hand between them.

"*What do you want?*" he asked me in my memory, his lips brushing my ear as he pressed me against the wall of that hotel room. My answer was always pathetically embarrassing in hindsight. I'd only had sex with two other people before him, and it hadn't been anything to write home about. I'd thought of the kinkiest thing I could imagine, and shyly stammered, "*Um... you could... spank me? Maybe?*"

Cringe-worthy, I know, but I couldn't change the past. My fingers rolled over my flesh beneath the steaming water, and I sighed, my eyes drifting closed.

He'd smiled, and I couldn't tell if he was making fun of me or not, I still couldn't, even in my own fantasy. "*If that's what you want.*"

I could smell his cologne, see him unbuttoning the sleeves of his gray-blue chamois shirt. He'd been wearing a faded David Bowie tour shirt beneath it. It was like he'd sprung fully-formed from my eighteen-year-old fantasies, the hot History teacher who just couldn't help himself.

That thought opened my eyes. Man, had my daddy issues been that bad?

*Does it matter now?* I asked myself, my fingers resuming their busy work beneath the bubbles. I took a shuddering, shaking breath. I could practically feel the crisp white duvet beneath my cheek as I relived lying across his lap, clad only in my cotton thong. I'd wished for black lace back then, but only because I hadn't realized the almost painful eroticism of white cotton to men.

"*Have you ever done this before?*" he'd asked softly, his palm making slow circles over my backside.

I'd shifted my legs, slipping down further in the water. Oh, we'd discussed the rules back then, but I didn't need rules in my bathtub. My blood pounded, remembering that first hard smack; the shocking sound of it echoing off the walls, the stinging pain that had taken a moment to really set in. He'd soothed it nearly away with the same hand that had delivered the blow, then another had landed, and another. Each time, I'd worried I wouldn't be able to take the next. *Would he think I was silly or stupid for calling the game off?*

His long fingers had skated beneath my thong, pulling it up tighter against my aching pussy before slipping it down to my knees. Then another hard slap to my ass, and his fingers were inside me, two of them, roughly plunging in and pulling out. I had been so ready, wetter than I'd ever been, my mind...
consumed with a steady chorus of pleas to just get on with it and fuck me, already. Maybe if I had
known how long he would make me wait, I would have given up. But I'd taken every shocking contact
between his hand and my backside, until my skin had been aflame and I was sure I wouldn't be able to
sit down on the long flight the next morning.

The tight, hot spiral I was so familiar with now gripped my pelvis, and I picked up the pace,
remembering how slow and measured his breathing had seemed in contrast to my desperate panting.
He'd spread my own juices around my folds, stroking up, circling the untried opening between my
cheeks. I'd pushed up on my elbows, about to protest out of modesty more than distaste, when another
searing blow landed. In its wake the tip of his thumb slipped into my ass, and I hadn't been of a mind to
argue with him anymore.

I remember one desperate cry, "Please!" and I echoed it to myself now, twisting closer and closer to
the edge. He'd made me come then, his thumb in my ass, two fingers in my grasping cunt, the other two
working over my hard clit until I'd exploded. Just like I exploded in the tub, my legs quivering and
jerking, bath water sloshing onto the floor.

"Fuck." My other arm was over my head, mimicking the arch of the tub, and I covered my eyes for
just a moment, to get my breath. That night had been incredible, but now I had to rescue the hardwood
floor, and I'd just jilled-off to a fantasy about my new boss. I might have felt better for a few seconds,
but now I felt considerably worse. And I still had to face him the next day.
Chapter Three

The next morning, I got up, forced myself out of bed, and promised myself that no matter what happened, I would not jump from anything taller than two feet today.

I dressed like I was going into battle, in black, high-waisted, wide-legged trousers and a sleek, structured, rust-colored jacket over a white blouse. I donned dark wood bangles like armor and did up my eyes in shades of tarnished silver. The contouring, my god, the contouring. I wore my brown hair in careless waves – the type of careless only someone who'd spent an hour and a half on her hair alone could achieve. And when I strode from the bathroom in a cloud of fragranced body lotion, Holli actually dropped the gallon of ice cream she was eating directly from for breakfast.

"Holy mother of cheekbones," she muttered as she licked her spoon clean. "Are you going to work looking like that?"

"Pff." I looped a skinny cashmere scarf around my neck. "I'm going networking like this. I figure I'll be fired by nine-thirty, I can at least go drop off some résumés."

"You're taking this really well." Holli picked up her bucket of ice cream. "Should I be prepared for the inevitable fall out?"

"There isn't going to be any inevitable fall out," I stated firmly. And I meant that. I'd done my moping around, but rather than let myself become a victim to a situation that was totally out of my hands, I would exert control over whatever aspects I could. I’d leave my current job gracefully and professionally, and try to get another as soon as possible.

"Mmm." Holli nodded as she shuffled to the couch. "Just remember, Mr. Cheeba and I will be right here waiting if you change your mind."

I made sure I was out the door before she could light up. I didn't want to smell like weed at seven in the morning.

I got my coffee and my breakfast at my usual stop. It didn't take the usual amount of time, though, which I really appreciated. The last thing I wanted was to be late to my firing. I caught an earlier train than normal, too. At least something was going to go right today.

The building’s lobby was still pretty empty when I negotiated the revolving door and flashed my badge at security. I got an elevator with no wait – epic! – and when I got to the office, I’d even beat Ivanka, the receptionist. No one ever got to work before she did. I suspected she lived under the desk.

I punched the time clock via my desktop computer and started on the totally not fun task of transferring all my personal files to an external hard drive. I’d also clear my internet history and wipe out my contacts list. I wasn’t going to leave a scrap of help for the new regime. At quarter after eight, I checked my phone. No messages from Neil.

Gosh, he really wasn't anything like Gabriella. By now, the sky would have already been falling, and crises would be raining down on us.

Whoever had covered for me had emailed me Neil's schedule for the week, and a list of things that had to be done this morning. That surprised me, considering I had planned on being fired and figured he was planning the same thing. Must have been an oversight.

One of the glass double-doors pushed open, and Neil entered, in a long, black wool coat that he shrugged off the moment he stepped inside.

I jumped up to take it from him, totally out of habit. I'd been hanging up guests' coats in the office for years; it would have felt deeply unnatural to refrain from taking his.

"Good morning, Sophie." His tone was totally fake and even, at odds with the uncomfortable way
he tried and failed to maintain eye contact as he said it.

"Good morning," I replied, and I fixed my eyes right on him, feeling a mean little thrill of satisfaction. That's right. I'm refusing to acknowledge the awkwardness of this situation. What are you gonna do about it? "Coffee, black, two sugars?"

"Yes, thank you." He recovered impressively, adopting exactly the same strategy I had chosen to use: denial. "And if you could set the thermostat to around sixty-five, if it's not too much trouble? It's a bit warm in here."

"Certainly." I smiled my easiest, closed-mouth work smile, all the while sing-singing in my head, I've seen you naked, I've seen you naked. He headed for his office, and I opened the coat closet and retrieved one of the gleaming wood hangers.

"Sophie."

I stopped and turned. He stood in front of his door, watching me. I had won our little standoff. He was going to bring up what had happened yesterday. I guess I could have gloated over my tiny victory, but instead I just felt really, really sick to my stomach.

His expression was an apology written in human facial features. Something passed between us; an energy so full of weight and promise that it made the air heavy. My body went entirely still without my willing it to, but I wasn't tense. All at once, we were the lovers in that hotel room again, and the intervening events evaporated into ether.

And in that moment of perfect trust, when we could have broached the difficult history we had made between us, Rudy Ainsworth strode through the door and confidently deposited his coat across my desk. "Morning, Neil. Ready to save this magazine?"

Before I go any further, I should really explain Rudy Ainsworth. He was the kind of person who, through nothing extraordinary about his appearance, manner, or dress, commanded all the attention in a room the moment he stepped into it. He was short, slightly round, and had beautiful dark skin, but he wasn't super good-looking, just average. He wore tweed blazers and patterned plaid shirts with bow ties without looking like a hipster or a nerd, even with the thick black-framed reading glasses he sometimes wore. He was totally plain, but he exuded something that drew everyone to him like a magnet.

This morning, that magnetic effect was somewhat diminished by the tension between Neil and me, and we both seemed to realize that Rudy had noticed it, as well. I hurried to hang up the coats while Rudy looked with interest from me to Neil and back.

"Did you enjoy your day off, Miss Sophie?" Rudy had a soft voice and a faint, generic southern accent that I was about seventy percent sure was a pretentious put-on. It was obvious that the question was an admonishment, and I was supposed to try and ferret out the right response.

"Yes, thank you for asking." I wasn't going to make an excuse for my absence. Rudy Ainsworth could think whatever he wanted about me, and it wouldn't hurt my feelings. I was getting fired today, anyway.

"I'm glad you're here," Neil told Rudy. "Can you come in and look at the budget they proposed for the handbag spread?"

I was instantly forgotten, and the moment the doors closed behind them, I dropped into my chair. I was almost dizzy from whatever had happened between Neil and me, and my relief at having been rescued from a potential labyrinth of passive-aggressive conversation with Rudy.

Rudy was the least of my worries. Now that Neil had left the room, I went off on an emotional bender, eyeing our might-have-been confrontation from every possible paranoid angle. Had he felt what I had? It had seemed so obvious in the moment. Was he still going to fire me? Had I imagined it all?

I went on autopilot for the first forty-five minutes of my day, answering the phone, falling back on the comfortable routine I'd been in just a couple days ago. I'd thought the magazine would come apart
without Gabriella, but everything seemed so shockingly normal. Maybe I could keep working here, after all. Maybe I could snag a position someone else had vacated in a huff yesterday. Life might actually improve.

For the first time in a very long twenty-four hours, I started to feel like maybe my career wasn't completely over.

At around lunchtime, Neil emerged from his office and paused beside my desk. "I think you should join me for lunch. We have some things we need to discuss. Ivanka will cover any calls."

Have lunch with Neil? I had a vision of barfing up my still-beating heart right onto my desk in front of him. I felt a bit queasy as I got to my feet, which seemed to have been encased in blocks of lead. I went to the closet and got our coats, handing him his first. To my surprise, he moved to take mine from my hands.

"I've got it," I said as pleasantly as I could as I shrugged it over my shoulders. We were still at war, even if I had come to a sort of uneasy peace about work.

I followed him through the lobby, preferring to keep a few steps behind him, like I'd done with Gabriella. He noticed before we even reached the elevators.

"Could you stop following along like Mary's little lamb? You're my assistant, not my servant." He sounded a bit irritated. At me or Gabriella? Or both of us?

Even though we only stopped twice on the way down, I thought it must have been the longest elevator ride of my entire life. I stood beside him, not saying anything, my gaze fixed firmly on the numbers lighting up over the doors. I didn't want my eyes to stray to my right for even a nanosecond, because I was certain he would notice me looking at him.

Suddenly, I realized how men must feel when standing at a urinal in a public bathroom.

We crossed the lobby, and I noticed people stopping to stare. Not at me, but at Neil, and why shouldn't they? The entire building was abuzz with the takeover of Porteras, and people were eager to get a glimpse of the man who'd breezed in and ousted the feared, fire-breathing Gabriella Winters.

From the hard set of his jaw, I guessed he noticed the attention, too.

A car waited at the curb, a black and gray Maybach 62, and Neil opened my door for me. I gritted my teeth. When I reached for the handle to close it myself, Neil stepped back hastily to go round the other side of the car.

A partition between the front and back seats separated the car in two. Neil got in and used the intercom system to speak with the driver about our destination. I was just grateful for the center console between the two of us. It was nice to have a physical barrier there; comforting like a podium at a public speaking gig.

As we pulled away, I took a mental inventory of the car. It definitely had a better TV than I had in my apartment, and more real wood than all of my flat-pack furniture combined. It was also an abnormally quiet ride, free from outside noise, so the awkward silence between Neil and myself had been sharpened to a fine point.

He seemed about as thrilled to be in the car with me as I was to be with him. He leaned against the door and looked out at the traffic, his mouth a grim line. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft and pained. "I do remember you, Sophie."

The words took the breath from my lungs. My first instinct was to make some kind of quip to deflect him, but it was finally in the open between us, and there was no sense in running from it now. "You didn't yesterday."

"I've never forgotten you." There was a bewildered quality to his words, as though he couldn't believe I would think he'd let me pass from his memory for an instant. "I just didn't realize it was you, until you said... For God's sake, the Sophie I knew was going to go to Japan to teach English and find
herself. I never thought I'd see you again."

"Never thought, or hoped never to?" I tried at a smile, to pass it off as a joke, and it all sort of fell apart, so I looked away, out the window. There were millions of people in the city I would trade places with in a heartbeat to escape this moment, and yet...

I'd wanted this for six years. Even when I'd been fuming mad and trying to use his money to buy a last-minute seat on a flight to New York, I'd been more hurt and angry by the fact that I would never see him again than I had been at the way he'd left me.

"I shouldn't have taken your ticket," he admitted. "I did it because you were so bright and being so stupid... but it wasn't my place to prevent you from making a mistake. I didn't even know you."

I sat back against the very comfy leather seat. He was apologizing. I'd always imagined him apologizing; I'd just never anticipated he would call me stupid while doing it.

"I'm glad you went to NYU."

When I looked at him again, the weighty feeling between us was back. There was no mistaking that he felt it, too. I took a shaky breath. "So am I. It got me a good job. Am I going to keep it?"

He looked as though he would answer me, but the car stopped and the driver spoke over the intercom. "We've arrived, Mr. Elwood."

Neil exited the car, and this time he let me get my own door. I had to admit, I was impressed by that, but it was difficult to maintain any level of excitement when my job had been left a cliffhanger.

The restaurant Neil had chosen for us was a small brasserie with a sidewalk cafe still serving lunch outside, despite the brisk fall weather. The hostess smiled as we approached, and Neil mentioned a reservation.

"Not under an assumed name this time?" I asked under my breath as we followed the woman through the mostly empty restaurant. No wonder he needed a reservation, this place is hopping, I thought snidely, and then I was somewhat bolstered by the fact he hadn't taken me someplace super popular and crowded. That would have been a flashing neon sign that I was about to be fired. The hostess led us all the way to the back of the building, past the restrooms and the kitchen, to a small private dining room.

"This used to be a mob hideout," Neil said cheerfully as he gave his coat to the hostess.

I unbelted my coat and worked on the buttons, giving the waitress a skeptical look. "That's not true, is it?"

She shrugged with a friendly smile. "That's what we tell people."

Neil moved to pull my chair out. I arched a brow at him, and he held up his hands apologetically and took his own chair.

"Mandy will be right with you," the hostess said as she handed us our menus, one page of crisp tan paper tied into a leather cover with neat black ribbon. Whenever I ate in a New York restaurant, I guiltily remembered the laminated card stock at all the restaurants in my hometown, and I could almost hear my relatives telling me I was getting too big for my britches.

"Do you care for duck?" Neil asked, glancing up from his menu. "They have a very good cold duck confit salad."

I could have told him exactly what to do with his duck. "Are we here because you're firing me?"

He didn't look up this time. "No. I wouldn't fire you just because we slept together in the past. I'm the interloper here, you've been with Porteras much longer."

The tension in my work brain eased, and I looked down at the prix fixe menu and weighed my options in silence.

"Do you think you'd stay on?" he asked casually as the waitress returned for our drink orders. I'm never sure what I'm supposed to order for a business lunch, so I stuck to coffee and water. To my
surprise, he followed my lead. I'd thought he would order some fancy expensive wine or something.

I considered his question. It would be insane for anyone to want to work for someone they had a hot one-night stand with. "As your assistant? I don't think that's something I can manage."

"I completely understand." He set his menu aside and sat back in his chair, one hand toying with the stem of his water glass. "To be quite honest, I don't think I would feel comfortable ordering around someone with whom I had a sexual relationship. Had a past sexual relationship, that is." His quick amendment brought a hot flush to my cheeks, and he cleared his throat while we looked firmly away from each other. The waitress came to our rescue, taking my order for a grilled calamari salad, and his for moules marinières, which he pronounced perfectly.

_He could have just said 'I'll have the mussels,' _I sniped silently. What was the point of sitting here, having lunch with him, if it wasn't going to save my job?

I realize I wasn't being entirely fair to him. He'd apologized for stealing my plane tickets. He seemed genuinely sorry that he hadn't remembered me. And it wasn't like he could control the fact that our work paths had crossed. We were both in a weird situation, here.

After the waitress left us, Neil began again. "As I was saying, I wouldn't be comfortable keeping you on as my assistant, but I see no reason for you to leave the magazine completely. Your coworkers speak very highly of you and your experience in the company. Would you consider accepting an assistant beauty editor position?"

I was glad he asked me now, because if we'd been eating, I would have been choking on squid for sure. "Excuse me?"

"It's a bit of a leap, but Gabriella did put your name down on the list of suggestions." He took a sip of his coffee. "I won't pressure you into making a decision right away. That's not what this lunch is for."

Gabriella put my name on a list? With other candidates? Meaning, she didn't even see to my job security before she left? I tried hard to disguise my annoyance. After all, she had put me down as a candidate for assistant beauty editor. That was a huge promotion for me, and a chance to actually use my degree. "Well, I appreciate the time to think... but what is this lunch for, if not to discuss work?"

There was that half-smile again, like a ghost of my most private fantasies passing silently between us. "To catch up. It's been six years, after all."

"Ah." _Well, after I couldn't get on my plane to Tokyo because you stole my plane tickets..._

I would have to let that go, or make my life really difficult. Six years ago, I'd done lots of stupid things I'd had no business doing. Six years from now, I'd probably be saying the exact same thing. Clearly, Neil thought of taking my plane ticket as one of those stupid things he'd had no business doing. I could afford to be a little more forgiving.

"You know, we didn't really know each other before," I began, not unkindly. It was just a fact we couldn't ignore and still work together. "There's no reason we should feel weird about this."

"I believe that's unavoidable." He laughed, and the bubble of tension between us burst. I'd forgotten that; he spoke so carefully and always seemed to know exactly what to say, but laughed without a hint of reservation. The creases at the corners of his eyes deepened, and his wide smile showed his straight, white teeth.

The relief of the moment overwhelmed me, and I laughed, too. And once I started, I couldn't stop. It felt good to let down the walls I'd built up in the face of all my fears. I had anticipated getting fired, and that wasn't going to happen, at least not today. I'd thought that things between Neil and I would be weird, and they were. But it wasn't the end of the world, and I wasn't the only one suffering. That did a lot to ease my mind.

"Oh, Sophie." He shook his head, his smile dimming just a little. "I've thought about you so much. I was such a deplorable ass."
"Or Leif was a deplorable ass," I scolded, and found myself somewhat shocked to be playfully teasing, rather than truly angry.

"In my defense, Leif is my middle name. I didn't pull it out of the air." His green eyes met mine, and I didn't feel the uncomfortable urge to look away this time. He lowered his voice. "Did I ruin your life? Taking those tickets?"

No, he hadn't. He'd saved it, but I couldn't tell him that. It would be too much like excusing him. "I had a choice. You left me plenty of money. I could have waited for another flight, and I didn't. I bought the ticket to New York. I made my choice."

"And you don't regret it?" he asked cautiously.

I shrugged. "I do wonder what might have happened differently in my life, but I'm happy where I am."

"Good." He paused. "I've thought about how things could have been different, as well."

My throat almost closed off with the anxiety those words inspired in me. Did he mean between us? Or the way we parted? Or just that yesterday would have been so much easier for him if I'd spent it in Japan?

"I have to be honest."

I absolutely hated when other people used that phrase, and Neil was no exception. Those words made me simultaneously denounce everything a person said so far as a lie, and suspect everything that came after. And that was a shame, because I really, really wanted to believe what he said next.

"I've often regretted the way we left things. And I've wondered how it might have been different, if we'd stayed in contact." His mouth quirked, and melancholy lines deepened on his forehead. "I almost had the driver turn around and come back for you on my way to the airport. And then at the gate, I kept hoping that you'd... I don't know, somehow show up. Or the flight would be delayed again. I almost didn't get on the plane. But at that point I knew it was too late. I'd fucked it all up the moment I'd left that hotel room. If I could do things over, I promise, I would do them differently."

It's utterly bizarre how a kind sentiment can hurt you as much as a cruel one. My heart shattered in my chest. Yeah, I'd thought of what my life would have been like if we'd gotten on that plane together. Maybe we would have met up again in Tokyo. It could have been a Lost in Translation kind of thing, and we could have lived happily ever after. The fact that he'd been considering such an outcome as well wounded me deeply.

Which was absurd, I reminded myself. You knew him for less than twenty-four hours. Love at first sight doesn't exist. Though I knew deep down that I was mourning the idea of him and not any great love, it still hurt.

"Are you all right?" he asked, concern darkening his gaze.

I nodded, and took a sip of my water to swallow down the lump in my throat. Setting the glass back on the table, I said with forced cheerfulness, "Isn't it strange that we're meeting up again now?"

I realized the moment I said it that he would take it for more than it was, as though I were professing some kind of fate or destiny situation. His eyebrows rose, and he glanced nervously away, as if he were looking for a net to suddenly surround him. "Yes, well, I couldn't... get involved with you. Or with anyone, right now. I'm going through a bit of a nasty divorce."

"I wasn't - " I stopped myself. Better to forge ahead than try to explain away the past in these types of conversations. "I wouldn't be interested in anything, either."

"Oh?" Was that disappointment I heard in his voice? "You're seeing someone, then?"

"I'm not seeing anyone." I liked the thought of letting him stew with that, but it seemed too dishonest, and dishonesty hadn't done us any great favors so far. "The truth is, I've never found anyone who... measures up."
And then, hand to God, Neil Elwood, billionaire publisher and entrepreneur, giggled. It was the most charming, teenage-boyish sound I'd ever heard from anyone over the age of twenty. Just like that, I was utterly smitten with him again.

I could either work around him every day and drive myself crazy, or I could continue on this honesty trend. I took a deep breath and stepped off the most insane cliff I'd ever stood on. "Look, this is going to sound... I don't want anything serious. You don't, either. But we're obviously attracted to each other, and now we're in this situation. If we wanted to see each other casually, what would that hurt?"

I swear I left my body for a second. I looked down on the scene with the most crushing sense of self-awareness I hope never to experience again. *What was I doing?*

I had just propositioned my boss.

I remember sitting in the back of the taxi that day six years ago, his hand on my thigh over my jeans, his low voice telling me, "Anything you want."

And like that, I came back to myself, and I was staring into Neil's gorgeous green eyes, trying to guess what he was thinking.

"Sophie, I'm your boss." My heart sank, but then he continued, "We would have to be... reasonably discreet around the office."

"Absolutely. I worked too hard to get where I am." I frowned. "You don't think I would do anything to get us noticed? I'm not stupid."

He looked briefly puzzled at that then said, "You're right, I'm not giving you enough credit. I suppose I'm remembering you as that impulsive young woman in the airport. You were what, all of twenty-five back then?"

*Oh. Yeah.*

I cleared my throat. "About that. I maybe fudged a little on my age."

His eyes narrowed. "You fudged?"

"Yeah, I wasn't heading to NYU for a graduate program." He was going to be mad. Really mad. "I wasn't twenty-five. I was eighteen."

"Eighteen. Really?" His normally easy speech was stilted and nervous, pitched higher than before.

"So that would make you twenty-four - "

"Twenty-four," I said at the same time he did. "That's not a problem, is it?"

Neil had been forty-two when we'd hooked up. He'd expressed some discomfort at our age difference back then, and that was when it had been less than twenty years.

He made a few inarticulate sounds, like he couldn't get his sentence started, then paused and collected himself. "It is a bit of a problem."

"Ah." When was our food coming? How fast could I scarf it down and get out of here?

"You see..." He issued a short, disbelieving laugh. "You're the same age as my daughter."
"Your daughter?" I must have misheard him. I was sure I had. Because if his daughter was my age, that meant... "You were married? When you were with me?"

"No, no, I wasn't cheating on my wife or anything like that," he said quickly. "I wasn't married at the time. Emma is my child from a previous relationship. My wife and I have only been married for two years."

I let out a relieved breath. I would never want to help someone hurt another person that way. Even though it would have been far shittier on his part to have committed the adultery, I would have felt illogically culpable for unwittingly helping him. I was relieved to know he'd been a free agent at the time of our tryst.

Now there was just the problem of the bombshell that had exploded between us. We sat in silence for a bit, thinking our private, horrified thoughts. So, Neil was a father. Of a woman my age. Oh no. He'd spanked me. That suddenly seemed more creepy than hot. I downed the rest of my water, and eyed my coffee resentfully. I should have ordered wine. Or hard liquor.

It was clear that neither of us were comfortable with this new development. I didn't bother to retract my suggestion of a casual fling. It seemed to be a given that it would just not work out.

At least I was getting a promotion. And I bet, after today, Neil would avoid me like the plague, so there wouldn't be any future awkwardness between us.

I tried to find a natural path out of the conversation, and settled on, "So, do you have any other... kids?"

"No. I'd always planned to, but the timing was never right. And now, with one child who is an adult, I feel as though those days are behind me." He leaned back in his chair. "This is quite a mess we've found ourselves in, isn't it?"

I shrugged.

"I do hope you'll consider the position with the beauty department, in spite of all this," he added. I had no reason to doubt his sincerity. I couldn't imagine what he would possibly gain from keeping me at the magazine if he didn't want me there.

"I will." It was a great opportunity, though I had never really imagined I would end up working in the beauty department. I'd been strictly focused on clothing. Still, it was better than job hunting, and he was right, it would be too weird to stay on as his assistant.

Neil and I made small talk as we waited for our food. With our past out in the open between us, I had expected lunch to be interminable. After all, I couldn't run out screaming if I wanted that job, but with our one-night-only affair rekindled for five minutes to die a painfully embarrassing death, it was almost asking too much of myself to sit there and eat with him.

To my surprise, I found myself relaxing, enjoying myself even, as he told me about his interest in the magazine and some small changes he expected in the future. He asked me about NYU, and why I had focused on fashion, and it seemed like the hour we spent eating and chatting passed slightly too fast.

Neil picked up the check, "As your boss," he clarified after handing his black credit card over to the waitress. "Not as a former lover."

I laughed. "You know, if you're going to be my boss, you're going to have to stop bringing that up."

"I've thought of that, believe me." He smiled, and took a last sip of coffee. "Henceforth, we won't mention it again."

The car was waiting for us when we left the restaurant. As we pulled away, I asked, "So, this beauty
editor job. If I did decide to take it, when would it start?"

He considered a moment. "I might need you to train your replacement, but I don't see why you
couldn't start on the February issue."

I mulled that over. Porteras worked on a ten week schedule. The February issue would hit the
stands the first Monday in January, which meant the content collection process would begin in a week.
"Take as much time as you need to decide," he said, as if he'd read my thoughts. "That's only an
estimate."

We rode in silence for a few blocks. Then, apologetically, he said, "I'm sorry; I promise this is the
last time I'll bring it up. But I have to know... did you ever try to contact me during those six years? I'll
admit; I didn't try to find you. I didn't know how you would react. Every time I thought I might look you
up, I realized I didn't have anywhere to start. I'm not flattering myself by saying it, but I'm an easy man
to find. Especially in your business, you're bound to have known of me."

This was one of the bits I still couldn't get my head around. As confusing as the rest of the entire
situation was, I couldn't come up with a single reason that I had never made the connection between Leif
at the airport and Neil Elwood, publishing magnate.

Cautiously, I thought out loud, "I suppose when you were fresh in my memory, I wasn't paying
attention to who was who in the industry. I was just trying to get through college alive. And then when I
was actually working..."

I had seen his picture countless times, and clips of interviews. But I hadn't worked for an Elwood &
Stern company, so I hadn't troubled myself too much with what they'd been up to. I'd been so focused
on learning how Porteras worked and trying to carve out a place for myself there that I hadn't had the
time or inclination to look past our walls.

"I noticed that you looked remarkably like Leif, but there's something different about you in person
than from pictures." Without thinking, I mused, "Maybe you just look different when you're looking at
me."

Do you know what Maybachs really need? Ejector seats. Even if the only option for escape is to be
flung into traffic.

We pulled up beside the building, and my hand immediately went to the door handle. Neil waved
me ahead. "I have another stop I need to make, I won't be coming up."

I can't say I wasn't grateful when I shut the door and went on without him. The thought that he
might be watching me slowed my steps, and I forced myself not to look back, even when I’d entered the
lobby. I rode the elevator in a daze. So, one of the big mysteries of my life had been more or less
wrapped up. I’d found my sexy stranger again, and things weren’t going to work out the way I’d
sometimes fantasized they might. I was disappointed, but in a detached sort of way, like when a favorite
television show’s plot takes a turn I don’t like. The world wasn’t going to crumble over this incident. It
didn’t even feel particularly cry-worthy.

I was back at my desk for about two minutes when Rudy came through the door, frowning.
"Where's Neil?" he asked, peering past me at the open door to Neil's office.

"He said he had to make another stop on the way back from lunch." I pulled up his schedule and
checked the time. It was two-thirty-five. A meeting on cover design had been planned for two-twenty.

Rudy stood beside me and leaned over my shoulder. "What is going on with him?" he muttered to
himself. To me, he said, "If he were Gabriella, what would happen?"

"It would end with someone jumping out a window on fire," I snarked before I could stop myself.
Rudy straightened. "Well, that person is not going to be me. Could you let Neil know that I handled
the meeting, and I'll fill him in when I get back from Betsy Johnson?"

"Sure." I pulled up my company email and typed the message.
Rudy was almost to the door when he stopped and turned. "I like the way you did your eyes today."
I didn't get a chance to say thank you before he was gone. I chuckled to myself. I actually liked
people like Rudy. I view the whole "not knowing where you stand with them," thing as a challenge.
Neil and I crossed paths only briefly during the rest of the day, and I was thankful for that. The
shock from my borderline poetic car confession hadn't worn off yet. Since he'd never mentioned his
unscheduled stop, I assumed Neil had just blown off his after-lunch meeting to be driven around the
block a few times so he could avoid riding in the elevator with me. Unfortunately, that messed up his
entire afternoon, and he mentioned sheepishly that we might be working later than my usual six o'clock.
As the day ticked on into the evening, I kept myself calm and on track with the promise of another hot
bath – sans sexual fantasies about my boss – and waited patiently for him to tell me I could go home.
At around seven, he emerged from his office with Rudy and Hope Foley, Porteras's senior stylist.
"Sorry to have kept you so late, Sophie," Neil apologized. "We're going to dinner; will you be
available should we need you?"
"Of course." I was dying to get home to tell Holli what had happened at lunch, but it looked like it
was going to be a long night playing Bubble Spinner and waiting for my boss to get back to the office
from a dinner meeting. Maybe Neil wasn't so different from Gabriella, after all, from a work perspective.
"You don't have to stay here," he added quickly. "I hope you didn't think I meant for you to - "
"Gabriella would have chained her to the desk," Hope laughed. She had always clashed with
Gabriella, and was often the only person at the magazine who dared to push her contrary opinions. I'd
often found Gabriella's calm reactions to Hope's impassioned arguments wildly entertaining.
Rudy laughed with her, and Neil did, as well, but I noted a distinct flush creeping up his neck.
"Yes, well, I'm hardly going to expect that of you," he mumbled.
Hope and Rudy didn't seem to notice his discomfort, but did I ever. I wondered if he had the same
mental image I was having re: chains and desks.
I forced myself to maintain eye contact and said evenly, "Well, have a good night!" Then they were
– thankfully - out the door. I waited for them to enter the elevator, then jumped up and grabbed my coat.
* * * *
When I got home, I wanted to launch directly into my bizarre day, but Holli was in a state. A
totally understandable, enraged state.
"Look at this!" she fumed, thrusting her iPad into my face. "Can you fucking believe this?"
"Ohhhh no." I dropped my bag and shrugged out of my coat as my eyes scanned the magazine page
on the screen. A beautiful photo of Holli - her long legs rising like Grecian columns from a pair of Yves
St. Laurent boots, her hipbones jutting from a simple pair of black lace panties, skinny arms covering
her non-existent bust - was superimposed with the words, "How Thin Is Too Thin?"
"I did that shoot last year. I'd just had that gastrointestinal thing! Of course I looked emaciated. This
is totally unfair criticism!" She handed the iPad to me when my hands were free, and stalked to the
kitchen.
I scanned the article, but it was the same ignorance as usual. Models were too skinny. All of them
were on the verge of dying from eating disorders. What kind of example were they setting, blah blah
blah. Holli wasn't so famous that she'd become the target of stand-up comics' jokes yet, but I feared that
time wasn't too far off.
Since Holli and I have been friends for so long, I've learned, through trial and error, exactly what
one should not say in this situation. Trying to see the bright side in the career benefits and the envy of
other women was absolutely unwelcome. Suggesting she might be ignoring some deeply rooted eating
disorder she didn't even know she had? Even worse. Expressing my jealousy of her ability to eat a
cheeseburger the size of her head and actually lose weight while doing it? That was the worst.
The best thing to say, really the only appropriate thing for the situation, was what I said next: "This is totally shitty."

And it was, totally and completely shitty. There was no reason for anyone to be judging Holli’s health based on her physical appearance alone. They had no idea if she was anorexic or not. They weren’t her freaking doctors.

"Look at the industry as a whole, that's fine." Holli had to raise her voice to be heard over the sound of the water running into the empty metal tea kettle. "But don't single me out. Because you know what that says to my future employers? 'Don't hire this model, or everyone will have a shit fit.' If they think I'm too skinny now, wait until I have to choose between food and rent."

I scanned the article. "At least they don't mention you by name."

"Which would be a relief if my face wasn't on the title page." She rolled her eyes. "Sorry. I'm just frustrated."

I dropped the iPad on the sofa and went to stand beside her. I put an arm around her shoulder and squeezed. "Do you feel bad?"

"Yes, I do," Holli sniffed in pitiable exaggeration.

"Do you wanna get high and watch Norbit?" I asked, pulling her into a hug and patting her back like I was burping a baby.

"Yes, I do," she mock-sobbed into my shoulder.

The ability to make light of our problems while simultaneously soothing our hurt feelings was one of the aspects of our friendship I treasured most.

We settled on the couch with tea and popcorn - you'd be surprised how well those two go together - and I put in the DVD. My news about Neil could wait.

We made it almost twenty minutes into the movie before Holli's eyes grew wide and she exclaimed, "Oh my god! I never asked how it went with the guy!"

I shrugged. "Nothing to tell. That's why I didn't bring it up."

"Soph. Do you really think you're doing me a service by not telling me all the details? I'm in pain here; it's your duty as my friend to cheer me up through Schadenfreude."

"It wasn't that bad." I couldn't believe how easy it was to admit it, but it was true. "I thought we might... I don't know. 'Get back together' isn't right, because we were never together. But we did talk about possibly hooking up casually."

"Go you!" Holli lightly slapped my shoulder.

"I think we decided not to." I tried to break the news gently, but I could tell she was disappointed. "Turns out, he has a daughter my age."

"So he was married?" Her face scrunched up in disgust.

I shook my head. "No, he said she was his daughter from a previous relationship. He's only been married for two years, and get this, they're getting a divorce."

"Then you should have been in there!" She sighed. "Is that the reason you're not going to..." Holli slid her index finger through a circle formed by the fingers of her opposite hand.

I pulled a throw pillow from behind my back and walloped her.

"Do you think you would be comfortable with that? Having sex with someone literally young enough to be your kid?" I scolded.

Holli laughed and intercepted the pillow, fluffing it and tucking it behind her. "Younger. Once I'm north of fifty, I'm never dating anyone over twenty-one. And everything will be coming up Holli."

After our movie was finished, and I had gone to my room to turn in, Holli's response started getting to me. Maybe she was right. What was so wrong about dating someone younger than you? My dad had been younger than my mom. Well, by like two years. And I was looking for positive examples, not
couples who had gone down in spectacular flames. Still, I couldn't see any reason why I should be
grossed out by the age difference between Neil and myself.

None of that really mattered, though. Neil wasn't looking for anything serious, and neither was I. In
fact, I'd actively avoided romantic entanglements since my last year of college. There was no orgasm so
amazing, no surprise bouquet so sweet that it was worth risking my own dreams and identity. Besides, I
hardly had time for Holli anymore, how would I work a boyfriend into that schedule?

I hadn't even been home to visit my mom in a year. My heart absolutely dropped at the thought of
what she would think about all this. She had once told me she would prefer to think of me as a virgin,
even if I ended up with three husbands and fourteen kids. Of all the people that could have helped me
navigate this situation with grace and common sense, it would have been her. But there was no way she
would want to hear about the time I flew across the country, planned to fly around the world, without
her knowing about it. And oh, by the way, I had sex with a stranger. In her mind, I had gone straight to
NYU, after some minor trouble with a missed connection.

Boy, what a missed connection. I flopped over in bed, and turned my pillow to the cool side. Would
sleeping even be an option tonight?

Out of habit, my iPhone lay on my bedside table, within arm's reach. As Gabriella's assistant, it
hadn't been out of the realm of possibility to be woken in the middle of the night for a crisis with a flight
or a sudden realization that we were about to run the same pair of shoes a second time. From what I'd
already gathered, Neil was going to be a different type of boss.

Or at least, that's what I was thinking right before my eyes slid closed, about two seconds before my
phone vibrated. My bedside table resonated the buzz like a snare drum, and I sat up automatically,
trained well by two years in servitude.

It was Neil's work number. I glanced at the time. Ten forty-five? Why was he still at work at ten
forty-five, when no one else was?

"Hello?" I stifled a yawn as I answered.

"Hello, Sophie. I hope I didn't wake you." It disturbed me just how much of an effect his voice had
on me. It was like whiskey, deep and comforting, warming my limbs and dizzying my head.

I was so intoxicated by him, it took me a second to stammer out, "N-no. I, uh. I was up."

"Good." I heard a noise over the line, an inhale interrupted by a catch, as though he'd stopped
breathing mid-thought. Then he said, softly, "This would be much simpler if we could meet in person."

"Oh." I looked down at my lap. My face was scrubbed free of makeup. My hair was in a messy
topknot, and I was wearing my flannel pajamas with the cartoon coffee cups all over them.

If Gabriella had summoned me, she wouldn't have given me more than, "Come, I need you." I
would be lucky to get a location out of her, because she expected me to keep track of her schedule both
in and out of the office. At least I knew where Neil was calling from.

"Look, it's going to take me a minute to get down there -"

"No, no, this isn't work related." He was quick to say it, and then a silence followed in which I
swore I could hear both of our hearts beating like big, nervous butterfly wings. He cleared his throat.
"Would you be terribly put out if I... stopped by your place?"

If anyone had ever needed a movie montage, it was me, at that moment. I could leap out of bed,
dress myself with comical franticness, and when I answered the door I would look like Barbie. "Oh, this
old thing?" I would say, spinning in my 1960's Givenchy inspired dress. "I just threw it on."

He could probably make it to my apartment in twenty minutes. I would barely have time to brush
my teeth and clear up the dirty dishes and empty Diet Coke cans from the coffee table.

"That would be fine," I said, weirdly chipper. I was sure he could hear my fake smile through the
phone.
"I'll need your address, for the driver," he said apologetically.
"You can't stalk me off the company database?" I teased.
It fell flat when he turned suddenly serious. "I would really rather not. That isn't how I conduct my business or personal life."
I blurted out our address, already on my feet and headed to the closet. "Just don't drive too fast. I need to tidy up."
"This isn't a state visit," he assured me. "I'll see you soon."
I ended the call and held my phone to my chest for a fraction of a second before tossing it on my bed and rifling through my clothes. Nothing fancy, just a black cashmere v-neck sweater and a pair of comfy jeans. Then I ran to the bathroom and set a land speed record for teeth brushing. I was just clearing the living room of some of Holli's recreational paraphernalia - he was my employer, after all - when the door buzzed.
"Yes?" I asked over the intercom.
"It's Neil." I buzzed him up then cracked the door. We're a fourth floor walkup, and the stairs wound down a long central shaft to the small lobby. The click of the outside latch echoed up the stairs, and my mouth went dry.
I heard footsteps. I heard his footsteps, headed to my apartment. Why was I so keyed up by that? I pressed a hand to the bare expanse of skin above the neckline of my sweater, and felt the flutter of my pulse there. I pressed my thighs together, then stopped the instant I realized what I was doing.
What the hell was wrong with me? I had no idea why he was coming over. For all I knew, he was coming to tell me he felt really bad about firing me, but he had to because he was so creeped out to be around me.
Then I opened the door, and he was standing there, and I had no further doubts. He had come because he wanted me, like I wanted him. I could see it in his eyes the moment our gazes met.
He was slightly out of breath, and cracked some joke about a higher floor being unavailable when we moved in, but I couldn't process any of it over the sound of the blood rushing to my brain.
Neil was here, on the threshold of my apartment, looking apologetic and waiting for me to say something. All my words completely deserted me.
"Um... come in." I stepped back, and closed the door behind him.
"I'm sorry to come by so late, but I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep without speaking to you."
So, we were getting straight to the heart of the matter, then. I had anticipated some uncomfortable small talk, during which I could try to feel out what he'd come to say. Now I didn't know what to do, or where to put my hands. I curled my fingers into the sleeves of my sweater.
"At lunch today, I may have given you the impression - "
"That we didn't have a chance in hell of anything happening between us?" I supplied for him. I thought it might make him laugh. It didn't.
"I must admit, the age difference between us does make me uncomfortable. It made me uncomfortable back then, as well. I'm not the kind of man who needs to date younger women to be happy. It's not a status symbol for me. And I'm not the kind of person who picks up strangers in airports, either."
"Neither am I," I said, maybe a little defensively.
His face fell, and he took a slow step toward me. "I wouldn't care if you were. What I'm trying to say is, this is completely new to me. I spent that night with you six years ago because I genuinely liked you, Sophie. You were so cute and direct and a bit odd. And we did have an awfully good time together." He smiled tentatively. "It does trouble me that you're the same age as my daughter. But you're not my daughter. And that night was... it was one of the best nights of my life."
I was about to respond with something pithy, but he closed the small gap between us and pulled me into his arms. My feet tangled with his, but he somehow kept us upright. Our gazes locked for a fraction of a second, and my mouth opened with a surprised gasp just as his lips met mine.
Neil Elwood was kissing me, and it was every bit as good as my highly detailed memories. His soft lips coaxed mine apart. His tongue swept in and darted along the edges of my teeth. He held me with a splayed hand at my lower back, an arm around my shoulders. Pulled up tight to his chest, I gripped the lapels of his black wool coat and held on. There was little else I could do. It was like the man exuded some kind of pheromone that made my central nervous system go offline. Standing without wobbling was not an option. It didn't help that it had been so long since the last time I'd been kissed, I'd almost forgotten how to do it properly. I tore our mouths apart and, with a noisy gulp of air, inhaled the scent of him, the faint trace of his cologne and the wooden cask ghost of whiskey.

And that was my clue. "Have you been drinking?"

"Quite a lot," he admitted sheepishly. "Otherwise I wouldn't have had the courage to come over here."

"And when the hangover hits you, you'll probably regret that you had the courage." I pressed my palms to his chest and pushed back a step. "As romantic and like-the-movies as you may have imagined this whole scenario, you've jerked me around so much in the last twenty-four hours that I don't even know how to respond."

Apparently, drunken honesty was contagious. And thank god for that, because I could have easily been swept along in what he wanted, without a single thought to the consequences. That made Neil a very dangerous man for me to be around.

He looked crestfallen. "You're right. I shouldn't have... I just wasn't sure how we'd left it. And I would like, very much, to see if there's anything between us."

"I think it's pretty obvious that there is." There was no point in denying that anymore. "But I'm not sure it's going to work."

"It isn't that I'm looking for a serious relationship," he continued, watching me warily. I wondered if he thought I'd said anything all that admirable, just honest.

I had to put that notion to bed, right away. Christ, had I just thought about bed? No, serious relationships, that's what we were discussing. Keep it together, Scaife. You can't be stupid about this.

"I'm not in the market for anything serious, either. At least not right now. Not for a while." It wasn't a ploy; having a boyfriend was fairly low on my list of priorities. "I just got a life of my own two years ago, when I graduated college. I'm not ready to share it with anyone else."

He smiled with... was that admiration? I didn't think I'd said anything all that admirable, just honest.

"That sounds fair. But earlier today you suggested we might see each other casually." How did he manage to sound so reasonable and smart while being stinking drunk? It probably had a lot to do with the accent. He could have come in here and said he was turning Porteras into a car magazine, and I would have praised his vision, because he sounded so cultured and posh.

God, I could be so stereotypically American sometimes.

I shrugged. "That was before I really thought about the job you offered me. I would love to take the position, but the last thing I need is to have people saying I got a promotion because I slept with the boss."

"That would be a problem, if we were indiscreet. Do you plan on broadcasting all of our sexual activities to the entire office?" He raised an eyebrow.

"No, of course not." I tried to think of a time I'd ever... Oh, fine. I'm caught. "I do occasionally discuss private matters with one of my work friends."
"So do I, which is exactly why I'm here." He motioned to the couch. "Do you mind if we -"
"Oh, yeah, sorry." I covered my eyes with one hand, but it didn't do much to hide my embarrassment. "I'm sorry, I don't entertain much."

On the contrary, you entertain me immensely." He sat on the couch and frowned as he picked up the hemostat Holli used as a roach clip. The burned down end of a healthy sized joint was still clamped tightly in the pinchers. I grabbed it from his hand and in my panic, tossed it over my shoulder to clatter on the kitchenette floor.

"It's my roommate's," I explained quickly. "I would never -"
"Don't be so jumpy, I'm not here to inform on you." He patted the sofa beside him, but I didn't sit there. I sat on the arm of the easy chair, well out of the field of his sexual magnetism.

Who was I kidding? He could be in Finland right now, and my girl parts would still be all achey at the thought of him. Just the fact that he'd said “our sexual activities” had sent my pulse due south.

"Sorry, I thought I might have shocked you." Why had I said that? Maybe explaining further would make things better. "You know, different generation and all."

Explaining further never made awkwardness better. I should have known that by now.

"Yes, terribly shocking," he mockingly agreed. "Since youth and recreational drug use were invented only five years ago, I've obviously never been exposed to either."

My face flamed with embarrassment. "Did you come over here just to tease me?"

His expression softened into one of remorse at hurting my feelings. "I think it's quite obvious that I came over here because I'm still attracted to you. I've thought of you every day. I may have said that before, but it bears repeating. If I hadn't stolen your plane ticket - and let me express again how very sorry I am about that, in hindsight -"

"Forgiven," I interrupted him. The sudden shift in his mood seemed to have less to do with alcohol than with me, and I was flattered and slightly overwhelmed. But something he'd said before wriggled in my brain. "You said you talked to a work colleague, and that's why you're here?"

"Rudy," he admitted. "I'm sorry, I know he works with you, but he's been my best friend for years. I suppose it does change the dynamic, now that he's working for my company... but I needed to speak to someone. He's the only person in my life who knows about you, how we met. And he's the only person in New York I trust in personal matters. There was a bit of a custody battle, and I lost most of my friends here."

I frowned. "I thought your daughter was twenty-four."

"Custody of the friends." He smiled sadly. "Acquaintances, really. I spend a lot of my time working. Elizabeth made most of our connections here through her charity work."

"Ah." I really, really didn't want to talk about his divorce, almost as much as I didn't want to think about him being lonely in the city. I remembered the two weeks at NYU before housing had dropped Holli into my lap, how awful and empty they had seemed. I didn't need to sympathize with Neil in that way, because it was just another excuse to get involved with him for a wrong reason. If we were going to do this, we were going to do it right.

I took a breath and carefully considered my response. "I don't know how I feel about you telling... whatever it is you told to Rudy. I have to work with him, too. But if you trust him to keep your secret, I can. You have more to lose in this situation than I do, I think."

Neil shook his head. "This is all going much differently than I expected."

"You expected you'd show up and we'd fuck?" The word sent a jolt of tension through me.

"Can you blame me for trying?" He gave me that half-smile that melted my bones. "I should go. This was an inappropriate visit."

I watched him as he stood and strode toward the door, and my chest tightened. Okay, so he'd let
Eye-Rolling Rudy in on our dirty little secret from six years ago. I'd told Holli, hadn't I? And she occasionally worked for the magazine. It might not have been the same level on the indiscretion scale, but if he was feeling even a fraction of the emotional confusion I was suffering from, no wonder he’d needed a sympathetic ear.

Plus, he wasn't looking for a serious relationship. I loved sex, and finding someone I wanted to have it with, someone who was actually good at it and who didn't want to involve me in their five-year plan, was absurdly difficult in a city of eight million people. Especially when you were holding every available man to the impossible standard of being as amazing as Neil Elwood.

And here he was, the guy who set the bar for my sexual expectations. And he wanted exactly what I wanted.

"Wait," I said.

He stopped, his forehead creased with confusion.

"If you're down for a little extracurricular fun, and this isn't some kind of weird male sexual scavenger hunt wherein you need to fuck your secretary to score points..." My voice trailed off. I had gotten off track somewhere. I inhaled through my nose and straightened my spine. "Then fine. Let's just see each other casually."

"When you say 'see each other'..." he began cautiously.

"I mean have sex. In a friendly, no-strings kind of way." It never crossed my mind to be worried about whether or not he'd think it was “slutty” of me to want such an arrangement. It was strange, but I felt like I could trust him to be honest with me and not judge me according to some bullshit misogynistic double standard. Maybe having the kind of sex you have with a person you think you're never going to see again is the way all relationships should start.

"And nothing is going to happen tonight," I stated firmly. It took a lot of self-control not to whimper during that sentence. I'd spent so many years fantasizing about him and only him, and now he was standing right next to me, totally willing to do all the nasty things I'd dreamed of. But I had a strict "no sex with drunk people" policy.

A slow smile tilted his lips, and the naughtiness promised in the expression was enough to make goose bumps stand out on my skin. "Quite right. We've waited six years, there should be nothing to another... twenty-four hours?"

"Twenty-four hours?" I echoed, my heart lodging firmly in my throat. I crossed my arms over my chest, acutely aware of my hard nipples chafing against my sweater.

"Twenty-two?" He stepped toward me, his lips still twisted in a wry grin, and looked down his straight, classically handsome nose at me. He didn't touch me, but he stood so close his coat brushed my sleeves. A throbbing, purely sexual energy throbbed between us. If he'd opened his arms, if he'd made any move to embrace me, I would have fallen against him gladly, drunk rule or not. But he didn't. He just gazed down at me thoughtfully, his eyes moving over my features as though he were deciphering an intricate code. "I think six years of wanting you is long enough, Sophie."

Six years of wanting you. He'd wanted me, just like I'd wanted him. Relief and tension at the same time make for a strange sensation. I could think of lots of good reasons not to let him push me up against the wall and fuck me with all my clothes on, and none of them seemed good enough.

My tongue darted out to wet my lips, and I glanced up. It was easier to make eye contact when I could be sarcastic and guarded. "Well, now that all that's out of the way... I would offer you a drink, but I think you've had enough."

"No, I have a car waiting." He leaned down, his lips a fraction of a millimeter from mine. "I'll see you tomorrow, with further instructions."

He kissed me, far too briefly, and left.
I stood by the door for a long time, wondering what exactly had just happened. At the moment, it seemed like I was getting what I'd hoped for, after six long years of not hoping very much. At the same time, I'd just agreed to have sex with my boss, again. Holli's bedroom door opened a crack. "Is it safe to come out?"

"I have no idea." I walked on numb legs to the couch and dropped onto it. I put a couple fingertips to my bottom lip and smoothed over it slowly. I could still feel him there, a relentless tingle that echoed all the way down to my very wet panties.

"I peeked. Don't be mad." She padded into the living room. "In person, he just looks like a normal... person." She shrugged.

"Okay, clearly you've taken your contacts out, because he's gorgeous." We never, ever agreed on men, mostly because when Holli was into guys, they looked like they'd just run away from their Disney Channel contracts.

"Yeah, I guess. If you're into the daddy thing." She shrugged.

It takes different strokes, I guess. "He could have been horrifically scarred in a chemical fire, and it wouldn't matter. He just... does something to me."

"Yeah, naughty, spanky things." Holli's eyes glittered with lascivious enthusiasm. "What do you think he's going to do to you this time?"

"If I stopped and thought about it, I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight." I probably still wouldn't. How was I going to get through the night and the next day knowing that I was about to repeat the most fantastic sex of my life?

God, I hoped I had a fresh set of batteries.

* * * *

My eyes popped open before the alarm went off. I'd never been so excited to get to work in my entire life. Not even on my first day. Not even when Madonna came in to have lunch with Gabriella last year.

I wondered if Neil would appreciate the magnitude of rating higher than Madonna, and covered my face with my pillow, squealing. I knew had to get myself under control. If I spent all day swooning over the fact that Neil and I were going to hook up, I wouldn't bring my A-game to work. I wasn't about to drop the ball within days of a huge, surprise take over by new employers.

My morning commute was boring, the way it was always boring. I got to work and was at my desk, periodically checking the time, trying to control my hormones, which were in full-on rage mode before Neil even arrived.

He got to the office at eight-thirty, and greeted me casually as he handed over his coat. Strangely, knowing that we were going to have sex soon removed a lot of the awkwardness between us, and we were able to function like two normal human beings. Two normal, incredibly horny human beings. I felt confident that I could speak for both of us on that matter, because his hand brushed the small of my back as I moved to hang up his coat, and I caught his eyes lingering on my backside when I turned.

"You can't do that," I reminded him. "We'll get found out. Also, it's in the employee handbook, under 'sexual harassment policy.' The words 'zero tolerance' are mentioned."

"Point taken," he said dryly. "I have six people coming in this morning to throw shoes and scream at me."

"Coffee and water for six. No problem." Of course, I already knew about the shoe meeting, but he didn't need to know that. Before I took over the beauty editor job, I wanted to make myself look indispensable, able to conjure things at the drop of a hat. I found it never hurt to leave on a high note, as evidenced by my college transcripts. “Do you need me to sit in and take notes?”

"Yes, please do. Oh, and before I forget..." Neil set his black leather messenger bag on my desk and
lifted the flap. He pulled out an iPad in a sleek black cover and handed it over to me. "Start with the
notes app. There are instructions. And you'll need this."

My eyes widened as he pulled a slender card free from his wallet. He held it between two fingers,
offering it to me. "The name of the hotel and the room number are listed in the document. Unless this
evening is inconvenient for you?"

I know for a fact he saw my hand shaking when I took the key card from him. The corner of his
mouth twitched. He could tell I was dying for him. Judging by his ruthless efficiency in setting up our
"date," I had to surmise he was as desperate for me as I was for him.

Turning the card over in my hand, I glanced at it with feigned disinterest before slowly pushing it
into the unbuttoned top of my black silk shirt. I knew he could see the slightly darker outline of my
black lace bra beneath, and I took my time slipping the flimsy key into the cup of my bra.

He chuckled and shook his head.

Only when the door to his office had clicked safely closed behind him did I dare to lift the cover on
the tablet and press the power button. I saw the notes app on the home screen and I opened it, my gaze
flickering nervously to his door. The text of the instructions document was a simple, addressed to me:

*Sophie -
*This key belongs to the W hotel on Lexington Ave. Meet me in the "Wow" suite.
*Neil

The "Wow" suite? I resisted the temptation to Google and threw myself into work. I had hoped his
instructions would have been a bit more explicit. Some clue as to what kind of night he was expecting,
what he wanted to do to me... anything. The fact that he denied me even that small pleasure maddened
and distracted me. That was probably the point. Maybe he was under the impression that I was still a
naive college student, but I was sure I could find some way to torment him in return.

A wicked idea sprang to my mind, aided by the memory of his voice in my ear, my hands guiding
his. There had been a mirror in our hotel room six years ago, and I'd sat on his lap at the edge of the bed,
both of us watching as I pushed his fingers in tight circles over my clitoris. My face grew hot as I
remembered the sight of his cock stretching me, the sound of my slick flesh moving under his hands as I
gasped and wriggled on him.

"Look at how beautiful you are," he had whispered against my jaw, his gaze meeting mine in the
mirror. "*Never be timid about your own pleasure. Don’t be ashamed to come.*"

That image of my own passion, and the hungry way he'd watched me using his fingers to get myself
off, were seared into my mind.

Yeah, I could definitely do something with that.

The workday passed at such a sluggishe pace, I thought for sure that time had slowed down
specifically to cock block me. I sat through the shoe meeting, where no one actually threw any shoes at
Neil, though Rudy looked like he was getting close when they clashed over a Manolo. Rudy loved the
stacked heel and red-and-black color scheme. When Neil said it looked like a clown shoe, it seemed like
some serious *Real Housewives* throw down shit was about to start. But in the end, Neil made a point
regarding the resemblance to a piece from the previous season, and Rudy had to concede. I think Rudy
was as surprised as I was at Neil's familiarity with fashion. Though his company owned a men's fashion
magazine, as well, I hadn't realized how hands-on his involvement must have been, for him to fill
Gabriella's role at *Porteras*.

It was strangely easy to sit through the meeting without having sexy thoughts. Well, without too
many. I was routinely distracted by the sight of Neil's big hands on the delicate, feminine shoes, turning
them this way and that. I thought of him sliding such an item off my foot, his hand skimming up my
calf, under my skirt - but I cared more about the magazine than my libido, so I kept that kind of
daydreaming to a minimum.

Neil at work was an entirely different creature than I'd expected. He had a good eye for design, but an even better talent for listening as the fashion team presented each piece and explained why they thought it should make the issue. He asked questions, occasionally dictated a note to me, and by the time the meeting was over I realized I didn't have that queasy, on edge feeling in my stomach I used to get when sitting in on these things with Gabriella. Working for her was supposed to have been a learning experience, but it was difficult to learn from someone when you were constantly monitoring your behavior and schooling a blank facial expression because you were terrified of saying or doing something unfavorable.

After the meeting, while Neil was away at lunch, I sent a quick text to Holli: Seeing Neil after work. Will be late. Don't worry.

She replied lightning-fast: Awwwwwww yeah. Get you some!

While I was typing a snarky reply, another text popped up, this one from Jake: Going out with some of A's friends tonight. Single guys, interested?

Oh, Jake. We'd broken office sexual harassment policies time and again by bouncing romantic ideas off each other. When he wanted to know which vibrator his girlfriend, Amanda, would like best, he'd come to me. When I couldn't figure out why my ex-somewhat-steady-sex-partner couldn't get off with me on top, Jake had drawn me all sorts of diagrams on the backs of discarded photo proofs. Sometimes it was awesome having a platonic straight guy friend. Other times, like now, when he was considering asking his girlfriend to move in with him, he could project like, well, a projector. Ever since he'd gotten serious about Amanda, he'd wanted to fix me up with Mr. Right. I was certain he'd already planned our double dates, with just an empty gray "insert Sophie's husband" space where my future spouse could be slotted in. I sighed and dialed his number.

"Jake." He always answered that way, even though I'd pointed out how douchey it sounded.

"Hey, I'm out for tonight. I'm meeting a guy for sex in a hotel room." I added the last bit in the hopes he would take the hint that I wasn't looking for a Prince Charming right now.

"And for that you'd pass up meeting the guy who could be the guy of your dreams?" He exhaled into the phone speaker in frustration. "Are you sure you're not interested? One of them is a Kennedy."

"Oh yeah, because that's a real incentive." I snorted. "I've always wanted to die under mysterious circumstances in my thirties."

"It sounds like you're trying to do die under mysterious circumstances in your twenties," Jake scolded. "This guy... he's not a stranger, right? You're not about to be murdered in a hotel room?"

"No, it's someone I trust." Leave it to Jake to turn my love life into an episode of *Dexter*. Not that I didn't appreciate his concern. I just wished that when people were concerned for me, they gave me credit for having a functioning brain.

"Well, have fun." The resignation in his voice made it clear that he would be looking for my face on the news.

"You too. And if you hear of a grisly murder at the W, feel free to tell my mutilated body, I told you so."

After we hung up, I made a mental list of what I had to accomplish between the time I got out of work and the time I was supposed to be showing up at the hotel. I texted Holli and asked her to bring by my new black dress with the plunging v-neckline and kimono sleeves. The thing barely covered my ass, it was so short, but since covering my ass wasn't the point, I didn't worry too much.

At six o'clock, I knocked on the door to Neil's office. "It's Sophie."

"Come in," he called, and I was relieved to find him alone inside.

"Is there anything else you needed me for?"
He smiled, but he looked tired, and I got the horrible feeling that didn't bode well for our evening. His sleeves were rolled back, his elbows leaning on glossy photographs spread out over his desk. He checked his watch distractedly. I was almost afraid he would cancel, but when he looked up, his gaze caught mine with heated intensity. "No, I'm sure I can get by, if you have somewhere... interesting to be?"

"I do." I cleared my throat. "And do you have somewhere interesting to be?"

"Oh, I think I'll find some way to entertain myself." A slow grin spread across his face.

I smiled and turned for the door, stopping to add, "Then I guess I'll see you in the morning."

"I very much hope so." The prospect seemed to energize him, at least, even if he dropped the pretense of our verbal game. "Go on. I should be there by eight."

I paused, the tip of my tongue pressed against my front teeth as I considered saying anything else. But it was better just to leave it. I took the garment bag Holli had dropped off, pulled on my coat, and headed to the W.
Chapter Six

The W was a classic New York building with bas-relief elephant faces decorating the facade above a modern glass awning. I realized, as I stepped through the door, that it might look a bit suspicious heading into a hotel with just a garment bag and my purse. *Fuck it,* I thought, feeling giddy and naughty as I strode through the lobby. *I'm not here for an extended stay, I'm here for amazing sex.*

I refrained from making such a proclamation at the front desk, but only just barely. I stopped a bellman for directions, but I declined his offer to show me to the room. I rode the elevator up and, reaching the door, used my key and stepped into the "Wow" suite.

It was easily larger than my apartment. I wandered through the living room, where long couches framed the floor. A huge installation of acrylic panels, each with an image of glowing golden sky and abstract black tree branches, covered the subtly grayed white wall perpendicular to the floor-to-ceiling window that provided an astounding view of neighboring sky scrapers. I dropped my garment bag and looked up to the second floor loft, where I presumed the bedroom was.

"Wow."

I wasn’t in the room for two full minutes before there was a polite knock at the door. I opened it to find a uniformed waiter with a silver bucket and a bottle of champagne. "What's this?" I stepped aside and let him enter the room. He took the champagne to the wet bar. The bottle he set on the marble countertop had a long neck of green glass, and matte silver foil over the cork. I glanced at the label. *Krug Clos du Mesnil. 1995.*

The waiter smiled as he unwrapped the foil. "Mr. Elwood requested that it be sent up upon your arrival."

He’d had someone on look out for me? Sneaky man.

"Is it good?" I knew nothing about champagne. I was more of a red wine girl.

The waiter's eyebrows lifted and he chuckled. "Oh, it's very good."

After the waiter departed - declining gratuity because, "It's been taken care of," - I wandered the suite with a glass in hand. The room’s decor straddled the line between modern and comfortable; nothing too pretentious, nothing absurd for the sake of design. I went up to the loft, where I found a bathroom with a European-style shower and, to my surprise, a black leather shaving kit and some cologne and shampoo in commercial sized bottles. Those weren’t standard hotel toiletries.

Was Neil staying here? I went to the bedroom and peeked in a drawer. There were some neatly folded clothes inside, and I quickly shut it. I didn't want to snoop. Clearly, he'd been staying for some time.

I checked the clock. It was quarter to seven. My stomach knotted with excitement. I had just a little over an hour before Neil would arrive, and I intended to seduce him from the moment he stepped through the door.

I showered carefully, so I wouldn't get my hair wet, then dried myself and rubbed some of the divine smelling hotel lotion into my skin. I frowned at my hair in the mirror. I'd worn a tousled up-do all day, but it was work hair.

To my unbelievable good luck, when I pulled out the pins my hair let down into waves I couldn't have possibly achieved with a curling iron and infinite patience. If there were a patron saint of sexy hair, I would be lighting candles to her, for sure.

I touched up my makeup, thickening my eyeliner just a bit and swapping my nude lip color for a dark berry gloss I’d found in the bottom of my purse. I dressed, neatened up the bathroom, then hurried
downstairs.

Standing before the mirror in the living area, I tugged down the hem of the short dress that clung to
my body like a glove. The wide sleeves fluttered from my elbows as I reached up to fluff my hair one
time. I thought back to what I'd looked like that day at the airport six years ago. This was a definite
improvement to greasy teenager skin and bad highlights in a tee-shirt and jeans.

I found an iPod plugged into a stereo dock, and I took the liberty of scrolling through the albums. I
was pleasantly surprised to find some genuinely cool choices - Peter Gabriel, Florence + The Machine,
Damien Rice - and ultimately I selected some TV on the Radio. A slow, moody song filled the entire
suite from built-in speakers.

After some searching, I’d found the switch to lower the shade over the huge window. There was a
dimmer switch in the main living area, so I turned down the lights, then arranged myself on the wide
white couch. I wriggled my skirt up a bit and spread my legs, my attention fixed on the door.

I couldn’t believe I was doing this. I couldn't believe it was actually happening, after six years. After
I had given up hope of ever having a sexual experience as satisfying as my night with Leif. Every
muscle in my body tensed with anticipation. My breath caught in my chest as my fingers ventured down,
under the black lace of my panties. I thought back to my white cotton underpants that night at the
Crowne Plaza, and I giggled to myself. If anyone had told me back then that I'd be sex ambushing the
man six years later, I wouldn't have believed I would have the nerve.

I closed my eyes and stroked two fingers down my slit. My hips lifted. I'd been so eager for this
moment, now it seemed like my skin was too sensitive to touch. I thought of what Neil would see when
he walked in, and remembered the undisguised appreciation in his eyes while he'd watched our hands on
my body.

My stomach fluttered with nervous butterflies. What if he was expecting the girl from six years ago,
who'd only had sex with fumbling teenage boys? What if he got here and was turned off by my
initiative? After all, he'd found my naiveté so endearing the last time we were together.

Oh shut up, I scolded myself. Would you really want to fuck a guy who only wanted you for your
sexual inexperience? No, because that would be weird.

I’d made a salient point, I had to concede.

My fingertips circled my clit, and a shaky breath stuttered across my lips. My flesh felt hot and
heavy under my hand, and I cupped myself, letting my fingers slip between the folds of my sex.

The door clicked open, and the weight of my desire became like an electric current. My lungs
seized, my limbs quivered. I opened my eyes, a soft groan escaping me when I saw Neil there. He closed
the door and dropped his messenger bag. His gaze met mine and held it as he walked toward me in his
long black coat and leather gloves. I don't know how I managed to maintain eye contact, but I did, and I
had never felt so sexy in my entire life. Why had I ever doubted that this would please him?

His maddeningly neutral expression gave nothing away, but he couldn’t disguise the hunger in his
eyes. Oh, he wanted me. He stood over me, looking down as I continued to move my hand beneath my
panties.

"Take those off." His voice was soft and deep, the tone firm. I was being commanded, not asked. A
pervasive thrill shot through me, and I shivered.

His eyes followed my hands as I slowly peeled the scrap of black lace down my thighs. He stepped
closer and ran one gloved hand up my calf, raising goose bumps on my skin. I moaned at the cool touch
of the leather, and he grasped my panties, jerking them down the rest of the way. I slipped my feet from
them and watched him lift the lace to his nose.

"Oh god." My exclamation tore out on a ragged breath, and I pressed my thighs together against the
pounding ache in my cunt. I wanted him so badly I trembled, but I was afraid of what would happen
when we actually touched. The longing, the desperate, clawing sexual need that had been missing from every encounter I'd had in the intervening six years crashed over me, turned my blood into liquid desire coursing to every throbbing cell in my body.

"Don't stop," he said, removing his gloves slowly, tugging one fingertip at a time. I spread my legs a little, and he ordered, "Wider."

I heard my pulse in my ears as I parted my thighs further. Neil took off his coat and tossed it across the ottoman, on top of the gloves he'd already discarded. He moved to stand between my spread legs, looking down at me with his hands in his pockets. He was hard, his cock a visible ridge against his fly beneath his unbuttoned jacket.

I stroked myself, letting my fingers wander further, to dip inside before tracing upward again, coated in the evidence of my overwhelming desire. I smoothed the silky wetness over my clitoris, into the short, neatly trimmed strip of hair on my mound.

Wordlessly, Neil watched me rub my clit in slow circles. Being like this for him, my legs open, my pussy exposed and gleaming wet while he stood there fully dressed, turned the naughty factor up to eleven and then some. Just thinking about what I was doing spiked my arousal higher. I had done things with him that I'd never done with anyone else, and that knowledge made me feel oddly safe.

My thighs tensed, and I planted my black pumps firmly against the rug. My orgasm wound tight inside me, ready to spring and uncoil me from the inside out. A yelped, "Ah!" of frustration escaped me, and I lifted my hips from the sofa. I was going to come, I was so close, I was going to come while he watched me, without him ever touching me, and I was so goddamn close - "Stop."

The word was confusing in the context of the moment, and that was enough to shock me into actually stopping. My internal muscles clenched painfully, reaching for the climax that had been suddenly denied.

"What?" I panted, gripping the hem of my dress to physically restrain myself from relieving the ache.

"Come here." He held out his hand to me, and unthinking I offered him the one that had just been busy between my legs. He pulled me to my feet and braced my swaying body against him with a palm at my lower back. Being so close to him made me dizzy; his faintly spicy cologne filled my head, and my skin became hyper aware of his body heat, even through our clothes.

With his other hand, he brought my still damp fingers to his mouth and sucked them between his lips. I gasped at the touch of his tongue against my fingertips as he tasted me, and he released them with a small, strangely serious smile.

I rose on my tiptoes, my hand sliding around his neck and into his hair to tug his mouth down to mine. His groan was muffled by our kiss, but the hungry sound went bone deep, vibrating off my every nerve ending. He swayed with me to the low, insistent beat of the music. My thighs stuck together with the wetness that had smeared between them. My body wept for his touch, for his cock, for fulfillment.

His tongue stroked against mine, while one hand slid down my arm to lace our fingers together. He broke our mouths apart, dropping kisses along my jaw on a path toward my ear. He traced the edge of my earlobe, and I shivered in his arms.

"I have fantasized about this every day for the past six years," he whispered, the ragged edge of need apparent in his voice. I almost sobbed in relief to hear those words. It wasn't just me, then. There had been something incredible between us, and clearly there still was. I hadn't been crazy, looking for this kind of passion. It did exist.

He held me tight, his arm locked behind my back, holding me on my feet as he nibbled the shell of my ear. The prickly, over-sensitive feeling made me gasp. I leaned heavily against him, my breath
speeding up, my muscles tensing as he laved over and over the same, extremely erogenous spot. It was like being tickled, but the feeling shot straight to my groin, and he didn’t let up even as I writhed away from his mouth. I squeezed my legs together, my toes curled in my shoes, and I only realized what was happening when my cunt spasmed with a flood of wetness and grateful relief poured through my muscles. It wasn't the most mind-blowing, intense orgasm I'd ever had, but it did take the edge off my painful need, and he had managed to do it just by kissing my ear.

"Oh," I managed on a shaky breath as I looked up at the dark amusement in his eyes. "I think I'm in trouble."

"Yes, it appears so." He grinned, boyish and self-congratulatory, and released me, leaving me to stand helpless and shaking as he went to the wet bar. "You had some champagne, then?"

Champagne? I’d just had an orgasm in his arms, from him sucking on my ear. Not from fucking me or fingering me or eating me out, but from tame, backseat-in-high-school necking. And now he was asking me about champagne? I could barely stand upright.

"I did," I smoothed down my skirt, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

He poured some and came back to me with maddening slowness. "Now turn around, so I can get you out of it."

I turned slowly, my ankles still weak and wobbly from my climax. Neil stepped up behind me, so close that his trousers brushed the backs of my bare legs. He found the zipper between my shoulder blades and smoothly pulled it down. The music stopped, leaving us with only the sound of the metal teeth parting to punctuate the silence. He pushed down my sleeves one at a time, as I shifted the champagne from one hand to the other. His palms followed the path the fabric took, every touch igniting a scorching trail across my skin. The dress fell to the floor, and I shivered. I still wore my black lace bra and my heels. When my hand moved to the clasp at my back, Neil brushed it aside.

"Leave it on, for now. The shoes as well." The rustle of silk told me he'd taken off his jacket. When I turned, he was unbuttoning his shirt.

"Should we go upstairs?" I asked, raising an eyebrow as I sipped from the glass in my hand.

He pulled his arms free and tossed the shirt to the floor. Which was slightly alarming to me, because I knew it probably cost more than my share of the monthly rent. But Neil was standing in front of me, shirtless, and that kind of took precedence over everything else. He was fit, and not just fit for a man who was almost fifty. Brown hair with a smattering of silver lightly shadowed his tight chest, and narrowed into a line down his flat stomach. He crushed me to him, and the shock of his bare skin on mine made it impossible to stand on my own.

He kissed me hard, his hand tangled in my long hair, and when we were both breathless he lifted his head to answer my question. "Not now. I thought I'd lay you down on this sofa and bury my face in your cunt first. Unless you object..."

My jaw dropped. "I remember you being direct, but I'd forgotten how direct."

He winked and took the champagne from me. After a long swallow, he set the glass on the small table beside the couch. "I haven't heard an objection. And I've been looking forward to this all day."

The pure, molten heat that suffused me had nothing to do with the champagne. I took his hand and pulled him with me to the sofa, where I reclined as I'd been when he'd arrived. He dropped to his knees between my spread legs and rested his cheek against my stomach. The evening stubble on his jaw
scratched my skin. I thought of how it would feel against my inner thighs, my labia, and I moaned, raising my hips and silently willing him to reach his destination quickly.

He didn't need my urging. He lifted one of my legs over his shoulder, then the other, and bent his head. His tongue parted me, and I curled up with a choked exclamation, burying my hands in his hair. He gripped my hips and pushed them firmly against the sofa. I fell back, letting him hold me captive, his big hands pressing me down as he sucked and nibbled. When his tongue slipped inside me I sobbed aloud.

"God, the taste of you," he murmured against my thigh. "I could stay here all night."

He pulled my clit into his mouth, the stubble on his cheeks rasping my slick, open flesh, and my body tightened. The stiletto heels of my pumps dug into his back, but if he didn't care, I didn't either. I lifted myself against his mouth, and he slipped a hand beneath my ass to hold me. He pressed two fingers of his other hand to my cleft as he sucked me, and with the slightest tilt of my hips they were inside me. He pushed deeper and crooked his fingers, pressing hard against my g-spot. I felt my pulse center under his tongue, felt the edges of his teeth teasing my clit, and white-hot pleasure seized every muscle fiber in my body.

I shouted, "I'm coming!" and fervently prayed I wouldn't break his neck as my knees clamped on either side of his head. He moved his fingers in and out, rasping over that delicious spot, and all the tight, tense sensation that had built up in me shattered. My legs jerked. One of my shoes flew off. My lungs emptied on a high-pitched wail. If there were a prize for biggest orgasm, I would have won it then declined to attend the ceremony, because the orgasm was reward enough.

I came down slowly, every nerve attuned to my surroundings with intense clarity. The plush sofa under my back, the feeling of Neil's hair between my fingers and the heat of my sopping wet center against his mouth. He lifted his head just as the touch became too much for me. His fingers remained inside me, though, pulsing and fluttering. I should have been satisfied, bone tired, and I knew I would be, eventually. Not until he'd fucked me, though. Even as his stroking fingers brought me back to the precipice I'd just fallen from, I knew I wouldn't be satiated until he was inside me.

"Please," I begged him, trying to drag him up my body. I needed him to fuck me, needed him so deep in me that it hurt. I wanted him to fuck me hard, to wear me out. I wanted to feel soreness in my muscles for days. We'd waited long enough. We'd waited six years, and that was long enough.

He eased his fingers from me and covered my body. I wrapped my legs around his waist, not caring that my wet pussy was plastered against his very expensive trousers. He had to fuck me, or I would die, I was absolutely sure of it. We could worry about the dry cleaning bill later.

He kissed me, and I tasted myself on his lips before he raised his head. "We have to go upstairs." He brushed my hands away from the slender silver buckle on his belt, laughing as he did. "We have to go to the bedroom; it's where the condoms are."

I let him help me to my feet and balanced with a hand on his shoulder as I plucked my remaining shoe from my foot before we attempted the stairs. Halfway up, he stopped me and pressed me against the wall, burying his face in my neck to nibble at my throat. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, and his hand fell to the clasp of my bra, releasing it. We left it behind on the steps, his shoes, as well. Somehow, we made it to the bed, and I lay naked on the thick white duvet while he unbuckled his belt and slid his trousers and boxers down.

For the first time all night, my resolve somewhat wavered. I remembered Neil being big. He was definitely the most well endowed man I'd ever been with. But in the intervening years I'd somehow lost my perspective on just how big he really was. To say he was intimidating would have been an understatement. Professional porn stars are less well hung.

He correctly gauged my reaction, his expression grim. "I would understand, if you didn't -"
"No, no. I still want to." I felt like an asshole. He must have gotten my reaction more than once. Hell, he'd gotten it more than once from me, because six years ago I'd practically fled the room. But I'd trusted him to be gentle then. I didn’t know what I was afraid of now. I knew I had nothing to worry about. I shook my head, embarrassed. "Sorry. I can't believe I forgot such a substantial detail."

He laughed, his relief evident. "I was worried you might have changed your mind."

"Never." I cupped my swollen, slick sex in my hand and plunged two fingers into my body. His lips parted as he watched me, and I saw his indrawn breath in the rise of his chest.

"Please," I moaned, moving my fingers slowly out, then pushing back in. I plucked at my hard nipple with my other hand, writhing against the duvet. "Please fuck me."

He got a condom from the bedside table drawer and sheathed himself, then he was on me, covering me, pinning me to the mattress. The wide tip of his cock pushed against me, and I held my breath. My body opened reluctantly, my flesh engorged from the pleasure he’d already given me. The head of him slipped in faster than I expected, and I startled at the burning stretch. I willed myself to relax as he sank into me. That made it easier. I held onto his shoulders as I opened around him, taking him in.

He braced himself with a hand against the bed and gasped, "You're so tight. Am I hurting you?"

"No, it’s just... been a long time." I lifted up, taking him deeper. He groaned and pulled back, almost entirely out, before slowly pushing in again.

All my earlier feelings of disbelief vanished. I was no longer shocked that this was happening, after such a long time. I was completely lost in the moment, desperate to commit every sensation to memory, knowing I would never accurately remember, no matter how hard I wished. When he withdrew, I clung to him with my cunt and my legs, trying to bring him back. I matched his every move, rolling my hips, taking more of him on every thrust.

Everything ceased to matter. Our strange relationship, our ages, what would happen at work... none of that remained attached, and for some blissful, sweaty minutes we were just two people caught up in a primal drive. My fingers dug into his back, my knees hugged his waist as he pumped into me.

He caught my hand and tugged it between us, murmuring, "Touch yourself," close to my ear. I moaned when my fingers encountered the obscene thickness of him spreading me, and I rubbed my clit furiously with my fingertips, arching and gasping as I raced toward another climax. My already sore muscles protested as my body tensed once more, and I muttered nonsensical pleas against his neck, taking more of him on every thrust.

Neil wasn't far behind me, shoving hard, almost too hard, my eager cunt still spasming around him as he groaned and stilled. The deep pulse of his cock sent shivers of delayed pleasure through me, and I whimpered, clinging to him.

"Are you all right?" he asked breathlessly, the persistent throbbing still touching off mini-fireworks for me.

"Uh-huh." That was the most intelligent thing I could manage to say.

He eased out and rose from the bed to step into the bathroom. I cautiously felt my puffy flesh. Oh, I would definitely pay for that tomorrow. I grinned to myself at the thought.

"I think this was a really good idea," I called to him, pushing myself up on my elbows. “It’s been ages since I’ve felt this good.”

When he came back, he was wearing a pair of black flannel sleep pants. He stopped beside the bed and smiled down at me. "Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"No," I admitted. "I'll grab some on my way home."

"Don't try to be cool," he scolded. "I'm not kicking you out. I thought we could order room service and see where the evening takes us."

"Oh ho," I laughed, sitting up and swinging my legs over the side of the bed. "You want to do this
"Not exactly this. More, and similar. It's been six years, Sophie. You can't imagine that I've had my fill of you after just an hour."

The raw hunger in his voice obliterated the playful mood between us. He looked away, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Sorry," he said quickly. "That was a bit intense. If you have somewhere to be - "

I stood and looked down at myself. "Well, I'm not exactly dressed for dinner, is my only problem."

Instantly, that playfulness returned, and he swatted my behind as he moved past me to the dresser. He rummaged through a drawer then tossed me a soft gray t-shirt. "That's as covered up as I'll allow you to be in my presence, young lady."

I snorted and pulled the shirt over my head. It hung to just below my ass cheeks, and had a faded white outline of Led Zeppelin's Icarus logo on the front. I twirled in it as though it was an evening gown, and he admired me for a few seconds before heading toward the stairs. "I'll give you a moment, come down when you're ready."

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We ordered heinously overpriced room service burgers, which Neil absolutely refused to take any money for. "I understand that we're not dating, but I think we can go so far as to call ourselves friends at this point. There's nothing wrong with a friend buying another friend's meal."

"As long as I get to return the favor some time," I warned. I didn't like the idea of being beholden to anyone, especially not a man with money and power. And I didn't want him to think that's where my interest lay. "Just remember, I'm in this for hot sex, not hot meals."

We opened the shade over the huge window and sat on the long couch, the room service tray between us. While we ate, we chatted and watched the lights of the skyscrapers and streets outside. It was a full moon, and the night was almost as bright as the day, albeit in a weird, fluorescent way. From inside the soft, warm light of the room, I felt like I was looking out on an alien world.

"Can I ask you something?" I folded my legs criss-cross and tugged the hem of the t-shirt down when I noticed his gaze drop to my crotch. I cleared my throat, and he looked up with a crooked smile. "You can ask me anything. I just might not answer."

"Depending on what your question is."

"Are you living here?" I plucked at the front of the t-shirt I wore and jerked my thumb toward the loft overhead.

He took a sip from a bottle of water before answering. "Just for now. After the divorce was finalized, Elizabeth had sixty days to move out of our apartment. I spent most of those in London, but I had to return before they were up. In ten days, she'll take possession of the house in L.A., and my life can go back to normal."

I thought it was pretty sad that "normal" for him was being alone, even though he had been married for two years. Still, I didn't know all the particulars. I didn't feel it was my place to judge.

"Do you want to know what happened?" he asked, gesturing with a fry. "It isn't tragic, I wouldn't be offended if you asked."

"I wasn't fishing, if that's what you think," I clarified firmly. "But sure, if it isn't tragic, what happened?"

He shrugged. "We didn't communicate our expectations well before we got married. She interpreted my not wanting any more children to mean that I didn't want another child right now. And it took two years for the both of us to figure out that things weren't going to change for the better."

"Yikes." There wasn't much else I was qualified to say.

"I certainly don't recommend it. If you ever find yourself in a similar situation, forging ahead as
though nothing is amiss is definitely the wrong tactic."
"Thanks for the tip," I snorted. I felt weirdly possessive, though I had no right to be. I didn't want to
talk about his ex-wife. I didn't like the idea of him being with anyone. And I certainly didn't like the fact
that I felt any of those things. I wiped my lips with my napkin and pointed out the window, continuing
the game we'd started while waiting for the food to arrive. I drew an invisible circle around the window
of a neighboring building. "What about the people in that one?"
Neil embraced the change of subject gladly. "They're enormous perverts."
"Really?" I giggled, tipping my head to one side.
"It's disturbing, the stuff they get up to."
"What if I wanted to get up to something disturbing?" A little thrill went through me. I didn't really
know how to do anything truly disturbing, but I was pretty sure he would.
A slow smile spread across his lips. "Forgive me, if you've extensively broadened your repertoire in
the past six years, but when we slept together before you seemed to be under the impression that a bit of
light spanking was disturbing."
"I was only eighteen," I reminded him, and I took a little selfish pleasure in the momentary flash of
shame that crossed his face. "But no, I haven't been going crazy with the whips and chains."
"Is that something you'd be open to?" He asked the question so casually it threw me for a moment.
He'd seemed more uncomfortable asking me to eat dinner with him than asking if I wanted to be chained
up.
I cleared my throat. "Well... I'll try anything once. Though whips might take some convincing."
"Then we'll save that for the second date." He laughed, and my heart skipped a beat.
"How do you do that?" I shook my head and smiled to myself, looking down at my nearly empty
plate. "It's not fair that you get to be cool and rich and own a company."
"And I have a huge cock," he reminded me, and I threw a fry at him. "I suspect what you're
perceiving as 'cool' is the fact that I have the emotional maturity of a toddler coupled with the libido of a
seventeen year old boy, and absolutely no one in my life telling me no."
"That's a pretty specific and insightful answer," I mused, dropping my napkin to my plate.
"I've heard it enough. Sometimes shouted at me in anger. It's not as attractive an existence as it may
appear." He took another sip of water then moved the room service tray from between us, settling it on
the rug at our feet.
"I don't know, I can see at least one upside to it." I rose on my knees and scooted toward him. "You
have this crazy hot girl who's using you for sex. That has to count for at least one good thing."
"It's a very good thing," he murmured against my throat as he pulled me into his lap. His hands fell
to my hips, pushing the t-shirt up. I glanced at the window. "Isn't someone going to see?"
He lifted his head, gazing out at the city beyond the glass. "You're right. I suppose we should make
it worth their while, then."
My witty retort was lost in the flutter of fabric up and over my head, and then Neil's hands and
mouth were on my breasts, and I didn't care if the entire world was watching.
Chapter Seven

We were in the soft, comfy hotel bed, my head on Neil's shoulder as he lazily stroked my hair. The only light in the suite was the fluorescent glow of the New York night outside the window, and the pale blue from the alarm clock's stupid, stupid face.

"It's one o'clock," I groaned. I didn't want to leave the bed. I wanted to stay snuggled up with Neil, warm skin pressed to warm skin, and sleep until we woke up to fuck again.

I hadn't meant to stay so late. I really hadn't. Especially since this was technically his place at the moment, and staying over seemed a bridge too far for our first night. I lifted my head and rested my chin on his chest. "I have to go."

"Right, you have work tomorrow." He grimaced as he moved his arm. I'd been laying on it for a while. "I suppose you've got some horrible prick of a boss who won't let you have the morning off?"

I sat up and frowned down at him. "Is my horrible prick of a boss giving me the morning off?"

"No." He laughed and held up his hands defensively when my jaw dropped. "No, actually, I really need you there in the morning. I'm interviewing someone, and I want you to sit in. I just wanted to see your face when you thought I was giving you the morning off."

"You asshole." I laughed and leaned down, brushing my lips across his. I meant it to be quick, but his hand splayed at the small of my back, and his other hand rose to the nape of my neck. As long as I was being held there, I thought I might as well let him kiss me thoroughly.

"Are you sure you won't stay?" he asked, but we'd been over that between the second and third time. He really hadn't been kidding about having the sex drive of a seventeen-year-old. I was twenty-four years younger than him, and I had serious doubts I could keep up consecutive nights of this.

I shook my head and forced myself to actually get out of the bed. If I stayed much longer, I'd be too tired to make my way home. "Friends with benefits don't sleep over. I explained all this."

"You did, I'm sorry. I'm being greedy. Let me help you find your things."

Picking up the sheet we'd accidentally kicked to the floor, I wrapped myself in it. It wasn't that I was bashful, but I figured the less naked we both were, the less likely we'd end up fucking again. Neil apparently agreed, because in addition to the flannel sleep pants, he donned the Led Zeppelin t-shirt I'd been wearing on and off all evening.

My bra was on the steps, my dress downstairs. I was just tugging down my skirt when a thought occurred to me. "You still have my panties."

"Oh, do I?" He had stooped to pick up the shoe I'd kicked across the room earlier in the evening. "Yes, I suppose I did take them."

He was acting a bit too innocent. He was up to something. "Can I have them back?"

"What if I said no, you can't have them back?" He carried my shoe with him to the couch and sat down. "Would you like to play a game, Sophie?"

"What kind of game?" I walked toward him slowly. Once he got his hands on me, I might be powerless to leave. My body came to full, quivering attention with every step I took.

"I don't think it's a secret that I like to be in control during sex." He held up my shoe and patted his thigh, and I raised my leg cautiously. He grasped my ankle and slipped the toe of my shoe on, then the heel. But he didn't release me. I stood there, my foot braced against his hard thigh, the already short skirt riding up to my hips, exposing me completely.

"I did notice," I quipped. And oh, had I ever. The first time we'd been together, I'd assumed his
dominant nature had been about guiding me through my inexperience. Tonight, though, he'd been just as commanding, and I was a little embarrassed to admit how much I liked it. There was something incredibly freeing in not having to guess at what he wanted. Especially when it had seemed like the only thing he'd wanted was to make me come as hard as possible, as many times as possible.

I shuddered as his fingers slipped up, caressing the back of my calf. He seemed totally unaffected, even as his hand travelled higher. "Have you ever experimented with Domination and submission?"

My high hopes sank. "Yeah, I have."

"Were you the Dominant, or the submissive?" His fingers curled over my knee, then swept under, tickling the bend.

"One of my exes wanted me to tie him up and do stuff to him." I shook my head. "It really wasn't my thing. It felt like he was telling me, 'here, do all the work.' Not really appealing."

"Understandably, if that was how it was presented." He continued stroking, and every brush of his fingers hitched my arousal higher. "I like to think of it as a game; for myself, and for you. How can I make you feel and experience things you never have? And the challenge for you lies in giving up control, testing your own limits."

I swayed on my feet. "If you keep doing that, I'm never going to get out of here."

His lips tilted in a small smile. "Have you ever been the submissive in a sexual relationship?"

"Only with you."

"Does it bother you?" His hand stilled, and he studied my face for the answer.

Should it? I was a strong, independent young woman, right? I wasn't supposed to enjoy having a man boss me around. But every time Neil had given me a command in his low, serious voice, I'd fallen apart.

"Honestly?"

"No, Sophie, I want you to lie to me. I find communication terribly overrated." He bent his head and kissed my knee.

I shrugged. "It bothers me less than it should."

"Why should it bother you?" His mouth slipped down to the curve of my calf, his hand squeezing and stroking there.

"Because I'm not supposed to like being told what to do by some man." I took a shuddering breath.

He raised his head and looked me in the eye. "I think you and I are alike in that we don't worry about what we're suppose to do. Within reason."

That was very true, I'd give him that.

"I'm not looking for a twenty-four-seven submissive," he clarified. "I have enough to worry about in my own life; I don't need the added responsibility of telling you what to do every moment of your day. Taking control during sex, some light bondage and sensation play, that's the sort of thing I enjoy. And if you don't want to try it, that won't change my mind about our sexual relationship. I'd be perfectly happy either way. If you were willing to explore the possibility, though, I certainly wouldn't object."

"Well..." I pretended to consider, letting my knee fall slightly to the side, to give him a better view.

"I'll try anything once."

"I'm very glad to hear it." He playfully brushed my foot aside and stood, his hand sliding up my leg, under my skirt. He pulled me sharply to him as he pushed two fingers into my pussy. I clenched around him and groaned. He swallowed the sound, his lips forcing mine apart as his fingers slowly withdrew and pumped in again. "Would you like to try something now?"

"I have to go," I giggled against his mouth. He backed me up a step at a time, his fingers still inside me, until my shoulder blades hit the cool surface of the mirrored wall. He kissed me, sliding his other arm along mine, to lace our fingers and hold my hand captive.
"You'll go," he murmured, his mouth sliding to my jaw, my neck, his fingers still wriggling. "But you'll go home just as you are. Naked under that very short skirt."

I whimpered as his thumb circled my clitoris in slow, heavy strokes. I squeezed my thighs around his hand.

"And as you go, with nothing between your bare cunt and the world, I'd like you to remember why you're doing it. Whom you're doing it for.” His hand stilled, and he looked down, into my eyes. The intensity in his gaze swept like fire through me. He found my g-spot and pressed hard. "Remember how it felt, waiting for me to arrive, touching yourself while I watched. Remember that it was all for me, that when we're together, this is all for me."

Unbelievably, after a night of nonstop pleasure, I still had another amazing orgasm in me. My muscles tightened and I rose on the balls of my feet, holding him for support. I tipped my head back, but he caught my chin and forced me to look at him, ordering, "Open your eyes."

I did, and our gazes met as I climaxed, from just the pressure of his fingers. I squealed and squirmed, shocked by the magnitude of the release that suffused me with heat and paradoxical shivers of cold.

He slipped his fingers from my body and pressed them against my mouth. I opened obediently and sucked them clean, never taking my gaze from his. My pulse beat so fast, I was sure he could see it in my pupils.

"I'll call you a car. If that's all right?" he asked, taking my hand and drawing it to his mouth. He kissed my knuckles one by one.

"Well, it's that or put my bare ass on a subway seat." I pulled away, disentangling our hands. The moment had skirted a bit close to a line I didn't care to think about. I didn't want to get anywhere near intimate. At least, not emotionally. Not yet.

"Excuse me, Ms. Scaife, what's this "yet?" I scolded myself.

I think Neil picked up on my discomfort. "I'll call the front desk. It will only take a moment."

He went back upstairs, but I stayed where I was. Getting close to a bed with him was not a great idea. My legs trembled as I turned to check myself out in the mirror. I looked recently fucked, no doubt about it. My lips were swollen, my eyes bright, my cheeks pink. My hair was tangled, and my attempts to comb through it with my fingers only made it look stringier. I'd sweated all the curl out.

I would have no problem staying focused on our little “game.” I already felt naughty, and I hadn’t left the hotel room yet. A thrill ran through me. Every step I took, I would be thinking about Neil, thinking about the fact that I was doing something “bad,” and I was doing it because he’d told me to. All the anticipation I’d felt earlier in the evening crashed over me again. Was this how it was going to be between us?

"You might be in trouble, self."

Neil came back downstairs just as I had collected my garment bag with my work clothes, and my purse. "They'll have a car in five minutes."

"I think I'll go and wait in the lobby." I certainly wouldn't sit down, and god help me if I dropped anything, but it would keep me from falling back into bed with him.

He came to my side and put his arms around me, for a surprisingly sweet hug. "Thank you, I had a wonderful time tonight."

"Me too." I rose on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "We'll do this again soon?"

"I hope so. Oh, and bring that iPad back to the office, will you? I have some things I'd like to add to it."

"Will do," I assured him, and then, when I couldn't think of any other way around it, "I'll see you in the morning."
"Yes, see you in the morning." He grinned almost bashfully as I closed the door behind me.

* * * *

Being with Neil had overwhelmed me to the point that I forgot what day it was. Or was about to be. Or technically was, since it was after midnight. I got home, changed, scrubbed my makeup off, and crawled into bed at two-thirty, never thinking to check my phone's alarm.

I woke to the shrill beeping at five-thirty, and almost had to manually peel back my eyelids. Holli sat at the end of my bed, her huge brown eyes wide above her coffee mug. She was wearing her pink running suit over a gray sports bra. "Someone forgot her morning commitment."

"I remember now." I sat up, wincing at soreness in all my limbs. Thursday morning was usually our morning to work out together, but I'd gotten enough of a workout with Neil. "Do I have to?"

"Yes. You told me I wasn't allowed to let you make excuses." A truly naughty smile crossed her face. "And you have to tell me what happened last night."

Some friendships have clear-cut boundaries, wherein all relationship talk ends strictly at the bedroom door. That is not our friendship. I pulled on my sweats and blearily climbed out of bed. "Give me ten minutes."

Holli and I have memberships to the twenty-four hour gym down the block from our apartment. It's a small facility, and one of the best things about it is that it's usually pretty empty early in the morning. Which might not bode well for the place staying open, but for now, it suited our needs just fine.

The need for privacy, for example, when you're laying out all the tawdry specific details of wild sex with your boss while you're also trying to get your cardio in on the elliptical.

"No, he did not!" Holli gasped, taking a sip from her pink aluminum water bottle. Her exclamation was in reaction to my whispered recounting of Neil wanting to put his face exactly where he'd ended up putting it.

"He totally said that," I made the scout's honor sign and crossed my heart. "Remember how I used to go on and on about the night in L.A., and how it was the best sex anyone ever had, ever? He topped it by, like, ten." A shiver went up my spine just remembering it. "The sick thing is, I want to do it all over again, like right now. We had sex three times last night. He made me come right before I left. I should have reached my yearly quota of partner-assisted orgasms by now."

"Is he going to want to do it again?" she asked, hitting a button on the display.

I nodded. "From every discussion we've had, I've gotten the feeling that he wants to make this a regular thing. And get this..."

My speech halted. I didn't know if I could actually utter the next part out loud. I was worried about what she would think, which was silly, considering how open she was about kinky stuff the rest of the time. I was surprised at how much I cared whether she liked Neil or not, and I worried she might make some kind of judgment about him before ever meeting him.

But why would that matter? I shook myself out of my funk. "Okay, don't laugh. But he wants to do some domination and submission type stuff with me."

Her eyes grew wide. "Oh my god, why would I laugh at that? It sounds hot! Are you gonna do it?"

"Yeah. I'll try anything once. And at least I know he can make it worth my while." I snickered to myself.

"Look at you, all sexually confident." Holli grinned, showing her perfect white teeth. "So, how does this work, do you like, get dressed up in leather and beat the shit out of him, or - "

She caught me mid-swallow from my water bottle. I almost choked.

"How can you take something awesome and make it sound so unsexy? But no. He's into being the boss."

"Doesn't he get enough of that all day long?" She shook her head. "Look, whatever you want to do.
I don't think I could let someone tie me up."

We finished our workout and I headed back to the apartment to shower and get ready for work. Holli just hit the showers at the gym, and would head to her shoot. I would never appropriately disguise my envy that she had a job where it was not only acceptable, but also preferred, for her to show up looking as ratty and unpolished as possible. Today, she would be posing for American Apparel, so the comfy clothes she'd be wearing all day just added insult to injury.

*Hey, you're the one who injured yourself*, I reminded myself as I slipped my keys into my purse and left the apartment for work. I really had overdone it, and not on the elliptical. My inner thighs ached; my voice was hoarse from enthusiastic overuse, and even my feet hurt from the constant curling of my toes. It felt wonderfully wrong to strut into work the morning after fucking your boss, still sore in your muscles and other parts.

I practically ran to catch the train, and hurried up to the office. I was later than usual, but I so did not want to arrive after Neil. I didn't want him to think I was going to take advantage of him by shaving time off my work day in trade for sex. Lucky for me, he was actually behind schedule.

I put my coat away and placed the ipad on his desk, then stopped to dash off a quick message in the note app.

*Thank you for the wonderful night. May I have my panties back, please? I may or may not be wearing any right now.*

I smiled to myself. I totally was wearing panties under my green pencil skirt, but he didn't have to know that.

"Excuse me?"

My head snapped up, and I closed the iPad cover guiltily. "Hi, can I help you?"

The woman standing in the doorway was basically cool on legs. She wore matte black leather pants, an artfully faded t-shirt for a band I'd never listened to but whose name I'd heard everywhere, and a gold fringe necklace. Her skin was light brown and flawless, and she wore a nude lip gloss to offset the dramatic look of her heavily lined eyes. She smiled, and she had the friendliest, warmest smile I'd seen on anyone whose last name wasn't Osmond. "Hi, human resources sent me up. I have an eight o'clock interview?"

"Yes, of course." I motioned for her to follow me back to my desk. I spoke over my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Mr. Elwood is running late this morning -"

"No, I'm not." Neil's voice held a note of surprise. He stepped from behind the partition that sectioned off the coffee counter. He raised his eyebrows as he sipped from a plain black mug.


"No, thanks." She pushed her dark, straight hair over her shoulder and stuck out her hand for Neil. "I'm Deja Williams."

"Neil Elwood." He shook her hand and gestured toward his office. "If you don't mind, I'm going to have my assistant, Sophie, sit in on the interview. She's been here longer than I have, and knows better than I do what it will take to replace her."

I followed them into the office, trying to mentally control the embarrassed flush creeping up my neck. How could I have missed that he'd already arrived? I hadn't wanted to be late, and on top of it, how was it going to look to our interviewee? Don't try too hard, she's not going to be that difficult to replace. That's how it was going to look.

Neil paused beside the desk and flipped open the cover on the iPad. My note still illuminated the screen. I saw the corner of his mouth twitch as he read it, and it took all my willpower not to smirk.

His eyes met mine for only a second then his full attention turned to Deja Williams, who sat in the chair across from him.
I haven't quite gotten over the cultural conditioning that makes us view other women as competition. It's an ugly truth, but there it is. Deja should have been my kryptonite. She was cool and beautiful and funny. She answered every question sincerely, but with a warm, safe humor. She was perfect. According to all my usual math, I should have hated her instantly.

But it was impossible. When Neil asked about where she'd started in the industry, her answer was, "My plan originally was to work up from the mail room at Rock Monthly, become a staff writer eventually. Then I realized writing really wasn't for me." She told us what she liked about her last boss: "Margot wasn't too specific, but we were on the same wave length, and I always made sure I got her what she was looking for."

To top the perfection sundae, Deja had to leave her current job due to her boss stepping down as Editor-in-Chief of Rock Monthly. She didn’t just want the position I was vacating, she needed it, and she was capable of doing a good job.

Even if I didn’t stay at Porteras, I wanted to know the job I’d done for two years was taken care of. She was absolutely the right person to do that. I was convinced of it.

I think Neil was, too, though he played it cool. "So tell me, if you were working your way up, why would you want to take another position as somebody’s assistant?"

Deja shrugged. "I'm good at it. Look, I believe I should play to my strengths. If I'm the best at what I do, I'm going to do that, even if it’s in a supporting role."

Then I understood what it was about her I liked so much. She was like Holli's long lost sister or something. They both had the same no-nonsense attitude, couched in a likable personality.

Neil asked her a few more questions, then Deja shook our hands and I showed her out.

"How do you think it went?" she asked me bluntly as we stepped into reception.

"If it were up to me, you'd be in." Maybe I shouldn't have said that. I'd overstepped my bounds. "I'm not sure how many other candidates he's interviewing, though. I'll try to put in a good word."

"Thanks." She beamed her wide, mega-friendly smile at me, and we shook hands again, because I didn't know what else to do.

When I came back into the office, Neil had just gotten himself another cup of coffee, and I frowned at him. "Are you trying to put me out of a job?"

"Hmm?" He glanced down at the mug in his hand. "Don't be foolish. If I'm up and about I can get the occasional cup for myself. What did you think of her?"

I nodded, determined to come up with an answer that wouldn't seem like I was pushing too hard in any particular direction. After all, I didn't have to work with her, not for long, anyway. And while I knew my job pretty well where Gabriella was concerned, I still had no idea how to be the right assistant for Neil. But when I opened my mouth, what came out was, "You have to hire her."

He looked surprised at that. "You liked her?"

"Didn't you?" Was he crazy? She was amazing. "I really think she's going to be the right person for the job. She'll fit in with the people here, but she's not as uptight as the people here. And she has experience."

"You're lobbying fairly hard for her," Neil said with a small smile. "Does this mean you're taking the position in the beauty department?"

"I..." I frowned. I hadn't given him an answer yet, and he'd interviewed my replacement? Then again, he'd been planning on replacing me, anyway. "Was this all to force me into making a decision?"

"No, it wasn't. I swear." He headed to his office, and I followed him. "You said you didn’t want to be my assistant, and I agreed, it would be inappropriate. Why, did you make a decision?"

I leaned against the door frame and cross my arms. "Yes. I'll take the job."
“Good.” He turned on the iPad and lifted it up, tapping my note on the screen. "The answer to this request, by the way, is no. And take off the ones you have on."

*Oh my god.* Could I do that? I looked over my shoulder at the glass wall in the outer office. Beyond, in the lobby, Ivanka was talking into her headset, and the elevator doors had just opened.

“Not here,” he said, the corners of his mouth twitching as he suppressed a grin. “Go back to your desk and do it. I’m not going to take them from you. I’m not starting some demented collection. I just like the thought of it.”

“How will you know if I’ve done it or not?” The tip of my tongue darted out to touch my upper lip as I smiled at him.

“You never know, Sophie. I might check.”

The outer office door opened, and Rudy came in, headed straight for Neil’s office. Neil gestured to the chair in front of his desk and greeted him with, “Did you hear from Carol this morning?”

“I did, and it isn’t good news. They want to drop February from a two page ad to a single, and they said they would get back to us about March.”

Neil raised an eyebrow at me. “You have a project you need to finish, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” I chirped, and left to do as he’d ordered.

Neil was right. There was no way I could be his assistant. We would never get anything done.
Chapter Eight

The next day, about a half hour after my usual lunchtime, Neil called me into his office. He'd had sushi delivered from some swanky catering place. My stomach had been growling all morning, and I wondered if our "friends" provision would cover me snatching and eating his entire lunch. At quarter to noon, he'd dumped a huge stack of letters on my desk and said, "I really need these to go out today. Could you possibly take a later lunch and get them done now?"

"Not a problem," I had assured him. Inwardly, I'd thought some very uncharitable things about my boss.

When he summoned me in after the delivery guy had painstakingly unpacked and plated his lunch, I realized why he'd delayed me.

His entire desk was cleared off, and he sat in his high-backed black chair, jacket off, sleeves rolled up, no tie as usual. A feast of sushi rolls and sashimi, more than one person could reasonably eat, had been laid in delicate dishes on the top of the desk. My mouth watered. I tried to convince myself it was because Neil looked so good today - he totally did - but it was mostly to do with the food.

"Close the door behind you, and hit the lock."

The tone of his voice instantly diverted my thoughts from my empty stomach to my empty... someplace else. I locked the door and took a second to pause and collect myself before turning to face him.

"Have you eaten yet?" he asked, gesturing with his chopsticks.

I shook my head. "No, someone asked me not to go to lunch until one-thirty," I reminded him.

He winked at me. "Well, now you see my sinister motive. Sit down."

I put my hand on the back of the chair across from him, and he said, "No, not there."

I hesitated, unsure of what he wanted. Was I supposed to sit in his lap and eat sushi? The idea wasn't unappealing, but it was a little cliché. "Is this some weird Don Draper thing?"

He scoffed. "You should know me well enough by now to have more faith in me." He moved aside a square black plate with a truly intimidating arrangement of sliced rolls and patted the desktop. "Up you go."

I looked down. I was wearing an ivory lace skater dress, not exactly the length made for sitting on desks demurely. But I had a feeling he wasn't aiming for demure. I edged past him and hopped up, careful not to sit on or put an errant hand in one of the other plates. I primly crossed my ankles and gazed down at him expectantly. "What do you mean, I should know you well enough by now? We only met officially on Monday. Now it's Friday."

"I think we packed quite a lot of getting to know each other into our night together." He slipped his hand between my knees and pushed my legs apart. "Open."

I took a shaky breath. Beneath the dress, I wore lacy crème-colored panties. I hadn't been on a purposeful seduction mission; I just liked to match my underwear to my outerwear sometimes. But the panties were awfully thin, and awfully skimpy. If I spread my legs, he was definitely going to get more than the standard panty flash.

"What happened to not screwing around at the office?" I asked, allowing him to slowly part my thighs.

"I don't believe I ever said we wouldn't screw around in the office. I said we'd have to be discreet about it." His big hands rested on my inner thighs, and I gasped as he pushed them wider apart, putting me on total display. "I also don't believe I said we were going to screw around now."
"Explain to me how this isn't screwing around." I bit my lip to stop a moan as his fingertips skinned over the sheer material of my panties.

Abruptly, he pulled his hands away and reached for the plate he'd moved. He settled it on the desk between my spread thighs and picked up his chopsticks again. Then he smiled up at me as though absolutely nothing were amiss, suppressing what would undoubtedly have been the cockiest grin in the history of maleness. "We're eating lunch."

He lifted a slice of roll, and I had to physically restrain myself from snapping at it like a starving dog. The second the cool rice and soy paper hit my tongue, I groaned gratefully.

"I'm sorry to make you wait so long," he said, truly apologetic. "But I wanted to have lunch with you. I was hoping to spend some time with you this weekend, but Emma is going to be in town this evening through Monday morning. I'd like to be able to see her as much as possible while she's here."

My heart sank. I'd secretly been hoping he would want to hook up again on the weekend, but I hadn't pressed. We were keeping it casual, and I figured since I wasn't the one going through a messy, stressful divorce, I'd let him take the lead. Still, it wasn't like I thought he should put me above his daughter. I swallowed before answering. "No worries. Isn't delayed gratification supposed to be a turn on?"

"Delayed by six years?" He poured some steaming hot sake from a ceramic carafe and handed me a cup, clinking his own against mine before sipping his.

_Did we really drinking at work?_ I asked myself. Oh well. When in Rome.

He fed me two more slices, both with distinctly different tastes and textures. As a meal, it was better than the salad I'd been planning on getting from the building's commissary. As a sexual experience...

Every time he moved, he brushed against my bare legs. When he reached past me for something, his bare forearm grazed my thigh. The backs of his knuckles swept up my knee as he took food from the plate. The entire process was an exercise in frustration. All I wanted was for him to push my panties aside and plunge his fingers into me, something he seemed not at all inclined to do.

I noticed the plate of sashimi, and the cold slices of ruby red, raw tuna. Then a very bizarre association connected in my mind. "I don't know if I want you to eat tuna from between my legs."

Neil had been sipping his sake. He choked on it. He covered his mouth with his napkin, coughing and laughing at the same time. I couldn't help but laugh, too, and quipped, "Was that on purpose or something? Was this all a setup for a bad tuna joke?"

"No!" He'd recovered from his violent coughing, but his face was still bright red, and his eyes sparkled with humor. "No, it was not. I forgot I was dealing with a depraved individual. I'll try to plan our encounters with an eye for avoiding anything you might spin into juvenile humor."

"Good luck with that." I leaned down, as his hands came up to dive into my dark hair. _I'm so glad I left it down today_, I thought as his mouth covered mine and his palm cradled the back of my skull. It might not seem like it would be terribly sexy to kiss someone who's just been eating sushi, and okay, maybe it wouldn't be my first choice without a toothbrush, but in the moment I would have kissed him if he'd just been eating limburger cheese. Every "accidental" touch had set my body on fire, and the intimacy of being so exposed to him had only ramped up the sensations about a thousand percent. He kissed me slowly and thoroughly, and pulled away with obvious regret.

"As much as I would like to sweep all of this onto the floor and climb on top of you, that would create a bit more of a mess than I would be capable of explaining when Rudy came to our meeting at three." He brushed his lips across mine once more, briefly, then pushed back in his chair. "I have something for you, since we won't be seeing each other over the weekend."

He turned in his chair and grabbed the iPad he'd lent to me before.

"There's some reading material I hoped you might look at. I've made notes in the margins." He
passed it to me, the screen already illuminated.

I looked down. There were indeed three books loaded in the ebook app. *The Submissive's Handbook. The Big Book of Kink. The Dominant Mind.*

"I felt that before we moved forward, you might want a primer. Then you'd be better equipped to tell me what you'd like to do, and what you're comfortable with." His voice was soft and low, like a caress, and I shivered. The cover of one of the books showed an artistic black and white photo of a woman on her knees, her back arched, breasts high, her body held in the position by the intricate binding of ropes. Her eyes were blindfolded with a pale sash, her mouth parted as if in anticipation. My pussy flooded with renewed heat at the thought of Neil doing such a thing to me.

"I'll read these," I said, a little out of breath from the vivid flash of fantasy that had assaulted me. I tore my eyes away from the picture to meet his amused expression. "Definitely."

"I'm glad to hear it. Although, I don't expect you to learn everything on your own. I'll be more than happy to give you some hands-on training." He moved the plate between my legs aside and helped me down from the desk.

"How selfless of you." I smiled sweetly at him as he stood.

"I prefer my partners to be as informed as possible."

The plural reminded me of something I knew I would have to ask, eventually. I supposed I should ask it right then. "Speaking of partners..."

"I think I know what you're going to ask." He scratched the back of his neck, looking sheepishly away. "I know you're not looking for a serious relationship, so please, don't misinterpret my intention when I tell you... I would rather we kept our sexual relationship monogamous."

*Okay, not the answer I was expecting.* Not that I minded. "I'm fine with that. If one of us meets someone and we'd like to pursue things we can just... end this." My throat closed up a little at the prospect. I'd just found him again; how would I feel if Neil suddenly ended things a few months down the road to date somebody? That would be horrible.

I pushed those feelings of insecurity aside. I couldn't expect that he remain available to me if his needs changed, just because I wasn't ready for something more. He couldn't expect the same thing of me, either. I added quickly, "Besides, that's really safer."

"Ah, another point we do need to cover before we go any further. I saw my doctor on Wednesday afternoon and had some tests done, the usual, you know." He waved a hand dismissively. "The results will be in on Monday, but I have to apologize for not broaching this subject sooner. That was irresponsible, and disrespectful of me." He cleared his throat and added, "If you wouldn't mind -"

"I'm on the pill." I shrugged. "Endometriosis. If we both get an A+ on our tests, I guess we could try it without. You know, eventually, down the line."

There was a weighty silence between us, just for a moment, and then a knock at the door interrupted us.

"Yes, one moment," Neil called, checking his watch. "Damnit. That will be the editor... I've forgotten his name."

"One of our editors?" I squeaked.
"Don't give anything away," he warned confidently, as though he knew I was capable of playing this game. He reached for a plate on the desk. "Here, take this with you, if you're still hungry."

Put entirely off my game by the unfinished erotic encounter, and the fear of being caught, I stumbled away in a daze. I popped the lock as quietly as I could, but when I opened the door, Jake stood there with a peculiar expression.

"Locked door lunch?" he asked, his gaze dropping to the square black plate.

"I ordered a bit too much," Neil answered for me, cool and casual as ever. He was back behind his desk, eating his lunch as though I hadn't just been sitting in front of him with my legs wide open.

"Please, come in... Jake?"

I saw the annoyance at not being remembered flash across Jake's face, and high-tailed it out of the room.

* * * *

I started reading *The Big Book of Kink* on the train home.

I missed my stop and had to backtrack on another train.

Most of the stuff, I knew about already - God bless the internet - but I'd never considered actually doing any of it. And true to his word, Neil had added notes to the margins. Copious notes. It was one of those that had caused me to miss my stop.

Beside an essay about spanking, he'd practically written an essay of his own: *Have you any idea how many times I've jerked myself off fantasizing about you, and this? I can still feel my palm smarting from slapping your cute, tight little ass. The way you licked your lips before asking me to spank you. I'd like very much to do it again.*

By the time I got back to the apartment, my blood was pounding in my veins, and I hated, hated, hated the real world for intruding on my sex life. I opened the door and Holli called, "Hey!" from the couch. She was watching and old episode of *Blind Date.* "There's a package for you."

I went to the little dinette set against the wall, where a medium-sized shipping carton sat. I didn't recognize the company that had sent it.

Frowning, I opened the envelope in the plastic bag sealed to the outside of the box. There was a packing slip with a personal message: *A little something to congratulate you on the new job. Do let me know if you find a use for them.* Neil.

Maybe it should have bothered me that he was spending so much money on me. But I love presents. Shamelessly, and without reservation. I used my apartment key to break through the tape on the box as Holli came to stand beside me. She picked up the note. In a dementedly cheerful sing-song, she said, "Someone's got a sugar daddy."

"Oh, shut up." I was grinning like an idiot as I pulled out a black box with a picture of a makeup bag, brushes and product arrayed around it.

"What new job?" Holli asked, looking up from the note, her brow creased in confusion.

I was equally confused. I had no idea what the hell Neil had sent me. Makeup? Was this some kind of test for the beauty department? And then my eyes fell on the product description on the box.

"Oh my god," Holli giggled. "Are those sex toys?"

I opened the lid and pulled out a facsimile powder brush with thick, rubbery bristles. The base twisted open for a battery. I couldn't believe how something so funny could also be so sweet, and so sexy.

"Yup." I laughed as I held it out to her. "Vibrators, the lot of them. Oh, no, wait..." I dug through the box. "No, there is also naughty stuff to put on your junk to make it tingle."

"I need somebody to make my junk tingle," Holli sighed, carefully dropping the brush into the box. "Tell me about this new job!"
That took some of the wind out of my sails. Despite the promotion, I felt more success in my sex life than my working life at the moment. In fact, I wasn't entirely comfortable telling Holli the truth about my new job, now that she was already as excited for me as if I had gotten it on my own. "Neil offered me assistant beauty editor."

"That's fantastic!" Holli caught me up in a celebratory hug that was almost too enthusiastic for my weary bones. "When were you going to tell me?"

Laughing, I stepped back. "It's not a big deal, it's kind of a consolation prize for being left behind by Gabriella. She put me on a candidate list, and Neil doesn't feel right keeping me on as an assistant when we've slept together. So don't get too excited."

Holli's expression fell at my evident disappointment. She held out her arms and hugged me. "Oh, Soph. That probably means Gabriella was going to give you the job, anyway. If she had stayed. And Neil is smart enough to see that." Leave it to Holli to put a positive spin on what felt like a falsely gotten gain. In a last ditch effort to cheer me, she snapped her fingers and her jaw dropped. "We should have a party to celebrate!"

Holli lived for parties. She once bought hats and streamers to decorate for the couch's birthday, just to have an excuse for cake. But we hadn't had a get together in a while now, and with my entire life in upheaval, it would probably feel good to blow off a little steam with friends.

"Fine," I conceded. "But hold off until next Friday, at least. And don't invite a bunch of people from Porteras."

"Fine. Non-work friends only." She frowned. "God, you don't seem happy about this promotion like, at all."

She'd caught me. I sighed guiltily. "I just feel like maybe Neil gave me the job because... you know."

Holli knew better than to try and push that off with platitudes. She was an optimist, but not to the point that she believed she could bend reality with her positivity. "Well, you'll have to just work extra hard to prove yourself. But just to yourself; you don't have to prove anything to Neil. Remember, no one else knows you've slept with him. As far as everyone in your office is concerned, you're just getting promoted, without all that other stuff attached.

"You know you can do this job, Sophie." She gripped my shoulders and gave a firm squeeze. "You know you're right for this, no matter what someone else might think about how you got the job."

It's ridiculous how easily a hug from your best friend can make your self-doubt vanish.

* * * *

It being Friday night, Holli had a party to go to. She invited me, but I declined.

"Abstaining in favor of staying home with your new toys?" she correctly observed as she put on her earrings in the mirror by the front door.

Sometimes, I'm utterly blown away by Holli's beauty. It's a very bizarre thing, to live with a model. She looks like a normal person ninety percent of the time, but when she gets dressed up to go out, it's like the pages of a magazine come to life in the living room. She was rocking a short, sequined, navy tube dress with a low scooping back and long sleeves. Pointed black pumps with tons of toe cleavage and a five-inch heel added to her already willowy height.

"You look amazing," I said, with the same earnest appreciation I'd had for Cinderella's looks when I was four.

"Thanks!" Holli smiled at her reflection and turned, making finger guns at me. "You sure I can't tempt you?"

I shook my head. "I have new sex toys and dirty books. There's nowhere else I want to be tonight."

That was a lie, I reflected as she locked the door behind her. I'd rather be underneath Neil in his big
bed at the W.

I retrieved the package of sex toys and took it with me to my bedroom. I took out each of the items one by one, smiling with slight embarrassment. I'd never had a man buy me something so intimate before, and it made me all giggly and naughty feeling. And oddly touched. Vibrators disguised as makeup were really the perfect gift for when you're casually fucking an assistant beauty editor. He'd put thought into this.

I took a battery from my nightstand and slid it into the lipstick. I turned it on and it buzzed to surprisingly strong life in my palm. There were two other vibes, a mascara wand with an obscenely bulbous tip, and the powder brush, as well as several "compacts" holding cooling, warming, and sensitizing gels.

Lunch with Neil had keyed me up enough that the vibrations from the subway had almost set me off during my evening commute. The books and his scandalous messages typed in them? Hadn't helped. I stripped out of my clothes and dimmed my bedside lamp. In the low, golden glow, I lay propped against my pillows and pressed the vibe against my clit, sighing in relief at the direct stimulation.

The note typed in the e-reader came back to my mind. Neil had jerked off thinking about spanking me? The idea that we'd both been fantasizing about each other for six years was a heady one. Was he as addicted to me as I was to him? There hadn't been a single time in six years that I'd masturbated without thinking about him. Even when I'd been fucking someone else, and yes, shamefully, even when it was someone I cared about, he would frequently slip into my mind at the crucial moment. More often than not, it had been his voice in my memories that tipped me over the precipice, and my deepest fear had been that I would shout his name as I climaxed.

I rubbed the vibe in slow circles around my clit, my fingers closing over one hard nipple and tugging. I imagined Neil lying in his bed at the W, his massive cock in his fist, wanting me, thinking of me, remembering the way I'd screamed and writhed in his lap as he'd spanked my ass. I thought of the way he'd looked when he'd walked through the door to find me fingering myself for him. I wished he could see me now, getting myself off with his present.

My eyes flew open. He could see me. If I took a picture.

I set the vibe aside, my clit aching as I sprinted from the room, through the empty living room, to where my digital camera hung in its bag on the coat rack. I was so not doing this with my phone, at the risk of sending it to Facebook or something by accident.

I raced back to my bed and lay back. Before I picked up the lipstick vibe, though, I reached for the sensitizing cream in the compact. It didn't feel unlike lipgloss as I tested its slip between my thumb, index, and middle fingers. I slicked it over my clit, rubbing it in, savoring the sound of the cream - and my own cream - moving beneath my fingers.

My hands shook as I turned on the vibrator and nestled the length of red plastic between my labia. I drew my knees up so that my feet rested flat against the bed, and moved my pelvis in small, careful circles. I wanted more contact, wanted to come, but I wanted to wait.

I wanted him to see.

I leaned my forearm against my knee, so the camera wouldn't shake. Then, slowly, I drew my hand down my body, my breath speeding until I was panting, my fingers spreading my labia on either side of the vibrator. I gasped and twisted my hips, too aware of the tingling, hot sensation as my most sensitive area absorbed the salve. My pulse pounded in my pleasantly swollen flesh, as if every molecule in my body were rushing directly to the source of my pleasure. The stimulation of the powerful vibration was nearly too much. I pushed the tip harder against me and curled my toes, my entire body going still in the gripping shocks that radiated from my clit as my release shot through me. My legs shook, I shouted, "Oh, fuck!" and snapped the photo.
I laid there for a long time, the camera in one hand, the vibrator in the other, still running. It was its cheerful buzz that forced me to sit up and finally turn it off. Pushing sweat-damp hair back from my face, I slid the button on the back of my camera to display the last picture taken.

When I saw the photo of my labia spread obscenely around the shaft of the sex toy, I almost lost my nerve. My clit was nearly as red as the bright plastic pressed against it, and my skin and pubic hair glistened with the greasy sheen of the cream. Two fingers in a v pulled back my folds, and they were wet and shiny, as well.

I couldn't give that photo to him, surely. I would die of shame if anyone ever saw it. I was close to deleting it when I imagined his reaction. That stilled my thumb over the button.

Neil wanted me. I didn't need any further proof than what he'd already given me. We'd been lovers for six years - although all but two nights of those years had been spent apart, and without me knowing his real name. We'd been given the most serendipitous chance to indulge ourselves in each other all over again. I had to take the full experience.

The only problem was getting the photo to him. He was spending time with his daughter; I didn't want to spring this on him via cell phone during that. I considered email, but that seemed a bit risky, and I didn't know if he'd open it on the company server, which could lead to some embarrassing complications.

I looked to the iPad sitting on my dresser, and a truly evil thought occurred to me.

I had never looked so forward to the end of the weekend in my life.
Chapter Nine

After a weekend of restless nights, I was more than ready to see Neil again. I was on high alert from the moment my eyes opened on Monday morning. I showered, dressed, and commuted on total autopilot, the words of the manuals I had poured over flickering through my mind. Neil’s trick with the sushi on Friday seemed to have flipped the switch on my libido to full power, and he was the only person capable of returning me to factory settings. Believe me, I’d tried, over and over, with the toys he’d sent me. But no matter how many times I’d come, I was still miserably turned on.

I spotted him as I came up the steps from the subway station across the street from the office. He stood beside his Maybach in the early morning light, smiling in a way I’d never seen before. He opened the rear passenger door, and I saw the reason for his kind expression.

A woman my age stepped out of the car. It was Emma; I had no doubt. My heart stuck in my chest. She was an earthy sort of pretty, her blonde hair falling in a messy bob below her newsboy cap, and she wore a distressed denim jacket that was just a little too big for her. She looked so cool and kind of like a rock star, and at the same time very much like someone's daughter as she reached up for an easy hug from her father.

I felt like a voyeur. This was a part of Neil's life he hadn't invited me into. Even though I'd innocently witnessed the tender scene, I felt like I was intentionally snooping. I kept my head down and hoped he wouldn't notice me as I crossed the street and charged up the wide steps.

I couldn't help but overhear him ask, "You'll call me when you land?"

I heard her reply, in an accent that almost matched her father's, "Yes, of course. But I'm not flying the plane. You needn't worry about me, I'll be on Valium in the back."

The rest of the conversation was left behind me when I slipped through the revolving glass door and into the building’s lobby. I gave my pass to the security guard at the desk and kept moving. It was while I stood, waiting for the elevator, that I became acutely aware of Neil's scent, and his presence behind me. I had memorized his cologne without realizing it, had learned the pitch of his breathing.

My head reeled. Were these things I'd just picked up on in the last five days? If so, what the hell was wrong with me? Or were they something I'd clung to since that night six years ago, fine tuning in my subconscious this entire time? And if that were the case, what the hell was even more wrong with me?

"Good morning, Ms. Scaife," he said evenly, and I turned my head. He was closer than I had expected him to be, and about to be closer when the doors opened and we stepped in to the elevator together.

"Morning," I managed to return as we stood shoulder to shoulder with staff from Porteras and a few people from other businesses in the building. "Did you have a nice weekend?" he asked benignly, his gaze fixed on the numbers over the doors. We stopped once and three people got off, leaving four of us. Unfortunately, the other two were both from Porteras, and they were listening to every word of our conversation. Not because I was so fascinating. I wasn't so egotistical to think their eavesdropping had anything to do with me. They were listening because Neil was their new boss, and they were trying to get a handle on his character.

Neil had to keep up his part, too, pretending not to notice them. Which is why I felt a sliver of pity for him when I responded with a chipper, "I did. I just lay in bed and read, all weekend long."

I saw a faint flush creep just above his collar. I suppressed a smirk.

When we got to the office, Deja was waiting outside, holding a studded leather satchel in lieu of a
briefcase. She beamed at us. "Reporting for duty."

"Good morning, Ms. Williams," Neil greeted her.

"You can call me Deja, I'm not too formal." She shook his hand, and then mine, making a finger gun at me as she searched for my name. "Sophia, right?"

"Sophie. Very close."

Inside, I took Neil's coat before I hung up my own, and showed Deja which hanger to use. "I'm running late. Again." I whispered to her. "I usually never am, but it's been a hell of a week, with the takeover."

"Big change from Auto Watch?" she asked.

I paused. I wasn't sure what she was asking. "Excuse me?"

"You know, where you guys worked before the Porteras sale?" She seemed to get that I wasn't getting it, and we both stood locked in a moment of confusion before a realization visibly hit her. "Didn't you come here with Mr. Elwood? From his car magazine?"

"Oh!" I shook my head, relieved that our miscommunication was over. "No. No, I used to be Gabriella Winters's assistant here. I've only been working for Neil for like five days." I quickly amended, "Mr. Elwood. I mean."

The morning got tied up showing Deja around the office, introducing her to people, running over how the phones and interoffice messenger system worked. As I went through my tasks for the day, I painstakingly explained the Porteras procedures to her. Not once did she stop me or tell me she knew what she was doing and didn't need my help, which was a nice change from some of the people who'd served - briefly - as second assistant to Gabriella. Deja was serious about doing a good job, and she wasn't interested in proving that she was better than me. I liked her more every minute.

At eleven-thirty, Rudy breezed into the office and announced that it was extremely urgent that he see Neil. While Rudy introduced himself to Deja and gave her the third degree on her background, I went to Neil's door and knocked. I could have called him; it would have been easier, but all day long I'd been desperate to get a moment alone with him. I'd left the iPad on his desk, but people had been in and out of meetings with him all morning. I had no idea if he'd had a chance to look at the surprise new wallpaper image.

"Come in," he called, and I got my answer almost immediately when I stepped inside.

"Close the door," he said gruffly, rising from his chair and coming toward me. I did as I was told and popped the lock. When I turned, he was already at my side.

"If things are too intense, or you're uncomfortable, you can say 'red' to stop completely, 'yellow' to dial things back a bit." He whispered beside my ear, so Deja and Rudy wouldn't hear beyond the door. "Like a traffic light," he clarified. "Do you understand?"

"I do," I said breathless, leaning into him.

He dragged me from the door - with a firm grip on both my wrists – to the desk. With a hand clamped on the back of my neck, he bent me over and jerked up my black leather pencil skirt. I wore textured black tights beneath it, and he gripped the crotch of them as he leaned low over my back.

I raised my head just bit and blew a strand of hair out of my mouth. "What does green mean, then?"

"It would mean 'proceed.' Just like a traffic light, as I said."

His fingers were twisting the fabric of my tights, and my body was hyper aware of the hard edge of the desk grinding into the fronts of my thighs.

I wriggled a little in his hold and said, "Green."

Faster than I could anticipate his movement, he ripped the crotch of my tights, found my panties and pushed them aside. When he encountered my wet, willing flesh, he jammed two fingers in roughly, and
a strangled sob escaped me.

Calmly, he reached for the phone and dialed the desk outside. "Deja? Tell Rudy I'll meet him at the car... No, it's not urgent. 'Urgent' is code, he just wants to go for a drink. Tell him I'm on to him, and I'll be down in five minutes. I have to go over my schedule for the rest of the week with Sophie, I won't have time later... No, not now. You stay by the phone, Sophie can show you when we're finished."

I listened to whole exchange, the air crushed out of me by the desk, my pulse in my ears - and other parts - almost drowning out the sound of their conversation. His fingers stayed still in me, as deep as they would go, until I was fairly certain I'd taken in his knuckles, too. White-hot sparks of mingled pleasure and pain surged through me. I thought I might come from the pressure alone, and wondered how reasonably quiet I could stay if that happened.

He leaned back down and kissed the shell of my ear, tender in contrast his body pinning mine. "I see you enjoyed the gift I sent you."

I whimpered, trying to rock my hips, to relieve the pressure. He didn't let me move, but he did slowly circle his fingers inside me.

"And you read the books. You even put notes in the margins." He sucked my earlobe between his teeth and nibbled. My whole body shuddered. "There was one note in particular that I liked very much. Shall I read it to you?"

I nodded, and held back a mewl of disappointment as he let me up and eased his fingers from my cunt. He picked up the iPad and turned on the screen, then opened the book. "Here, in the section about determining what type of submissive you are..."

My breath caught audibly. He looked up, a small, crooked smile crossing his lips. "You've written, 'yours.' What do you mean by that, Sophie?"

"I don't know what else to call it." I swallowed, and wet my suddenly very dry lips. I could do a lot of things with him that I would have never expected myself capable of doing with another person, but admitting that out loud? I couldn't even look at him. I would have to work on that. Maybe a time when my stomach didn't feel absolutely sick with denied desire. "When we're together, I... I don't just like to be controlled, I need to be completely controlled. And it isn't something I've wanted with another man, or would want with another man. I want you to dominate me. I don't want anyone else doing these things to me. Just you. You make me feel things I've never imagined feeling. I want more of that. I want to be... yours. Totally under your control. And that scares the hell out of me."

I looked up. When my eyes met his, I was shocked to see tenderness in his gaze. My entire body was trembling. I was so frustrated at losing his touch that I thought I would weep. Maybe it was the frank way I'd just had to speak to him, or the heightened danger that someone might try to walk into the room and catch us. Maybe it was the entire weekend, full of unfulfilled longing and highly sexual reading material. I was shaking all over, like a drug addict denied a fix.

"Oh, Sophie." His voice was raw and strained. He looked for a moment as though he didn't know what to do. Striding over to me, he took my quivering body in his arms and pulled me into his lap as he sat down. His hand found its way between my thighs, gentler this time, his fingertips parting me to circle my clit. I clung to him, my arms around his neck, my face buried against his shoulder, stifling my relieved sobs into his shirt. Tears streamed down my face. I was embarrassed at how much I wanted him, that my emotions had gotten the better of me. I came with a full-body shudder, breathing in the scent of his cologne, reveling in the touch of his bare skin under my wrists.

It was exactly what I needed, to come from his touch, not a plastic toy or my own hand. I needed it to be him, to get my release under his total control.

He smoothed my skirt down and pulled back, just enough that he could look into my eyes. "Better?"

I nodded, a ragged breath escaping me.
“Sophie, I am so sorry.”

I slid from his lap and wiped my eyes, hating that he could plainly see the tear tracks on my cheeks. My makeup would be wrecked, I was sure of it. "No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cry. I swear, I'm not psycho..."

"Of course you're not." He seemed put out at the very suggestion.

"This is entirely my fault. I teased you on Friday, sent you home with books to groom you in the submissive mindset then I sprang this on you, knowing that you’re inexperienced. You weren’t at all prepared for what you felt."

"But it didn't bother me," I insisted. It really hadn't. “If someone told me that getting pushed over a desk and roughly fingered would be the highlight of my workday, I would high-five myself. I can handle this. Really, I can."

"It isn’t a matter of will power. You needn’t be ashamed. I’m the one who should be." He examined the spot of mascara on his shirt then carefully donned his jacket to cover it. "It was irresponsible and selfish of me to take things too far, before you were ready."

I stood awkwardly in front of his desk, not knowing what I should do, or how I should respond. I never felt this way with anyone else. My brain was usually working a mile a minute, staying a few steps ahead. Now, it seemed like it was shut off.

"Will you come over tonight?" He asked, pulling the black key card from his wallet. "To talk? No expectation of sex."

"Of course." I took the card from him.

"Good. Right now, I'd like you to take the rest of the day off."

"That's not necessary," I said quickly, swiping at my cheeks. God, I felt like such an ass. "I can pull myself together."

"I know you can." He came to stand beside me, his hand on my upper arm, stroking me through my shirt. His voice was low and patient. "This isn't because of anything you've done. It's because of what I've done, and I'd like to make it right. What you're feeling is the result of bad behavior on my part. It’s called sub drop, I’m sure you read about it in the books I gave you?"

“Yeah.” I had read about it, but I’d kind of skimmed over it. “I thought maybe it wouldn’t apply to me because I’m...”

“Capable of controlling your emotions through sheer force of will?” Neil asked with a raised eyebrow.

I sniffled miserably.

“Sometimes, it’s unavoidable. But this was. I should have taken more time with you before diving straight ahead with all this. And now I’m not able to properly handle the situation because I was stupid enough to cause it at work. Please, take the day off. Consider it a gift from me. You'll still be paid. I'm sure Deja is more than equipped to run the office for half a day, and we can meet tonight at my suite and talk more. But in the meantime, please take care of yourself. I feel terrible that I can’t do more at the moment."

"Are you sure?" I was still hesitant to take any special treatment. Going home and getting a hot bath and a nap did sound tempting, though. "I mean, I'll go, but – “

"Porteras hasn't failed in fifty years, I doubt it will on the one day you're not present to hold the place together." He leaned down and kissed my cheek. His face was much softer midday than in the evening, without sharp five-o'clock shadow on it, and I liked that he let his lips linger a touch longer than he had to for a casual peck.

"Give yourself a moment. I'll leave first, and tell Deja you're not feeling well. And I’ll see you tonight." He gave my arm a gentle squeeze then walked away, leaving the office door open a crack
behind him.

I waited a few minutes, until I knew he had left. He'd taken down the decorative mirror that Gabriella had hanging behind her desk, so I sat down to his computer and woke up the screen. Immediately, I saw Photo Booth open in the dock.

"You're just as vain as the rest of us, Mr. Elwood," I said under my breath. "You're just sneakier about it."

I checked my face on the screen and dabbed around my eyes with a tissue. It didn't look too bad. I shook my shoulders and took a deep, cleansing breath before heading out to my desk.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Deja asked as soon as I emerged. She'd been sitting in my chair, but immediately got up and motioned me over.

I nodded, mortified. "I'm fine. I'm just... not feeling great. I'm going to go home."

"Did he upset you in there?" Her head turned just slightly, as if she were about to back away. "I don't want to work for a yeller."

"He's not a yeller. He's not mean, I'm just..." I didn't want to lie to Deja, but obviously I couldn't tell her the whole truth. I quickly settled on, "I'm just having a hard time with this whole company takeover thing. I really liked my old boss."

"I get that, believe me." She gave me a closed-lipped smile of understanding as she nodded her head. "See, I thought you were upset because I'm here, taking over your old job, and you really liked Mr. Elwood or something. I thought you guys had worked together for a long time."

"No, we've just known each other for a while." That didn't sound too bad. People met and did not fuck each other every day.

She crossed her arms, comprehension dawning on her face. "Okay. Okay, that explains it."

"Explains what?" *Go, go, just go, don't become friends because you'll be tempted to tell her too much just go -*

"I'm not sure I should say anything." She pressed the fingertips of one hand to her forehead. "This is embarrassing, but I kind of got the impression that you guys were... I don't know. Playing James Spader and Maggie Gyllenhaal in there."

I knew my mouth was hanging open, and I hoped she took it for shock because the idea had never occurred or was revolting to me. "Wow, you have a very good imagination."

I'd said "imagination" and not "intuition," right?

"Yeah, a little too good. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to say anything about you or your ethics. At all." She shook her head. "I'm sorry, let's start over. Hi, I'm Deja."

I forced a laugh, and hoped it didn't sound too psychotic. "It's okay. No offense taken."

"No, that was off-sides." She shrugged. "It's just... have you noticed the way he looks at you? And he's always looking at you."

"No, I never noticed." I suddenly remembered how very sick I was supposed to be. I blinked and pressed a hand to my temple. "I'm sorry, I have just the most crushing migraine, and the lights are going to drive me bonkers. Are you going to be okay here today?"

"I'll be fine; I think I have this under control." She patted the desk. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yup." But tomorrow, I'd be sure to wear my romantic-speculation-proof hazmat suit.

* * * *

A long afternoon off restored me, just like Neil had predicted. I was still furiously embarrassed at how the morning had turned out, and disappointed in myself for being so strangely emotional about sex.

Okay, yeah, the books had mentioned that heightened endorphins and stuff could mess with my emotions. But I was usually bulletproof when it came to separating sex from feelings.

When I arrived at eight, I entered the suite and heard the sound of the shower running in the loft.
David Bowie's "Lady Stardust" played over the sound system throughout the room, loud enough that I pitied Neil’s temporary neighbors.

I wondered if I should stay downstairs, or go up and join him. But he'd wanted to talk tonight. Maybe he didn't want sex at all? I wasn't sure where we stood on that subject at the moment. Still, I put down the bags of takeout I'd brought along, slipped off my coat, and headed up the stairs.

The shower in the bathroom was "European" style. Which I guess means that all of Europe loves spilling gallons of water directly on their bathroom floors. When I'd used the damn thing, I hadn't quite gotten the trick of it, and would have much preferred a curtain to the single glass wall.

I revised that opinion, when I realized what a great view it gave me.

Neil stood beneath the spray, his hair slicked back from his face. The single overhead light cast shadows on his body, deepening the lines of muscle in his back and legs. But the best part of catching Neil in the shower was, hands down, the loud, awful singing. I'd always remembered him as being composed and crushingly cool, and interrupting his secret bathroom rock star moment completely destroyed all that. He was just a guy, with the same goofy habits and bad shower singing the rest of us had. I was so relieved to discover this, I giggled to myself, and he turned his head, startled. His momentary expression of shock immediately transformed into bashful laughter as he wiped water from his eyes.

"I'm fairly certain that spying on a coworker in the shower is against the Porteras sexual harassment policy." He turned off the water and reached out for a towel to wrap around his waist.

"I think fingering them on your desk might also be a no-no. I'm not saying that two wrongs make a right..." I lost my train of thought as he came toward me, towel riding low on his hips. He reached for me, and I dodged him. "No! You're all wet. And I have takeout downstairs, so don't dawdle."

I hurried to the living area, where I started unpacking cartons from the plastic bags I'd carried it in. Neil was down just a few moments later, barefoot, bare chested, clad only in his black cotton sleep pants. He leaned over my shoulder, hair still dripping from the shower.

"What is all this?" he asked, dropping a quick, wet kiss on my neck. I squealed and tilted my head away to avoid the now cold drops clinging to him.

"It's me, paying you back for the burgers the other night. I hope you like greasy, bad Chinese." I popped one of the containers open and inhaled the scent of syrupy orange chicken.

"The worse, the better." He sat on the couch, grinning up at me. "You look like you're feeling well again."

"I am." I gave him a little smile. "I'm sorry about earlier, I was such a complete ass."

"No, no, it was my fault, entirely." His brows drew together. "I sometimes mistake your... enthusiasm for experience. I know that you're game to try new things, and that excites me. This time, to the point where I didn't exercise good judgment."

"I'm not usually that emotional about sex. I'm pretty good at shutting down that part of me entirely." Put bluntly like that, it sounded sort of pathetic. "What I mean -"

"Don't be silly, Sophie. I don't want you to completely separate your emotions from sex." His tone softened. "In my experience it doesn't make for very good sex. Happiness, at the very least, should be an emotional side effect of sex."

He had me there. I'd never had anything close to a great sex life, only just serviceable. I sighed. "Okay, you're right. I was emotional. I was emotional about sex with you. It's just... I feel like I've been sober for six years, and now I've fallen off the wagon. I'm completely hooked on you. It's terrifying."

"Agreed." He reached for my hand and pulled me down to sit beside him. It felt strange to have all my clothes on, pressed against his bare skin. I'd come over in some tight-legged jeans and a striped blue sweater, totally casual, but I still managed to somehow be overdressed.
"I feel the same way. It is a heady thing, and confusing, when I'm trying to separate you from the Sophie who's been on my mind for six years." He laced our fingers together as he continued, "I had the two of you mixed-up this morning. I sprang some very rough play on you, in an unusual setting, without consulting you first. I'm very sorry, and if you do wish to continue this relationship, you can trust me not to make the same mistake in the future."

"If I wish to continue?" I sat up a bit, alarmed, my elbow braced against the low back of the sofa. "If?"

"I never want you to feel trapped with me," he admitted. "And I don't want you to forge ahead as my submissive despite misgivings. If at any time you find this arrangement isn't working, I want you to be comfortable telling me, whether you want to remove just the submission element or get out entirely. I'm not going to do anything vindictive or extreme about it."

I kicked off my ballet flat and ran my painted toes over his big, bare foot. "I read about that orgasm denial thing, in The Big Book of Kink. I thought that was what you were doing. But it's supposed to be a punishment, right?"

"It can be used as a punishment, but I prefer it as a game all on its own." With his other hand, he reached up and smoothed back a few errant strands of my hair that had escaped my messy top knot. His fingers skated down my jaw as he lowered his hand. "As a matter of fact, there are some rather interesting things you can do with mental conditioning and orgasm training, though the books I gave you didn't go in-depth. And I would never initiate such an activity without your express consent."

"What kind of things can you do?" I noticed suddenly how warm my face was, how my pulse was fluttering with anticipation. I was totally turned-on, but I didn't remember how I got that way. I guess around him, I was in a constant state of sexual readiness.

His answer was much more clinical than I expected: "Training your body to respond to a certain pattern of touches, or a verbal cue, so that you can climax on command."

The sound of his voice already made me clench in anticipation, so I could easily imagine him being able to make me come from a word alone. "That seems like it could be kind of dangerous. What if you made me get off when we were out in public or something?"

"I would only do that if you asked me to," he said softly. "That sort of exercise takes an extreme amount of trust. We can revisit the idea another time. Tonight, let's just start with the basics. Only if you want to, of course."

"Um, yeah. I pretty much wanted to fuck you when you were in the shower," I said, shocking my own ears with my bluntness. "But first, let's eat."

It seemed counter intuitive to stuff my face with cheap takeout if I wanted to feel sexy, but I was starving, and the sound of my empty stomach would probably not make a good soundtrack to an erotic interlude.

We sat on the couch, happily digging through cartons with our chopsticks, when suddenly a thought occurred to me. "Oh my god, I'm so sorry. You said at the office that you don't eat stuff full of sodium."

"Rules are made to be broken. Occasionally," he amended with a guilty pause.

The quiet reservation in his answer pricked at me. "You ate a burger the other night, too, after you said no red meat."

"I try to be conscientious of my health most of the time," he said wearily. "But it's damned depressing when I'm sitting next to someone who was born the same year my metabolism deserted me. My father died in his fifties, and I'm aware that the clock is ticking for me, too. So I try to stay healthy and avoid things I shouldn't have. Bad foods, stress, the lot of it. But the odd indulgence won't kill me."

I felt like an asshole for bringing up a subject that was clearly touchy to him. I plucked a chunk of broccoli from the container of beef stir-fry and held it out to him. "Hey! I found Neil food."
He gave me a very stern look, but couldn't keep it up for long, and we laughed as I fed him a bite. "Ugh, I'm stuffed." I patted my stomach, which was slightly rounder after my scarf'd down meal. "I hope you like a woman with a potbelly."

"I like you," he said, quite serious as he sipped from his glass of water. "Any way I might have you."

"Well, we have that in common." I grinned at him. "Oh! I got my paperwork in the mail today!" I hopped up from the couch, figuring I could explain away his puzzled expression easier with the documentation in hand. I retrieved the torn Planned Parenthood envelope from my purse and brought it to him.

"Certified disease free." I handed over the print out. "Well, the diseases they tested for. I could still have Tuberculosis or something."

His gaze flicked up to me before he briefly scanned the page. "Just a moment, I have mine, as well."

He set his food aside and wiped his mouth with one of the chintzy paper napkins from the bag. Then he rose and retrieved his iPad from the counter by the wet bar. When he handed it to me, I whistled, impressed. "Your doctor emails you?"

"It's an online chart, it will tell you everything you need to know." He paused. "And then some, so don't..."

"Dig around in your fascinating medical history? I'll try to restrain myself." I looked over the pertinent information, noting with interest that his height was listed at 6' 2", his weight one-hundred seventy-eight pounds. "Okay. So... now that that's out of the way, and we covered the whole sub drop issue..."

He smiled as my gaze drifted up to the loft. Chuckling softly, he said, "I've picked up on your subtle hint."

I walked ahead of him up the stairs, grateful that my butt always looks so good in jeans. "I hope the bedroom isn't too 'vanilla' for you," I said, making air quotes as I gained the top step.

"Anything we do here will be fairly vanilla," he assured me. "You're not ready for extreme. Besides, I don't have rope or a paddle, I don’t exactly travel with them."

He was going to paddle me eventually? A sudden rush of heat made me reflexively press my thighs together. "Well... you have your hand. And a belt."

His closed-lip smile sent a wave of pure lust through me, so powerful my mouth dropped open and my breaths became more pronounced, my chest rising and falling visibly as he slowly walked toward me. The tight skin of his bare shoulders gleamed, so did his eyes as he looked down at me. It was so strange, how different he could be from one minute to the next. I'd read about that, too, the mindsets involved in Domination and submission. I wondered if I seemed different to him, too.

The fact that I was too timid to ask kind of clued me in that I probably did.

With one finger, he traced the long tendril of a fallen lock of hair down my neck, to my collarbone. "If I used a belt on you, you wouldn't sit down for a week."

"Sophie, come back to me," he said gently, firmly, and I opened my eyes. "Nothing is going to happen tonight that you don't want. But I do have an obligation to protect you from yourself at this point. No belts. Would you like to pick a safe word, or shall we use the traffic light again?"

"Red, yellow, green?" I ticked them off on my fingers. "That sounds good to me. Easier to remember."

"Very good. And I trust you to use them. If there is anything you don't want to do, you need only use the safe word." He stepped back. "Undress, please."
I didn't hesitate. I whipped my sweater off, revealing my pink bra with dainty black polka dots on it, and black lace edging the cups. I wiggled out of my jeans, revealing the matching thong.

"Very pretty," he said, his lids heavy as he regarded me. "Now, take your hair down."

As I reached up and began pulling out bobby pins, he walked in a slow circle around me. His voice was low and dark as he asked, "You enjoy spanking then, Sophie?"

"I do." More than enjoyed it. My pussy clenched at the memory of that sweet anticipation, the moment before his hand fell.

"I do, Sir," he corrected me softly. "While we're playing, you will call me Sir."


"Did you like it the first time I spanked you?" He stopped behind me and sank his fingers into my loosened hair, gently shaking the rest free. Pins fell to the carpeted floor and I heard them, that was how heightened my senses became when he was near me.

Concentrating was difficult, with his fingers moving languorously over my scalp. I bit my lip to stifle a moan before I answered. "Yes, Sir."

"What did you like about it? Take your time," he advised me. His chest brushed my shoulder blades, and this time I couldn't suppress my whimper.

He leaned down, so his lips were beside my ear. "What was that?"

My clit throbbed in time to the slow circles he stroked through the roots of my hair. My hands strayed across the fronts of my thighs, tentatively covering my mound.

He stilled. "Don't touch." It took a surprising force of willpower to drop my arms to my sides.

"Answer my question, Sophie." His breath was hot across my earlobe.

"Tell me what you liked about me spanking you."

"I liked..." I licked my lips. I shifted my feet on the carpet, but it didn't ease the heaviness, the ache to be touched. I had a moment of fear; it had taken me only minutes to reach this intense state of longing. How would I make it through the rest of the night?

Focusing on my answer helped. "I liked waiting for it. The anticipation. And the way it felt."

"What did it feel like?" He withdrew his fingers from my hair, letting it fall around my shoulders in a silky curtain. He moved away from me, only for a moment, to turn off the lamp. We stood in the near dark, with just the warm light from the lower level filtering up to us.

"It hurt. In a good way. And it felt naughty, like I had done something I wasn't supposed to." It was easier to speak when he wasn't touching me. "I wouldn't mind not being able to sit down. It's like a fun souvenir."

I hadn't been so pleased with it while I'd been flying to New York six years ago, but I had just been left money on a nightstand after sex. My pride had been more bruised than my ass.

His hands skimmed down my arms. "So, you view the spanking as a reward, rather than a punishment?"

Goosebumps rose on my arms in the wake of his palms. "It wouldn't be a very effective punishment for me, Sir. I'd do bad things just to get attention."

He laughed softly. "I'll have to think of something else, then." Coming around to face me, he said, "Take off your bra."

My fingers trembled as I reached for the clasp. He watched me, his expression unreadable in the dim light. I unhooked the band and let the straps slide down my arms.

He waited until I'd dropped the bra on the floor to reach for me. With one hand, he stroked a lazy circle around the pink tip of my breast. It must have taken him an amazing amount of self-control to stand there, unaffected, and I don't say that to flatter myself. I knew he wanted me as much as I wanted him; he was just somehow able to cover up his desire. To be patient, to take his time. When all I wanted
was to have him inside me.

Brushing back a lock of my hair from the top of my breast, he leaned down and took one nipple into his mouth. I thought I might topple to the floor under the onslaught of sensation that battered me. He looked up, amused, and released me.

"I think I will spank you tonight, Sophie," he said, his voice low and full of wicked promises. "If you are a very, very good girl."
"How do you want me to be good, Sir?" I asked Neil. I was breathless and bare under his gaze. My panties were absolutely plastered to my vulva, and I was certain my skin was moments from bursting into flame. The thought of earning what I desired, from the only man who could give it to me, ramped up my arousal to an almost uncomfortable level.

“Answer a few of my questions. After today, I don’t want to make any mistakes with you.” He idly traced one fingertip around my nipple then went to the bed to sit on the edge. “I need to know what you’re comfortable with. We can push limits later. Tonight, we’ll start simply.”

I couldn’t believe he wanted to talk at a time like this. Wasn’t he supposed to just throw me down and, you know, dominate me?

“I already know how you feel about spanking,” he said with his half-smile. “What about oral sex?”

“For me or for you?” I asked, and my clit was screaming for me, for me, for me!

“Because I think you already know that I’m a big fan of having you go downtown.”

“For both of us,” he clarified. “How would you feel about sucking my cock?”

Fuck, did he have to use that word? I was so freaking turned-on already. “Good question.”

“Take all the time you need.”

I looked down at him and wet my lips. I couldn't believe what I was about to say, and when I spoke, the words didn't even sound like my own voice above the blood pounding in my ears. "I want to. I want to suck you off and swallow your cum.”

He lifted an eyebrow.

The safe-sex question had been bouncing around in my mind since that afternoon, when I'd received my test results. When would I be comfortable having unprotected sex with Neil, assuming everything came out hunky dory on his tests, too? And okay, maybe I should have consulted an objective party, or considered for a few days, because my thinking on the subject was going to be constantly clouded by horniness. But I'd decided that I trusted him, at least about this.

Maybe not with plane tickets.

“I’d like you to wear a condom when you’re fucking me. But I hate the taste of latex, we’ve both been recently tested, and it’s a lower-risk activity.” I made a face. “That last bit sounded like a pamphlet.”

As long as we do use a condom during intercourse, I’m comfortable with that,” Neil said after a moment. “As for safe words, we’ve discussed red, yellow, green, but if at any time you’re unable to verbally respond, you can signal to stop by showing me your fist and opening and closing your palm. Can you show me that now?”

I did as he instructed. It seemed kind of strange to me, but the more we planned for what we were going to do, the more turned on I got. The experience was oddly reminiscent of being super hungry and trying to decide what to order at a restaurant. I shifted from one foot to the other, just to feel my panties rubbing me.

“Very good. Is there anything you wouldn’t like to do tonight?”

I thought about it a moment. “Um, no. Not really. And I’ll tell you if you do something I don’t like, but I’m open to pretty much anything that’s going to feel good.”

“And is there anything in particular that you would like me to do to you tonight?” He stood again and closed the distance between us, but he didn’t touch me. He just stood there, looking down at me with his gorgeous, devious smile.
My heart was beating somewhere in the vicinity of my collarbones. I thought my pulse might choke me. “I don’t want you to go too easy on me. Part of what gets me off when I’m with you is the way you tell me to do things, the way you can get a little rough. I don’t want you to smack the shit out of me, but don’t treat me with kid gloves. Make me submit.”

“Is that an order?” He grinned. “That’s not terribly submissive.”

I took a step forward, bringing my bare skin against his, and smirked up at him. “Maybe I need a better teacher.”

His hand came up to lightly grip my lower jaw, his thumb pressing hard, but not painfully, into my cheek, and I gasped.

“Do you?” His tone was completely different, a dark, low voice that was a caress and a bite all at once. My spine stiffened, my eyes went wide, and I shook my head as much as I could with his hand holding my face.

“I can’t hear you, Sophie.”

“No,” I whispered, then cleared my throat. “No, Sir.”

"I would like you to start touching yourself." He left me and went to the bed. He watched my hand trail down my stomach, let me get almost to the Promised Land before he stopped me. "Not there."

I pulled my fingers guiltily from the waistband of my panties.

"Cup your breasts," he ordered, and I did, grateful to ease the aching pressure in them. My thumb strayed over my nipple, and he tutted disapprovingly. "I didn't say you could do that. Take your hands away."

"I'm sorry, Sir," I whispered, and though I ached, I did as he'd commanded. I was dripping wet and throbbing. I felt high, actually high, from the barest physical sensation.

He waited a long time, watching me with my hands at my sides, making nervous fists beside my thighs. He braced his elbows on his knees, one hand falling between them, like he was sitting in front of a television and not a desperate, panting woman. "You're doing very well."

"Please," I moaned. My breasts were tight and hot, my nipples hard peaks. I had to touch them. The air in the room hadn’t seemed chilly before, but I shivered slightly, and goose bumps raised on my skin.

"Please what?"

"Please, Sir, let me..." What? Come? I knew there was no way. We'd just barely started, and he’d been willing to let me go the entire weekend. "Touch myself," I finished, my voice a pathetic whimper.

He waited for an eternity, considering. His gaze moved up and down my body. I swore I could feel it.

"Nothing below the waist," he said finally. His eyes fixed on my fingers as I rolled my nipples against my thumbs. “What do we say now, Sophie?”

“Thank you, Sir,” I groaned. Standing before Neil, touching myself the way I was, I had this crazy thought that I wasn’t me. I was some other Sophie, who had no rules or obligations. No worries. No student loans. Every mundane detail of my life melted away, and I was just some girl in some hotel room, doing whatever it took to get fucked by the man sitting in front of me.

Unbelievably, the familiar sensation of the beginning of an orgasm coiled behind my clit as I pinched and tugged my nipples. Growing bolder under his stare, I dropped my head back with a loud moan.

"Don't come."

My eyes snapped open, and I straightened, my fingers stilling. He was absolutely serious, a little bit cross with me, even. Though I knew we were just pretending, excitement licked through me like white-hot flame.

He rose and walked slowly behind me once more. Grabbing my hips so suddenly that I gasped and
staggered slightly, he forced me to bend at the waist and brought our clothed pelvises against each other.

"You will be allowed to come tonight. But not yet. Not right now." My cunt clenched at his words. "You'll beg me to let you come, first, and then you'll beg me to let you stop."

Beg to stop coming? I couldn't imagine asking for any such thing. That would be like asking to be denied air or food. I ground back on him. He released me, one arm sliding along mine to catch my hand and steady me on my feet.

"Get a pillow. Place it in the center of the foot of the bed, and lay across it on your stomach with your ass propped up." He gripped the back of my panties and tugged them down, just slightly. "And drop these to your knees when you're in place."

I thought I might come from the friction of walking. I was in so much trouble. I wondered when I could reasonably begin begging.

My hands shook as I positioned the pillow as he'd told me. I lay down, taking a slow, deep breath as my warm skin touched the cool white duvet.

He stood at the end of the bed, looking at me, and I wriggled a little as I pulled my panties down.

"Just to my knees, Sir?"

"Right..." his fingertips followed my panties from just below the curves of my buttocks, across the ticklish backs of my thighs, to the bend in my knees. "There."

I squirmed, my breath catching in my throat.

One big, warm hand stroked my back, raising tingles on my spine. When he reached my hips, I tensed for the first blow. But he didn't spank me. Instead, he gently rubbed his palm over a bare cheek. He abruptly raised his hand again, and again I tensed. I willed myself to relax. It would come.

"How hard do you like it?" he asked, his fingertips skimming along my crack.

"Hard?" I asked uncertainly. "Pretty hard?"

"Like this?" When his hand connected with my backside, it shocked me. It was no love tap, but a stinging hot slap. The pain spread in a delicious halo from the place where he'd smacked me, and I jerked, muffling my groan in the bed.

"Harder or softer?" he asked, his fingertips brushing over the place he’d created.

"Harder," I whimpered.

"Excuse me?" he asked, affronted. "Harder, Sir," I amended. Then, "Harder, please, Sir."

"Good girl, Sophie." Another blow fell, definitely rougher than the last. I shouted, a mixed sound of relief and pain. Neil clucked his tongue. "I am more than happy to spank you exactly as hard as you wish, but we are in a hotel room. You'll have to keep your voice down."

"Keep my voice down?" I grinned to myself, hiding my face in the bed. Neil didn’t care about the neighbors, if his off-key shower concert had been any indication. I’d read the books; I knew that a Dom might ask a sub to stay quiet as a control exercise.

"Can you spank me again, Sir?" I asked, pumping my hips against the pillow.

This time, the slap he gave me made me yelp loudly in surprise.

"If you can't stay quiet, I'll gag you," he warned. "And don't tell me how to do my job."

"I'm sorry, Sir." And was I ever sorry. I had just learned a pretty important lesson about the difference between a punishment spank and a fun one, I realized.

Neil smoothed his hand over my skin. His fingertips eased between my cheeks, and I held my breath as they skimmed down. "Was that hard enough for you?"

"Yes, Sir," I moaned, moving my hips just slightly, urging him along.

"Do you need another?" A finger slipped into my cunt. He slowly, easily pushed in, and made a low sound in his throat. "I think you might. Do you want one?"
I did want him to spank me again, but I didn’t want him to stop what he was doing with his fingers.

“Ask me, Sophie. Nicely.”

“Please, Sir.” I gasped and panted, moaned and writhed. His fingers withdrew, tracing my wetness over my slick, swollen labia. He parted me gently, circling the opening of my vagina, dipping in just barely, retreating, dipped in again, deeper, more with each maddeningly slow motion, until my legs were trembling.

Then he stopped, his hand resting in exactly the right place, doing exactly the wrong thing. No movement, no penetration, no friction, and I screamed my frustration into the duvet.

He did spank me then, harder than the last times, and I couldn’t help my cry of mingled pain and fulfilled anticipation.

“I told you to keep quiet.” His fingers withdrew, and with that hand he grabbed my hair and wound a length of it around his fist, jerking my head back. He balled up my sopping panties and pushed them against my mouth.

I had no illusions as to what he was going to do with those panties. I could smell my arousal on them, knew that his fingers were still smeared with my juices even as they tangled in my hair. Never in my life had I felt so dirty, so utterly nasty and depraved. I’d also never been so fucking turned on. I groaned, "Green," and he pushed my panties into my mouth.

"Remember the signal," he reminded me, opening and closing his palm before my eyes.

He spanked me again, the sound of his skin on mine making a resounding crack in the quiet hotel room. His fingers pushed into my cunt, and I clenched around him. I was going to come. There was no doubt in my mind. My body was on fire, my hips bucking, a high, thin wail building up in me. All of the thick, hot feelings in my pussy merged into one wave of sensation, and just as the wave was about to crest, he stopped.

"Not yet, Sophie."

I shuddered, physically stopping myself from tumbling over a precipice. My toes curled. Calves cramped. I wanted to climax, needed it like I needed air. I supposed I could still come; I was so close that a deliberate arousing thought would tip the scales. But it wouldn’t have been nearly as satisfying as obeying orders and seeing exactly how far he would take this.

"Stand up."

My clit ached with longing. He wasn’t going to finish me off? A hysterical sob welled in my chest as I got to my feet, but his intent became clear when he said, "Get on your hands and knees in the middle of the bed."

I did as I was told, breathing hard through my nose. A drop of perspiration trembled on my lip, and my mouth was slightly open to accommodate the balled-up panties inside.

I stayed still on the bed while he went to the nightstand for a condom. I listened, my hearing crazily tuned into his movements, his position in the room. I heard his breathing speed up just a moment before he knelt on the bed behind me. Then his hands fell to my hips, pulling me back. My flesh was swollen and slick, and he rubbed the wide tip of his cock up and down my slit a few times, coating the latex that covered him until it was good and slippery. He nudged my clitoris once, twice, and I tried to push back, but his hand on the small of my back stopped me.

"I'm going to fuck you, Sophie," he said, pushing against my opening. "And I'm going to let you come."

I whimpered. I needed my release so badly. Our stolen moment at the office hadn't been nearly enough to make up for the long, frustrating weekend. When the head of him stretched me, I groaned and pushed back. That only caused him to withdraw entirely.

"But I'm going to take my time."
My shoulders sagged, and my forehead touched the bed. All I could do was hold perfectly still and hope – praying the most profane prayer possible – that he would just get it over with and make me come already.

He pushed inside halfway, and my breath made a strangled sound in my throat. I took him in with an ease that surprised me, like I had been custom fitted to handle his length, his girth. He slid out, and I clutched at him with my internal muscles. Then, he thrust forward and buried himself in me so deeply I gasped.

"Shall I stop?" He sounded concerned, and I knew he wasn't teasing, but really inquiring as to my well being. He leaned over my back, still hard inside of me, and reached to pull the panties from my mouth.

"Please, Sir, don't stop," I panted, my voice hoarse. My mouth had dried out with the handful of rayon that had been stuffed in it.

"You remember the words?" His anxiety was apparent. I wondered if he'd been with someone who hadn't used the safe word, or if he just didn't trust me to remember because of my inexperience.

"Neil, I promise," I said through gritted teeth. "Please, just fuck me."

He slapped my ass with a growl.

Neil Elwood growls during sex. There's a quote for Forbes.

The butterflies in my stomach rioted and my hands fisted in the bedding. I held my breath as he rammed hard into me, then withdrew and slammed in again. One of his hands slid from my hip down to my cleft, seeking out my clit. He stroked me in rough circles and I couldn't decide whether I wanted to push against his hand or back on his cock. Cold sweat broke out on my flushed skin. I panted in time to his thrusts, until I was practically hyperventilating. The release he'd denied me for so long built up again, and this time it wouldn't be denied. I raced toward the peak, breathless, unintelligible sounds bursting from my lips.

"Tell me, Sophie. Tell me what you're feeling." He grabbed a handful of my hair, pulling my head back.

I didn't recognize my own desperate, raw voice as I screamed, "I'm coming." He slammed hard against me, as deep as he could go. My legs shook, my arms trembled with exhaustion. Every millimeter of my skin flared with raw, sexual response. Everything was too much; his hands, his cock, the sweat dripping off my nose, the cramps in my feet as my toes clenched and released rhythmically with my orgasm.

I was vaguely aware of the brush of his tongue across my spine before he groaned, "I love to feel you come. Let's do it again, shall we?"

Still on fire, still reeling and dizzy from release, I could not escape his touch. He pinched my clitoris and held it, slowly pulled his body back to rock the head of his cock against my g-spot.

"Right there. Oh right there, oh please, oh god, yes," I babbled as I raced toward another climax, tilting my hips with his shallow thrusts. It was torture. He was just barely inside of me. My muscles clenched, holding his cock tight against that sensitive patch, and as I burned toward release with shrill gasps, he let go of my clit. My blood pounded back into the enflamed flesh, and that was all it took to make me spasm all around him, screaming, sobbing.

I couldn't take anymore, I realized with a shiver of sensation as he sank into me. He'd told me he wouldn't stop until I begged him. So, I begged him. "Please, Sir. No more."

He withdrew slowly. "Take the pillow. Put it on the floor and kneel on it."

Gooseflesh stood out all over my body. I rose on quivering legs and did as I was told, dropping the pillow on the floor at the foot of the bed. I knelt on it, and looked up at him expectantly as he stood before me.
He rolled the condom off and tossed it on the bed, then rubbed the massive head of his cock against my lips. “You only came twice, Sophie.”

“It was a little too intense, Sir,” I murmured, my tongue slipping out to touch the tight, satiny skin of his cock.

“Oh, then you are in trouble.” He took a breath as I ran my tongue over the slit in his tip. “Because nothing would give me more pleasure than to make you come over and over, with no let up, until you were screaming and sobbing and begging me to stop. Would you like that?”

“Fuck yes, Sir. Just as long as you don’t expect me to walk after.” My thighs trembled with exhaustion at the mere thought of what one more orgasm would have done to me.

I took him in my fist and pumped his length, slowly rolling his foreskin up and then back. I wet my lips and leaned forward to take just his tip into my mouth. Neil's hand fell on my head, not to urge me along, but to thread through my hair. He exerted no pressure, just held on, and his reaction emboldened me. I circled him with my tongue, slipping between the sensitive glans and the ridge of skin I glided back and forth. Then I dove down the length of him, taking him as deeply as I could.

He groaned, his hips rocking just a little in time to the bobbing of my mouth on him. I lightly raked the nails of my unoccupied hand down the back of his thigh and sucked him slowly, my tongue swirling round and round. I loved how strangely intimate a blowjob could be, almost more so than intercourse. I loved knowing that there was no possible way my partner could be thinking of anything else. The pleasure I took in performing the act made me feel almost selfish.

I tilted my head slightly up, the flat of my tongue lapping the underside of his cock. Neil watched my every move. When we made eye contact, I held it, knowing I was the focus of his entire world. A renewed rush of desire flooded through me at the heat I saw in his eyes.

Slowly and steadily, I kept my hand squeezing and stroking, my lips sliding up and down his length as far as I could. I cupped his balls and felt them draw up, heavy and hot in my hand. The telltale hitch in his breathing, the tight grip he had on my hair, all of it clued me in that he wasn't going to be much longer. I slightly sped up my efforts, and he groaned, "Oh god," before his cock jerked and a burst hit the roof of my mouth. It took me a second to react and swallow, but I did, and then again, and again, before I finally released him.

He let go of my hair and offered me a hand up. I took it, giggling, "I need to get a drink of water." He briefly pulled me into his arms, planting a quick kiss on my cheek. As I headed to the bathroom, he swatted my behind, and I snickered to myself.

When I came back after rinsing my mouth and using the facilities, Neil was in bed, sitting half-up against the mountain of lush, comfy pillows. I looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand. Quarter to eleven.

"I should probably..." I didn't want to finish my sentence, because it sounded an awful lot like I was trying to fuck and run. And I was, but I had work in the morning.

"No, come here. Just for a minute," he urged, patting the bed beside him. "I don’t want you to go home and have another drop.”

A part of me still thought I could leave and feel fine, but the other part of me remembered the way I'd burst into tears in his office earlier that day and how shitty I had felt. He was right; the whole Domination/submission thing really could mess with my head if I wasn’t careful. I decided to follow his lead on this one.

"How's your bum?" he asked as I slid in next to him. The sheets were crisp and clean and felt amazing on my naked skin.

I smiled and shook my head. "Bum? And it's fine. I'll definitely feel it tomorrow." At his look of concern, I quickly added, "But that was the point, wasn't it? I like to feel totally fucked? Especially since
we don't get together that often."
"We could see each other more frequently, if you wanted to," he suggested as I settled in at his side. I rested my head on his shoulder, and he put his arm around my back.
I snuggled down, letting his body warm mine. "I thought we weren't doing serious. Seeing each other a lot seems..."
"It doesn't have to be serious." He kissed the top of my head. "We see each other every day at work, after all."
"Hey, about that?" I rolled onto my side, so I could look him in the eye. "Deja totally knows something is going on."
His hand, previously stroking my upper arm, stilled. "What do you mean?"
"She mentioned it to me. She asked how long we'd worked together, and then she made some comment about the way you look at me." I nibbled my lower lip. "She says you're always looking at me."
"I work with you. How can I do that without occasionally looking at you?" he asked, a note of defensiveness creeping into his voice. Then he sighed in resignation. "All right. I have noticed my eyes straying unnecessarily. I'll work on that. And we'll avoid further... contact in the office."
The bed was ridiculously comfortable, and I felt myself sinking deeper into it with every heartbeat. "Where are we going to meet when you move out of this place?"
"It seems unfair that I'm forcing you to come to me, but you have your roommate..."
"We could keep our tradition of doing nasty things in hotel rooms. Or are you averse to coming to my apartment?"
"No, I just wanted to make sure you're comfortable with that." I shrugged. "And I can see why you wouldn't want to come to my place. It's kind of small."
"Would you be uncomfortable if I were to come over?" he asked, resuming his slow stroking of my shoulder and back.
Good question. How would I deal with having Neil in my space, where I lived every day? That made things a little too personal, didn't it? On the other hand... "Actually, it would be awesome to go to sleep right after sex, instead of getting in a cab."
"You never have to leave. I would never throw you out." His foot rubbed against my ankle beneath the blankets, and I couldn't help my smile. "As casual as we may be about it, this is still a relationship. I don't ever want you to feel used or objectified. I do care about you and your feelings, Sophie."
A knot in my chest, one I had never noticed was there, eased at his words. Even though my rational mind thought better of Neil, some part of me that had never dealt with trust all that well had been doubting him, without my ever knowing it.
A physical shiver of relief went through me, and he hugged me closer, asking in concern, "Are you all right?"
"Yeah, I'm great. I'm better than great." I leaned up and kissed him, a playful peck to let him know everything really was okay, then reluctantly rolled away from him. "That was amazing."
“That is just the tip of the iceberg,” he said with a grin.
I lay there, letting him play with my hair, on the verge of dozing. Something important pricked at my brain. It took me a moment to figure out what was bothering me. When I did, I had a hard time phrasing it. I started uncertainly, “Hey... when we’re together like this... you don’t have to always remind me of the safe word. I mean, I appreciate it, since I’m new at this. But I promise I’ll use it. I’m not stupid.”
His big palm rested against the small of my back, making slow, gentle circles with his fingertips. It stilled as he considered his answer. “I know you’re not stupid. It was never my intent to make you feel
that way.”

“I know, you’re just trying to be careful, because of my freak out.” It was totally illogical, but I felt like I had done something wrong.

“No. Please don’t feel embarrassed about that. Perhaps I should tell you…” He took a deep breath, and I braced myself to hear something really bad. “I have tried being submissive before and, caught up in the heat of the moment, I forgot to safe word. My Dom didn’t realize I was no longer enjoying myself, and it turned out to be a very bad experience. I would never want to do that to you.”

“So, was she just not good at her job, or…”

“He,” Neil clarified cautiously.

“Oh.” Neil slept with men, too? That was a surprise. Not necessarily a bad one, when I started imagining it in my head. In fact, it might turn out to be some quality tub time material, if I left out the whole “bad experience” part.

“He wasn’t a very good Dom. At the time I thought he was quite impressive. He suggested I sub for him so that I would know what it felt like when I was the Dominant,” Neil explained. “But not being submissive myself, I didn’t enjoy it at all. I was bound, I panicked, and I seriously injured my neck and shoulder.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to drag up bad memories.” Gosh, I knew how to kill a mood, didn’t I?

Then I had another thought, and I couldn’t not ask, not if I was supposed to go back into work tomorrow. “Um, I’m sorry for asking, but... it wasn’t... Rudy?”

He looked horrified. “My god, Sophie, no. He’s my best friend. I may be fairly easy going when it comes to sexuality, but my private life is more or less compartmentalized. Once I see someone in a certain light, I’m very unlikely to re-categorize him. Besides, Rudy is a bit of a prude.”

I snorted. “Okay. But listen, you don’t have to keep going on and on about the safe words. I know them. And I trust you to know if you need to stop and check on me.”

“I will take that note,” he promised. “But I will always be sure the safe words and signals are clear before we begin. That’s not just for you, it’s for me as well.”

“Deal.” I eased from the bed reluctantly, before I could be lulled to sleep by all the gentle touching and warm, naked skin. As I dressed, he watched me, saying nothing. I’d just pulled my sweater over my head when he finally broke his silence.

"Stay the weekend with me."

I had bent over to pick up my bobby pins from the carpet, but I straightened quickly at his words. "Excuse me?"

"When I'm back in my own apartment, where we'll have privacy and not be bankrupted on take out." The corner of his mouth twitched with a half-smile. "I don't know if you're aware, but I'm very rich. So, my apartment is spectacular."

I put my hands on my hips. "Listen, I'm not rich, and my apartment is still pretty spectacular, Mr. Elitist. But I thought we were keeping things strictly sex. Do you think it’s a good idea to spend a whole weekend together?"

He rose from the bed and walked to me, totally comfortable in his own nakedness, and pulled my clothed body against him. One hand groped my ass through my jeans, the other pressed against the small of my back. "Do I think it would be a good idea to spend forty-eight or more hours fucking you? Taking you in every room of my house, on every bed, desk, chair and table in the place?"

I purred a long, slow, "Mmmmmm," as he nuzzled my throat. "You make a very compelling argument."

"I should be settled in again weekend after next," he murmured against my skin. Red-hot sparks of desire simmered my blood. How could I already be craving him, when I was still exhausted from our
last encounter?
I groaned inwardly. "No, I can't that weekend. Holli wanted to throw me a party to celebrate my
new job. Which is really just an excuse for her to invite all our friends over to get hammered, but she's
really excited, and I promised her I'd do it."
"Well, I can hardly ask you to turn your back on your friends." He lifted his head and stepped back.
"What if I sent my driver to pick you up Saturday night, instead? We could sleep in on Sunday and have
breakfast?"
I hesitated. "You don't go to church or anything, right?"
A look of shock crossed his face. "Of course I do. You knew I was devoutly religious, didn't you?"
I didn't know how to respond. Then I realized, in a moment of panic that turned to indignation, that
he was joking. I slapped his shoulder. "Very funny."
"I worship at Our Lady of Extremely Late Brunch," he quipped, bending his head to kiss me, and I
lost myself in him as he wrapped his arms around me again. When he raised his head once more, he
asked, "So, two Saturdays from now, is it?"
"Yeah, I think that would be great." It would also be about a month into our "relationship" at that
point. I supposed one month wasn't unreasonable for a first overnight. And it would be like a little
vacation for me, just in the same city I lived in.
Oh, who the fuck was I kidding? I wanted to spend more time with him because I had a crush on
him. No matter how casual I might want to keep things, I really liked this guy. That didn't mean I had to
hang my hat on some romantic ideal. But I did like being with him.
Neil called me a car, and on the ride home I leaned my forehead against the tinted window and
closed my eyes. Another night without enough sleep, but it was worth it. I felt energized, and weirdly
renewed. I guess I'd never had enough mind blowing sex to realize what a great stress buster it could be.

The next afternoon, I was squirming in my office chair, trying make my sore ass more comfortable,
when Rudy came in and stood expectantly in front of my desk.
"You just missed him," I said, gesturing toward Neil's office. "He went down to the seventh floor to
check out the stilettos shoot."
"I know." Rudy's perfectly plucked and filled eyebrows raised a fraction. "I came here to talk to
you. And where is little miss..."
"Deja?" I supplied for him, bristling at his "little miss" comment. "He took her with him."
They had left me behind to start cleaning out my desk. I was glad for the time alone, because it was
definitely bittersweet to be moving to the beauty department. I'd been with Porteras for two years, all of
them in this very office. I was just going across the floor, but it might as well have been Mars.
"Good." Rudy thumped the desk with the side of his fist. "I needed to talk to you and not have the
busy-body blabbing it all over the office."
"Busy-body?" I remembered my conversation in bed with Neil. Had he mentioned it to Rudy?
"Why would you say -"
I don't think I've ever been the focus of so withering a stare. "We can cut the bullshit, Sophie. I
know you're sleeping with Neil. He's my best friend, he tells me everything. And apparently, Deja
knows you're sleeping with him too?"
"She suspected," I said quietly. "Will you lower your voice? Deja is a professional. More
professional than I am, because she's not sleeping with her boss. She just picked up on the vibe."
"I didn't come in here to talk about her, anyway. Tell me what you can about Jake Kirchner."
"Jake?" I frowned. "Not a lot. He's got a girlfriend, he does some freelancing on the side, lit crit
eassays, mostly - "
"No, no, no. Tell me something useful. Does he still talk to your old boss?" As he spoke, Rudy's eyes narrowed, slowly punctuating his sentence.

"Ah. As in, is he someone to worry about?" That wasn't a question I could really answer. I liked Jake a lot, and he'd never done anything to openly sabotage anyone, but he wasn't happy with the changes being made to *Porteras*, and he had always been at Gabriella's beck and call. If he had a chance to put her back on the throne, I knew which side of the revolution he would be on, without a doubt.

Still, I wasn't about to tell that to Rudy. Jake hadn't done anything to breach my trust, and Rudy hadn't done anything to earn it, yet. "I really couldn't tell you. I'm not in contact with Gabriella these days."

"But you are in contact with Jake." Rudy wasn't going to let me off the hook that easily. "Look, you may not realize exactly how much work it took to pull off the sale and restructuring of *Porteras*, but I have been working on this with Neil and Valerie for over a year."

*Valerie? Who the hell is Valerie?* I guess I really didn't have any clue as to what was going on behind the scenes. "I know you guys did a lot of hard work. I promise, I'm not being purposefully reticent. I just don't know. But I care about this magazine. And I care about Neil. If I were privy to any information that could hurt him, I would tell him immediately."

Rudy looked surprised at that, and uncomfortable. I put that down to him not experiencing surprise all that often. He momentarily pursed his lips then said, "Fine. We'll leave it at that. Thank you for your honesty."

He was nearly to the door when I said, "By the way, I saw *Giulio Cesar* last season. Your costumes were amazing."

"I know. Thank you." But he couldn't hide his smug little smile behind the glass door.

Alone in the office, I continued my slow removal of my stuff from what would be Deja's desk, and considered my options. I didn't want to purposefully wheedle information out of Jake for Rudy. That was completely off the table. But the fact that Jake had become a concern - or a liability - was something I should keep an eye on. I liked Jake, but I didn't want my association with him to put my new job in jeopardy. I also didn't like to think that Gabriella was trying to infiltrate the magazine through her former employees.

One thing was for sure, though. Jake had helped me out for two years, and it would be shitty of me to know that he was under scrutiny and not give him a heads up. As much as I truly did care about Neil, my friends - even just work friends - were more important than a guy I just started a casual relationship with.

I had to tell Jake, and live with the consequences if Rudy found out.
Chapter Eleven

I didn't get a chance to talk to Jake until Thursday. He'd been swamped fighting to keep all the lush photos that accompanied his Versailles story in the January issue. By Thursday morning, Neil and Rudy would have made their decisions, so I figured that either way, it was the right time to tell Jake about Rudy's weirdness.

I found Jake in the conference room, looking down at glossy photos, their printed surfaces reflecting the light from the fluorescents. I couldn't tell if he was thinking, or grieving.

"Hey... you." I wasn't great with telling people news I thought they didn't want to hear. "How did it go?"

"I lost four pages." He looked up with a humorless laugh. "Rudy Ainsworth thought they were redundant."

I pretended to consider the four panels he had spread out in front of him. He'd brought up Rudy. That gave me enough of an opening. "Are you and Rudy not getting along?"

"Who can get along with that guy? He's so jumped up his own ass and self-important." Jake raked his hand through his hair.

I tried a different approach. "I can't wait until I get into the beauty department. He hardly ever goes in there. Maybe that's something you could do."

"What, work in beauty?" he snorted derisively. "I think lip gloss and eye shadow are a little beneath me at this point."

"Wow, tell me what you really think, dick." I was beginning to wonder why I wanted to help him save his job. "Oh, but a lady mime in black leather and a powdered wig, that's totally important journalism."

Whatever point I'd been trying to make hadn't penetrated even a little bit. My sentence was barely finished before he abruptly declared, "Neil Elwood is going to burn this place up like a dying star." Jake snapped his fingers. "Poof, just like that, it'll be gone."

"I think stars take a lot longer to die than 'poof.'" I had never seen him so petulant, so utterly unlikeable. He would have never dreamed of acting this way when Gabriella was running the show.

A good friend would have told him exactly why the photos should have been cut. They really were too similar, in that each one had some kind of fur accessory featured, and would speak to a modern perception of Soviet Russia rather than harkening back to French nobility. But I had a feeling he'd already been told this, and wouldn't see my criticism as helpful. Instead, I told him, "Well, I think I'm going to just keep my head down. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, and I would really like to avoid a grease stain."

He smiled at that, but reluctantly. "You know, I shouldn't be telling you this." He picked up a photo and dropped it. "Don't get too comfy. There are some... things in the works. I'm trusting you not to pass that along."

Pass what along? Some vague pronouncements that were grandiose in their pretentiousness? I nodded solemnly. "Absolutely, I understand."

Then I got the hell out of the conference room. Jake had always had his little oddities, like his sometimes embarrassingly passionate feelings about his own work, but it was the kind of stuff I had been able to overlook to remain friendly with him. Now, with Gabriella gone, he was behaving like a toddler throwing a tantrum. It was like... like Dr. Jakell and Mr. Hyde.

Oh, how I wished Holli were with me so we could high five over that pun.
I walked through reception, feeling all itchy and weird. I guess I had expected the entire meeting to go differently. I’d tried to be helpful, and instead I’d gotten insulted. The new job I’d start tomorrow was apparently beneath Jake. I was some lowly joke he deigned to speak to. Had our “friendship” always been like that?

Or was it because I was going from “assistant” to “assistant editor” that he suddenly had a problem with me? Maybe I wasn’t a threat if he thought of me as the chick who got coffee and dry cleaning. Now, I was moving into editing actual content for the magazine. Maybe he couldn’t handle the thought of being supportive of someone unless they weren’t competition.

You’re no longer tied to Gabriella’s hip. He can’t use you for anything, I reminded myself. Maybe my proximity to Gabriella had been the point of our friendship all along.

Distracted by my disappointment, I almost walked right through reception without spotting Deja sitting on the long, white sofa, her arm on the back, smiling brightly at... Holli?

"Hey!" I greeted her, trying to cover my surprise. Holli never just showed up at my work - Gabriella had expressly forbidden personal visits, and Holli had been very careful about that rule. On the rare occasion she’d had to come up to the main office for job-related reasons, she’d never said hello.

"Hey! I was in the neighborhood and thought it might be safe to stop by and ask you to lunch. Safer than it used to be." Holli slid her hands into the back pockets of her painted-on jeans and rocked on the balls of her feet, her lower lip caught between her teeth. "And then I ran into Deja here."

Ah and ha. I hid my smile as much as I reasonably could.

"Do you two know each other?" For a city of eight million people, New York could be an incredibly small world.

Deja stood, giggling awkwardly as she looked to Holli for permission or confirmation. I got the feeling there was a conspiracy there. "Holli worked an event at RM a few years back."

"I was a human sushi platter." Holli beamed with pride. "It was one of my first modeling jobs. I got to meet Aerosmith."

I laughed with them, the way you laugh when you’re the third wheel in a conversation. It wasn’t that they were intentionally excluding me from their in-joke; obviously there was a vibe between them. I shrugged and smiled. "How can you forget a naked sushi girl, right?"

"So, do you want to go to lunch? I can cover things here," Deja offered.

"Great, thanks." That would give me a chance to grill Holli about her naked sushi times. I would never pass up a chance to hear about rock stars eating sushi off my best friend.

“So,” Deja said, her eyes wide, her smile carefully neutral as she looked from me to Holli. “I’ll see you around some time?”

“Next Friday, right?” Holli made intentionally cheesy finger guns at Deja, who laughed and nodded.

“Definitely. Definitely,” she agreed, backing away in the direction of the office doors.

Holli turned away first, and I followed suit, not looking back to see if Deja was still watching her. Holli is totally open about her sexuality – which I’m not sure fits into any easy classification. She's been with both guys and girls, and for a while, in college, she'd had this three-way relationship going with a married couple. For about six months in 2010, she was in an unrequited love affair with the George Washington Bridge. She's pretty delightful that way. I know that any time I talk to her about sex stuff, she's going to either have tried it, or at least have an opinion on it.

I didn't know how open Deja was about herself, though, and I am so not in the market to out people. I kept the conversation safe on the ride down.

"It's cool that she remembered you," I commented as the doors closed.

"Yeah, she's really nice!" Holli hit the lobby button. "I invited her to the party."

"I gathered that." I raised an eyebrow. “What happened to ‘no work people’?”
"I figured this one exception would be okay." Her eyes widened. "Why, did I do something wrong? You didn’t invite him, did you?"

“I don’t think it’s really his scene.” I felt a little bad for being relieved by that. I wanted to keep him as separate from the rest of my life as possible. We weren’t a couple, and it was weird enough working in the same place as the person I was fucking. I’d decided I would draw the line at casual recreation with my friends.

"You start in Beauty tomorrow, right?" Holli asked as we stepped off the elevator and into the lobby. “Why on a Friday?"

“Because I’m driving Mr. Elwood insane.” I preemptively grinned at her. “Not in the way you’re thinking. Deja is there to ‘train’ and she doesn’t really need any training. There isn’t much for me to do in the office but clean. Apparently, he finds my cleaning style ‘obsessive’ and ‘pathological’.”

“You’re going to do so good at this job, Sophie,” Holli said, and the pride in her voice warmed me like a cup of really good hot chocolate.

A frisson of excitement tingled all the way down my arms. "Actual assistant editor job. It's going to be a huge change."

Just as we reached the doors, my phone chirped. It was Neil. "Hang on, I have to take this."

We stepped outside- because unbelievably, the traffic on Broadway in lower Manhattan is quieter than the building's super echo-y lobby- and I answered the call.

"Yes, Sir?" I assumed he could hear my coy little smirk through the phone. But when he spoke, I could tell it wasn't time for flirting. He sounded utterly overwhelmed, his words clipped. "I've been called away. I'll be leaving within the hour."

"Do you need me to come back?" I held up one finger to Holli, Jake's cryptic remarks floating through my mind. Had something gone wrong with the deal? Was it even possible at this point? I knew absolutely nothing about how the company had changed hands or why.

"No, it's nothing work related." The tension in his voice was apparent. "I'm going home to London. My mother has been hospitalized; they think she had a stroke."

"I'm so sorry." I couldn't imagine what I would be going through if my mother were in the hospital an ocean away. "Do you need me to do anything for you?"

"As of tomorrow morning, you're not my assistant anymore, Sophie," he reminded me. "I wasn't calling you for a favor. I wanted to let you know before I left, so you didn't think..."

"So I didn't think you were breezing out of my life again?" Uncomfortably, I had to acknowledge that the thought would have occurred to me.

"Yes, exactly." He sounded sheepish at my quick reply.

While we were keeping things as no-strings as possible, if he ran off on me again the way he had after LAX, I wouldn't just be pissed. I would take an emotional bruising. I hoped that when our relationship ended, it would happen with mutual respect, but I couldn’t entirely trust that yet.

He cleared his throat. "I was going to ask you if you wanted to go out and celebrate your promotion with me tomorrow night. Now I'm afraid I can't, and I'm not sure I'll be back in time for our weekend, either."

"This is way more important, obviously. Don’t worry about things with me, okay? Things are fine." I hesitated before I added, "Look, if there's anything you need, call me."

"I will. Thank you." The keen edge of emotion in those four simple words made my heart ache. "I'll call you when I get back."

I hung up with him, feeling oddly empty that I wouldn’t see him again before he left. Then I felt shitty and selfish. He was obviously in crisis mode, and I was worried about myself.

"Is everything cool?" Holli asked, frowning at me.
I shook my head. "No, he has to go to London." I omitted the part about "going home" to London. That bothered me, and I didn’t want to admit it. "His mom had a stroke."

"Holy shit, his mom is still alive?" Holli grimaced, and I knew she was imagining the Crypt Keeper or something.

I ignored her. "He'll be gone for a while, I guess, but he didn't want me to think he's taking off permanently, like last time. That's a good thing, right?"

"I guess." She shrugged. "I thought it wouldn't really matter, anyway. You're just in it for the sex."

I opened my mouth to protest, but found it strangely difficult. I stammered a little bit. "I- Yeah. Right, but I would miss the sex."

She raised an eyebrow at me.

"What?" I demanded, and she just shrugged and smiled. I shook my head and walked past her. "I thought we were going to get some food."

She just laughed as she followed me down the steps.

* * * *

It was totally bizarre to return to work the next day and not go to my old desk. It felt even weirder to see Neil. I'd gone home the night before and immediately called my mom, like bad mom health was catching or something. We'd chatted about work and friends, but I'd deftly avoided her wheedling inquiries about my love life. She would not be okay with hearing about my casual D/s relationship with a guy older than she was.

After that, I'd lain awake half the night, trying to calculate the length of a flight from New York to London, wondering where Neil was. He'd left the office while I'd been out to lunch, but I had no idea how long it took to get through security or whatever he'd had to do. Deja had mentioned that he'd taken a private jet, so I supposed he wouldn't be standing in some TSA line with his shoes off, worrying about his poor ailing mother.

It amazed me when I walked into the building and everything hadn't ground to a halt. To the contrary, when Rudy had taken over running all of Neil's meetings and appointments the day before, it had felt a little like Gabriella was with us again. Caught up in everything that had been going on with regards to my job, I hadn't noticed how terrified everyone was of Rudy.

When he stopped me on my way through reception and said, "Good luck today, Sophie," I noticed the looks that got me, and I held my head up a little higher as I crossed the main office floor.

India Vaughn, senior beauty editor, sidled up next to me as we walked. "Sophie Scaife, I think you just got the seal of approval."

"Don't be too intimidated," I quipped. "He doesn't really like me all that much."

She shook my hand, which is actually pretty tricky to do when walking side by side with someone. I was impressed at how professionally I pulled it off.

Let me tell you about India. India had been the office Brit before Neil came to Porteras. She has black hair and light eyes, and looks like she could play a president's wife in a movie. She knows more about nail polish than any other human being alive. I once went to a Christmas open house at her apartment, and I swear to god, she had an entire walk-in closet of just beauty products, like she'd taken a little slice of Ulta and slotted it into her home.

She was also an incredibly demanding boss by reputation, and I really wanted to impress her. "Don't be nervous," she reassured me, but I didn't mind being nervous. It helped me stay ahead of the game. "Gabriella had nothing but good things to say about you."

"Did she?" My mind spun. Gabriella had said things about me to India? Before she'd left and put my name on that list? Did that mean... "Was Gabriella considering me for this job before she left?"

"Well, yes... didn't she tell you?" India blinked at me as she pushed through the doors to the beauty
department. The room was amazing, with lighted vanities and worktables covered in cardboard USPS boxes overflowing with samples of the latest cosmetics. In one corner there was a light box and a digital camera on a tripod. A girl with green-striped black hair up in a messy bun leaned over the light box, drizzling sparkly nail polish onto a piece of glass.

"Jessica?" India asked, and the woman straightened. She was wearing the coolest rectangular glasses I'd ever seen, and had gorgeous brown eyes. "This is Jessica Nguyen, our other assistant editor."

"Yes!" I remembered her from the short-lived online makeup tutorial series she'd done for the magazine's website. I shook her hand. "I really liked the spring pinks last year."

She beamed at me. "I never thought that would fly. You know Gabriella and petal pinks."

"I had faith in you," India laughed. Then she addressed me. "Look, I know that working for Gabriella was extremely challenging. But you stayed on for two years, so I know you can handle this job."

A phone rang somewhere in the office, and India excused herself to answer it.

"So, favorite lipsticks. Go." Jessica's eyes twinkled at the very mention of lipstick, and I realized I had just walked into my dream job. Weird, I'd always seen myself more like Jake, making a big deal over important clothes and designers.

When I had been a teenager flipping through fashion magazines, the only things in the pages I'd been able to afford on my meager allowance were the cosmetics. I'd saved for weeks to buy Clarins eye shadow quads and Bobbi Brown tinted moisturizer. So, I knew my shit where product was concerned.

"Illamasqua 'Flare'," I ticked on my fingertips, "YSL 'Rose Boheme,' and of course MAC's 'Please Me.' Did I pass?"

Jessica was about to say something when India hung up and headed straight for the door.

"What's up?" Jessica asked, and her concern made me a little worried.

"It's Rudy." India pronounced his name with great disdain, stretching the syllables in her working-class accent, like Roo-dee. "It sounds like I'm about to be scolded."

"Scolded?" I asked after India left. "What does she mean?"

"Well, ever since Elwood took over the magazine, he and his little henchmen are instituting all of these bullshit policy changes." Jessica rolled her eyes at Neil's name.

"Ugh," I pretended to sympathize. "What dicks, right?"

"You know Rudy Ainsworth nixed four really good pictures from that Versailles spread?" Jessica's jaw dropped dramatically before she continued. "Because they had fur in them. They're trying to 'cut back' on the use of fur."

"In Porteras?" No, dipshit, in the other magazine you work for. "That's never going to work."

Jessica nodded in agreement "Tell me about it. Come on, let me show you around."

I have to admit, I was only half paying attention to most of what Jessica was telling me. So not smart on my first day in a new job, but I couldn't stop thinking about what a colossal mistake it would be to cut fur from the pages of Porteras. It wasn't that I was pro-fur. Dead animals squicked me out, but anti-fur designers were thin on the ground. Fur was a battleground that Neil would lose on, and besides, where was the line? First fur, then leather? At least we could still run non-fur pieces from designers who used fur, but when would that end?

Without the support of the designers and advertisers, Porteras really would flame out, and fast. Jessica was showing me how to photograph a good swatch of wet polish - and finishing the project my arrival had interrupted in the process - when India came in, completely crestfallen.

"We have to start the issue over." She dropped a printed, stapled list onto the center worktable.

"February?" Jessica chirped, alarmed. "We just got all the sample requests in."

"January." India dropped into her chair, her head in her hands. "We have to start over on the
January issue."

"Start over?" Jessica's tone indicated she couldn't even conceive of the idea. "But we'll be like eight
days behind schedule."

India looked up, her perfect black brows lifted. "Well, then I suppose we should clear our
schedules."

"What's wrong with everything? Mr. Elwood loved the proofs at the meeting-"

"Neil Elwood is a horse's ass," India snapped, and it was so blunt I couldn't help my horrified burst
of laughter.

"Sorry," I muttered, covering my mouth in shame.

"It's all right, Sophie. Sorry." India pinched the bridge of her nose, her dark brows drawing down,
her eyes squeezing shut tight. "It's a new mandate from on high; we're not to feature products from any
company that tests on animals or uses ingredients manufactured by companies that test on animals."

Jessica made a kind of strangled noise. "B-but that means no Esteé Lauder, no Bobbi Brown,
Clinique, MAC, Fekkai...

"And no one owned by any of the corporations like Proctor & Gamble, which means your perfume
profile is a bust." India shook her head. "This is going to reduce us to Avon and Mary Kay. Not exactly
high fashion."

"Avon and Mary Kay test on animals," I supplied unhelpfully.

India forced what was very clearly a "we're fucked" kind of smile. "Well, I guess it's time to get on
the phone to some nice vegans and see what we can do."

The day was brutal. As far as first days went, it replaced the time I started working at GAP on Black
Friday as the worst first day of my life. We spent most of the morning researching. All of the samples
we had on hand were from companies on the no-no list. India decided that we'd spin the month as a
return to natural beauty, in the hopes that someone in management would see how absurd this all was.

Look, it wasn't that I wanted to think about bunnies getting lipstick smeared in their eyes, but I also
didn't want my job to go down the tubes. If word got out that the magazine was going cruelty-free, we
were going to lose a lot of ad revenue.

Jessica and I did most of the running in and out of the building, to stop by company offices for last
minute samples, or to department stores to buy what we couldn't get overnighted. I was exhausted, my
feet hurt, my hands were covered in eye shadow swatches in colors named "Kale" and "Brigid's Flame",
but I supposed it could have been worse. As I was staggering through reception at eight o'clock, Deja
was still at my old desk. She looked up and waved at me to come over.

Going into the old office felt completely weird, and the most bizarre pang of homesickness gripped
me. Deja had the iPad Neil had lent me, and I almost puked up my heart at the sight of it. Had she
looked at it? Had she seen that picture?

"Mr. Elwood wanted to make sure he returned this yesterday, but in the chaos with his emergency,
he forgot." She handed it to me with a smile, not one single hint of knowing in her expression.

Then I felt guilty and paranoid. "Thanks," I said, gesturing to the door. "I'm going to head home, I'm
beat."

"I heard about the bad timing." She grimaced to convey her sympathetic horror. "Get some rest."

On the train on the way home, I opened the iPad. I was hoping to find a message or something there
to tide me over until I saw Neil again, even though I realized how silly that hope was. I'm sure flirting
with me wasn't high priority when his poor mother was lying in a hospital bed.

Still, I was delighted when checked the notes app.

Sophie

I'm so sorry I can't be there for your first week in the beauty department. Be assured I am lending
my support from afar. Since I don't have your personal email address, have mine. I'd love to hear from you, I find myself missing you already.

P.S. Deja is under the impression that this iPad belonged to you, so don’t try to return it at the office.

He signed it with his name and an email address I'd never seen before. But what I focused on was the "missing you" bit of the message. Missing me? He would have left this note while he was still in the office. I have to admit, that made me feel pretty warm and fuzzy.

When I got home, Holli was out. I pulled my laptop from its usual place under the couch and flipped open the screen. Then I logged into Gmail, typed in his address, and stared at the blank message field.

Of course I wanted to tell him what a huge mistake it was for the magazine to go cruelty-free. I wanted to tell him about all the extra work it caused for us, and all the people he was pissing off, people he needed to run Porteras. I wanted to warn him that these changes were too sweeping and sudden, but I recognized that now, when he was across the Atlantic tending to his mother's medical crisis, was definitely not the time.

I was questioning my loyalties, too. Did I want to tell him all of this because I was looking out for him, or the magazine? The fact that I couldn't decide - and without knowing if this were an issue he cared passionately about - was a little too confusing for me.

On top of all that, I didn't know how much of our relationship was just sexy fun times, and how much was friendship. Was he the kind of friend I could be honest with, or were we still in the "be nice, and make sure you don't fuck it up" stage?

He wasn't the only one having difficulties separating the person in his mind for six years from the actual person in the new relationship.

Since I wasn't going to broach the subject in an email anyway, I tried to let go of the hectic workday and focused instead on what I really wanted to say to him. I settled on:

Neil, I hope everything is okay. Don't miss me. I'll be here when you come back.
Call me if you want. If not, that's okay.

I paused, my fingers tapping gently on the keys without actually typing anything. Clearly, text was not my medium when it came to men. He'd been pretty emotionally blunt with the "I miss you" talk. Was it okay to say something like that back?

I settled on, I'll be thinking about you, and hit send. I forced myself to go to bed without waiting for a reply.
In the week that followed, my contact with Neil was confined to short email messages, and that was fine by me. With as busy as things were at the office, I wouldn't have had time for much else.

India, Jessica, and I worked into the wee hours on the weekend, then came in early and stayed late all the way through Thursday. I'd forgotten all about the party Holli had wanted to throw for me until I was leaving on Friday morning.

"We pushed it back to nine so you'll only be an hour late," she quipped as I headed out the door. I really hoped I could make it at all. I'd known that the beauty department was a busy area of the magazine, but I'd no idea how much planning and effort went into selecting how the products would be featured. I'd just been in the meetings where they'd shown Gabriella the page proofs and she had given a yes or a no.

By the time I got home - to an apartment full of people at ten o'clock, as Holli had predicted - I was mentally and physically exhausted, but mostly caught up. At least, caught up enough that we were taking the weekend off. Which was its own kind of bummer; I was supposed to have spent the weekend with Neil. Work would have been a convenient distraction.

After a quick round of greetings and congratulations on my new position, I excused myself to change from work clothes to party attire. Then I rejoined everyone to get my socialization on.

The party was like most parties attended on Friday nights by exhausted working twenty-somethings. Music, booze, and talking. At the risk of making myself and all my friends sound old before our time, the days of pushing couches off fire escapes were way, way behind us. In fact, everyone had mostly cleared out by one o'clock, except for Deja. She and Holli were kind of semi-flirting on the couch, and I had started to feel like a bit of a third wheel. So when Holli suggested we all go out and grab something to eat, I turned them down.

"You guys go, I'll stay here and clean some of this up," I said, exaggerating my yawn. "Then I'm off to bed."

"Don't clean it all up," Holli warned me. "I'll be here tomorrow to help."

After they left, I took a trash bag and started collecting red Solo cups. I was pouring out an unfinished drink in the sink when my phone rang, and Neil's number was displayed on the screen.

Until I saw that number, I'd had no clue how much I'd been missing him. I scrambled to answer, breathless and drunk, praying I wouldn't say something stupid, and blurted a loud "Hi!" into the phone.

"Oh, uh, hello. I wasn't expecting you to sound quite so awake." He, on the other hand, did not sound awake at all.

It was probably the exhaustion and the booze, but I almost burst into tears of relief at finally talking to him again. I kept it cool, thank god. "Holli had that party for me tonight, to celebrate my promotion," I reminded him.

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry, I'd completely forgotten. Am I interrupting it?" he asked.

"No, not at all," I assured him. "Everyone's gone already. How about you, is everything okay?"

"Fine, everything is fine. I'm actually back in town. My flight just got in and I'm sitting outside the airport now." There was a bit of a pause, as though he didn't know what else to say, and then he asked, "I hate to bother you, but would you mind if I came by?"

I chewed my lip as I surveyed my apartment. It looked like twenty people had been crammed in the small space, drinking and hanging out.

"At your own risk," I warned him. "We did just have a party."
"I understand completely. I'll see you in about an hour then? If it isn’t too late?"

I hadn't heard him so hopeful and flustered since the night he had come to my apartment drunk and looking for a booty call. It was adorable. "No, that isn't too late." It would put me at twenty-two hours awake, but I could sleep when I was dead. I just wanted to see him. As I puttered around the house for an hour, constantly checking the clock, I refused to examine the anxiety that had my stomach all twisted up in knots. I missed him, so what? I was allowed to miss him, right?

At some point, I stopped pouring out half-empty cups and sat down with a drink of my own. I don't know when it was that I'd nodded off, but the intercom startled me awake. I sloshed rum and Coke from the cup onto my sequined, white tank top and groaned. "Hang on, I'll be right there!"

What was I doing? He couldn’t hear me all the way down on the street. I hit the call button and gasped, “Sorry, sorry! I’m buzzing you up right now.”

I dabbed frantically at the stain with a crumpled napkin, until he knocked. When I opened the door, Neil stepped immediately inside, sweeping me into a crushing embrace.

"I missed you so much," he mumbled against my neck, and I staggered backward, my hands coming up between us to give myself a little space.

"Whoa there, cowboy!" I disentangled myself, laughing. "Did you happen to be drinking on the flight?"

He laughed sheepishly and stepped back. "I'm sorry, it appears the Klonopin isn't entirely out of my system."

"You take Klonopin to fly?" I laughed with him and rose on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek, one hand against the front of his sweater to retain my admittedly wobbly balance. "Most people just get hammered."

"Yes, and it seems that all those people were in your apartment tonight." His eyes widened as he took in the wasteland of cups and paper plates before him. "Your living room smells like a still."

"No, that... might be me." I looked down and brushed at the stain on my shirt. "Let me go change out of this... unless I'm not going to be wearing it for long?"

He grinned at me and shut the door behind him. I held out my hand to him to lead him to my bedroom.

It's strange when you're showing someone the place where you live for the first time. Neil had been in the apartment before, but never my bedroom. When I flipped on the light, I saw it the way I assumed he saw it. The white plaster walls, the green shantung duvet cover and what suddenly seemed to be far too many beaded throw pillows. Way too much stuff crammed into one small space.

He gestured to the dress form beside my sewing machine. "Do you design clothing?"

"No, but I do tailor mine." I shrugged. "I get a lot of free stuff, not all of it fits. You can hang your coat on that, if you want."

My closet wasn't really a closet as much as it was a water pipe I wasn't supposed to hang stuff on, and a lot of my bedroom window was blocked by an enormous mirror in a chipping gilt frame. I felt kind of embarrassed. My place looked like a hostel compared to his room at the W, and I could only imagine what his apartment was like.

His eyes followed the movements of my hands as I pulled the shirt over my head. I smiled to myself and made a beeline to the bathroom. "Hang on, I need to rinse this before it sets."

My hands were trembling as I ran cold water over the stain. Why was I so nervous? Just because Neil was in my apartment? It wasn't like he was going to judge me unworthy because I wasn’t rich; he'd never once given me that impression. And if he did find my room lacking, so fucking what? I wasn't trying out to be his interior decorator. I was doing a friends-with-benefits kind of thing with him. He probably wasn't going to turn down sex because my fuzzy socks were on the floor by my bed.
I heard music start playing softly in my bedroom, and I grinned, shaking my head at my own silliness. He felt at home enough to fiddle with my iPod. I could calm down about the worthiness of my place.

I walked back into my bedroom, my arms crossed over my chest. Neil was standing beside my bed, holding the framed picture of me and my mom that I kept on my bedside table. He looked up guiltily and replaced it next to my alarm clock. "I'm sorry; I'm touching all of your things."

"It's okay. You're drugged." I suppressed my laughter and leaned against the doorframe. It was awkward to bring up the subject while I was standing there in my bra, but I had to ask, "So... how's your mom doing?"

"Much better. My sister and I decided it would be best if mum were to go live with her." He sounded a bit guilty about that. "She'd been staying at my house in Somerset, but I think it's a bit too much for her now."

"You have a sister?" I filed that away. I didn't know why, because it wasn’t like I was ever going to meet his family.

He nodded and gestured to the picture frame on my nightstand. "Do you have any siblings?"

"Only child." I went to his side and reached down, gently tipping the picture onto its face. "Single mom. Very protective. She doesn't need to be here for this."

He laughed and pulled me into his arms, and I went, gladly. The unhurried tempo of an A Fine Frenzy song lulled me into a comfortable, relaxed state, as much as his embrace did. His hand splayed against the small of my back, the other slid down my arm, lacing our fingers together as he slowly pulled me into a sway with the music.

"I really, really missed you," he whispered beside my ear as I leaned my head on his shoulder.

I was drunk. He was messed up on pills. And somehow, this was the single most romantic moment of my life.

I had to lighten the room a little, didn't I? "You were only gone for a week."

"Eight days," he corrected me. He stilled, and released my hand so he could tilt my face up to his with two fingers. My lips parted in a smile as I anticipated his kiss, but he waited, looking in my eyes for a moment that took my breath away. "But I wasn't talking about the trip."

Why do so many emotions feel exactly like a collapsed lung?

There were a lot of things I could say, but all of them might lead to some kind of pharmaceutical confession he didn't mean to make, and I was way too drunk to handle that right now. So I said, "Shut up," and pulled his mouth down to mine.

I was used to controlled, careful Neil. He wasn’t in tonight. His hands were everywhere, roaming over my back, tugging at the clasp of my bra until I took pity on him and reached to help him. I slid my hands under his sweater and the button-down beneath it, and he pulled both over his head, bringing our bare skin together as though he couldn't stand to be apart for another moment.

I'd read the term "ravished" before, I'd just never expected to use it in a context that wasn't ironic. But there was no better way to describe the series of hungry, desperate kisses that left me literally swooning. Of course, the alcohol had a hand in that as well.

"Bed," I gasped against his mouth. I held his face in both my hands as we tumbled onto the duvet. I tossed my bra aside and reached for the top button of my pants. He pulled me beneath him as I shimmied my jeans down my legs.

"Look at you," he murmured against the tops of my breasts, kneading them in his hands. "You are so fucking beautiful."

I moaned and arched into his touch, lifting my pelvis. I rubbed myself shamelessly against his thigh. Everything we did was sloppy and clumsy and awful, but so wickedly hot I didn't want to stop, not even
when he raised his head in dismay, releasing my nipple from his mouth to say, "I... don't have a condom."

_Yikes._ There was that record scratch again, sobering me just enough to consider the situation. We'd both had our checkups, right? And I was on the pill. But the pill could fail. What would I do then? And did my fear of the consequences in the long term actually outweigh my horniness in the moment?

Not one damn bit. "I'm fine with that, if you are," I told him.

He studied my face for a moment, clearly weighing things out on his end, too. For as much good as all the thinking would do either of us in our altered states. Neither of us should have been making this particular choice in this particular moment. All we cared about was that we felt good and were about to feel a whole lot better. Since there wasn't anyone more capable- or less intoxicated- in the room, the choice was up to us.

"Oh, fuck it then," he conceded, and pushed himself up to kiss me. I sucked at his tongue, gripped his shoulders, writhed shamelessly against him.

I wanted him so badly that I was trembling all over. I wrapped my legs around his waist, tore my mouth from his and begged, "Please."

He leaned up to unbuckle his belt and unzip his fly, and I squirmed out of my panties. There was a flurry of frantic motion between us, and somehow we ended up naked, on the sheets instead of the duvet. I straddled his lap, trapping his thick erection between my pussy and his stomach. He groaned in appreciation as I slid my slick my flesh over the length of him, grinding my clit against his impossible hardness. I could have teased him like that forever, could have rubbed myself on him until I came, but I was too impatient. I shifted my hips and reached behind me to grasp him, guiding him into me.

I have had unprotected intercourse somewhere along the lines of zero times in my entire life. My mother raised me to view every man I slept with as someone I might have to spend the rest of my life co-parenting with, and her lived experience had instilled deep paranoia in me. I'd never gone bareback with anyone before, so it was a totally bizarre feeling as Neil slipped inside me, all velvety and hot, with nothing separating us.

"Holy shit," I rasped, clenching my muscles around him. I guessed by his throaty groan that it felt just as amazing to him.

It took me a moment to remember to move, and Neil's hands fell to my hips to urge me along. I braced my palms on his chest and sat up straighter, gasping as he slipped too deep.

I went slow, shifting my hips gently to avoid feeling that shock of pain again. I didn't mind the "bottoming out" feeling during rough sex, but right now, I wasn't looking for rough. Right now, I just wanted him.

His arms surrounded me, and he curled up from the bed to kiss my breasts, my shoulders, my neck. My hair fell around both of us, and he brushed it impatiently aside to cover my mouth with his. His teeth grazed my lower lip and caught it gently.

Sitting like this, in his lap with my legs around his back, my hands in his hair, I didn't have a lot of leverage to move. It made for an incredibly tight fit, though, and I wriggled, trapped on his cock, unable to escape the delicious feeling of fullness.

He caught my arms behind my back, held my wrists in one strong hand. Leaning close to my ear, he whispered, "No, no. Don't move."

Shivers raced down my spine. He exerted just enough pressure on my wrists that it felt... stern. Commanding. My head fell back, my hair brushing over my shoulder blades.

"I want to tie you up like this," he murmured against my jaw. There was something primal and dangerous about my throat being so exposed to him. When he nipped at my pulse point, I took in a breath and held it, and felt him smile against my neck. "Would you let me do that to you?"
"Yes, Sir," I breathed. I needed him to move. I needed something to push me over the edge. He traced a path up to my ear with his tongue and sucked my earlobe into his mouth.

Damn him. He knew what that did to me. He flexed within me, pulsing, exerting such exquisite pressure against my g-spot that all I wanted to do was thrash and writhe on him. The effect of his voice on my brain was almost enough to throw me over the edge into bliss. His tongue swirled over the shell of my ear, then just behind it, and I dug my fingernails into my palms, willing myself to sit still. He rocked inside me, once, twice, ratcheting my arousal higher and higher with barely any movement at all, and I spiraled out of control, shouting, shuddering, trembling.

Surprising me with his strength, he released my wrists and wrapped an arm around my waist, rolling me beneath him. My pussy felt impossibly tight and far too sensitive in the wake of my orgasm. I babbled and practically sobbed as he withdrew with torturous slowness, then eased back in. He slipped one arm beneath the bend of my left knee and raised my leg, driving deeper, holding me hard to him.

"Please, please, please," I gasped, and though I didn't know exactly what I was asking for, I was totally confident that he did.

Oh, he totally did.

He pumped into me with long, slow strokes, his hand splayed beside my head, pinning my hair to the mattress. At first, I just held on to him, but soon I was clutching the pillows, lifting my hips, riding incredible waves of pleasure until another climax broke over me. I felt it take him over, too, and he groaned beside my ear as his cock jerked deep within me.

I gasped, and after a moment, he lifted his head. "Are you alright?"

My face grew hot with embarrassment, and I couldn't help my giggles as he slipped from me, hissing under his breath.

"It's silly," I protested. He rolled to lie at my side, and pulled me into his arms.

"I don't care if it's silly," he muttered against my forehead, dropping a kiss there to punctuate his words "I asked because I wanted to know."

"I... um, I've never had like, full intercourse without a condom before," I confessed. Then I remembered how inexperienced I had been the first time we'd been together, and I had to laugh as I added, "I didn't realize I would be able to... feel it."

He laughed at that. "I assume you're referring to- "

"Your cum, yes." I could feel it now, leaking out of me and coating my thighs. "Shut up, now I'm embarrassed."

"Don't be." He tilted my chin up so he could look me in the eye. "You don't ever have to be embarrassed with me. You are, without exception, the most exciting lover I have ever been with. And that's not the anti-anxiety drugs talking."

I snorted. "That's very nice of you, but I don't think I'm that exciting."

"Don't be coy, it doesn't suit you." He reached down and pulled the sheets and blankets over us. Another derisive laugh from me caused him to defend his position with blunt truth. "Well, you did let me fuck your ass the first time we met. I thought that was quite adventurous of you."

I squealed at his crude words and slapped his shoulder. "Hey, you led me astray from the garden path, or whatever. I'd never done that before."

"I'm honored to be your mentor in all of these depraved practices."

It felt good to lay in his arms, to have him next to me again. Maybe he was right; maybe we should see each other more often. Something stirred in the back of my mind. "Can I ask you something?"

"No," he replied sleepily. "No, we don't know each other well enough for something as intimate as a question."
I sighed my annoyance at his teasing. "Six years ago... why did you take my plane ticket, if you were just going to leave me enough money to buy another one, anyway?"

His chest rose under my cheek, and he held his breath for a moment as he considered his answer. "I didn't want to strand you. I just wanted to make you slow down and think. You were so brilliant and full of life... I didn't want to see you do something rash out of fear. I felt absolutely helpless to see you make this mistake for yourself... I suppose I was playing the role of Emma's father, rather than Sophie's one-night stand."

"Well, I made the right choice," I congratulated myself, rubbing the arch of my foot up and down his calf. It was getting more difficult to keep my eyes open. I yawned, a bit louder than I was expecting. "I'm sleepy."

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked, stirring under my hand.

I shook my head and snuggled in closer. "No. No, right now, everything is perfect."

* * * *

I woke to the warmth of Neil's body beside me, the coarse hair on his chest beneath my palm. The late morning sun illuminated the room, and dust motes cheerfully drifted in the light from the window.

He'd stayed all night. That both pleased and utterly terrified me.

As I sat up to check the time, he stirred beside me, murmuring a sleep thick, "Good morning."

I opened my mouth to answer him and - Oh god. My breath.

He reached for me, one arm around my waist, and I quickly stopped him with a hand against his shoulder, my other hand covering my mouth. I gasped a horrified, muffled, "No!"

He squinted at me in the clean morning light, looking a bit annoyed. "Oh, for fu- do you think I've never smelled morning breath before?"

"You haven't smelled mine, and you aren't going to." I rolled to my side, facing away from him, and pulled the blankets over my mouth.

He spooned up behind me, an impressive morning erection pressing against my ass.

"Well, good morning to you, too," I giggled, and he nuzzled his head into my shoulder to kiss my neck.

He chuckled, and I felt it rumbling low and deep in his chest. "Don't be too flattered, it's because I really have to pee."

"Well, I guess we're not doing the morning sex thing, then?" I turned my head to bat my eyes at him over the top of the blanket. He pulled away from me reluctantly. "No, I'm afraid not. I have lunch with Rudy at noon, and I need to stop at home and change. And chisel off these contacts."

"You wear contacts?" I couldn't believe I'd never noticed them before. I spent enough time staring into his eyes, after all.

"Only when I want to see." He sat up on the other side of the bed, squinting as he scanned the room. "We'll do the big, romantic morning tomorrow, I promise."

"Tomorrow? Oh, that was right. "Do you still want me to come over? I mean, since we kind of already spent the night?"

"I wanted to spend the weekend with you," he reminded me with a grin. "You're not tired of me already?"

Tired of him? I was actually a little bit freaked out by how much I liked being with him. I’d never let a guy spend the entire night with me before. I don't know how it had changed things, but something definitely felt different. Even though I couldn't put my finger on it, it worried me. This was a casual relationship. If I started wanting to spend all my time with him, if I wanted to start sleeping in the same bed with him and being constantly around him, that could be trouble.

But not enough trouble that I would miss out on doing it again.
"Not even a little. What time do you want me?" I'd meant, of course, "What time do you want me to come over," but he gave a bit of a dismayed laugh.

"When don't I want you?" He found his boxers beside the bed and slipped them on. "I'll send a car for you at six. Is that all right?"

Ooh, he was going to send a car. I guess there were certain perks to fucking a rich guy. "Yup, that'll work. But, uh... you might want to put on some pants and get that whole erection situation under control. I do have a roommate."

I dashed to the bathroom and hurriedly brushed my teeth while he got dressed in my room. I checked my reflection in the mirror, examining my neck. No hickeys. I appreciated that. My makeup, however, hadn't made it through the night, and I was a little mortified that he'd seen me looking so smeared and haggard this morning.

I stumbled out to the living room, giving a sheepish smile to Neil as we passed each other. Holli was sitting on the couch, her legs crossed kindergarten lotus position style. She wore a huge sleep shirt with a chicken on it, and bacon-and-eggs print pajama pants. They weren't a set, she just liked to wear them together to be macabre.

"You're up early." I thought she'd be passed out until noon at least.

"Haven't been to sleep yet. I came home and got sucked into this airbrush makeup system infomercial that was oddly soothing, and then they started showing early morning reruns of ER." She raised an eyebrow at me. "Besides, who could sleep with all the loud sex going on?"

My face got hot. "Oh my god, what happened to the not listening policy?"

"It's not like I had a choice."

Neil emerged from the bathroom, wearing the white button down he'd worn beneath his sweater last night. He carried that and his coat over his arm, his iPhone in his hand. "I called my driver while you were in the bathroom. I'll be out of your hair soon enough." He looked kind of sheepish about that, like he thought he was unwelcome.

I waved my hand. "Stay a minute. Do you want breakfast? I don't think we have actual food here, but I could probably scrounge up a reasonable facsimile."

"No food?" he looked at me in alarm.

"I ate it all," Holli admitted proudly. "And she's been working too much to shop. I hear her boss is a real asshole and won't give her a reasonable schedule."

"I fear her schedule is out of the asshole's hands now." Neil paused as he regarded Holli. "I recognize you... you've been in Porteras."

"Porteras?" he snapped his fingers. "Yes, we were just looking at that rescheduled jacket shoot. You were one of the models." I had woken up in some surreal parody of my own life. Neil had spent the night in my bed like a freaking boyfriend, my apartment was still a catastrophe, and now I was introducing him to my roommate? Was this college again? "Oh, um, Neil, this is Holli, my roommate. Holli, this is Neil, my..."

I couldn't think of a word to accurately describe the situation, and besides, she knew already. "Neil."

"I'm touched," he quipped. His phone chirped. "That will be Tony."

"I'll clear out," Holli said, jumping up and pausing the DVR. We try to be considerate of each other where dates are concerned.

I kept myself firmly on task as Neil came over and put one arm around my waist. I dumped coffee into the filter and leaned my cheek toward him for a goodbye kiss. Super casual. Nothing weird about spending an entire night with a guy. Not weird at all.

His lips brushed over my ear and he said, low, "I did get you a small gift in London. I can't wait to use it on you."

If I'd had any doubt in my mind as to what he meant by that, he removed it entirely by smacking my
bottom as he turned away.

I wondered if Neil's car could wait until after I dragged him to my bedroom. Probably not, and besides, he had a lunch meeting to attend.

"I'll see you tonight," he said from the door. I just grinned in reply.

Holli emerged after he left, and resumed her place holding down the couch.

Now that Neil was gone, I could ask the question I had been dying to ask since the party last night.

"So... Deja is cool, huh?"

Holli shrugged. "Yeah, she's okay."

That was Holli denial speak for, "I want to marry her and have a million babies and wear matching outfits for our family photos." But I wasn't about to point that out, because she might turn it around on me.

"Where did you guys go?" I flopped onto the couch beside her.

"Oh, this really cool twenty-four hour Korean place she knew of. They had the best spicy beef soup." Holli sighed, her mood turning suddenly glum. "But then... she said it."

"Oh no." The dreaded thing that people were always saying to Holli. Or, one of the dreaded things. There were several. "You're so lucky?"

"Yup. 'Ooh, you're so lucky, I have to diet all the time.' Why? Why, when she's so cool?" Holli shook her head. "I don't know if I'll hang out with her again. I'm just getting to the point in my life where I feel like I shouldn't have to train people to not say stupid shit about my body."

I chewed my lower lip. Of course, she was right. And I shouldn't meddle or anything. But they were so alike, they seemed destined for each other.

I supposed I should clue Deja in. Or, I could mind my own damn business. They were both grownups. If Holli didn't like Deja, it wasn't as if there weren't millions of other people in the city to hook up with. If it was going to happen, it would happen on its own. And it wouldn't happen if I tried to mash them together like two Barbie dolls.

"So, Neil seems pretty cool. And he spent the night," Holli pointed out, slowly widening her huge eyes before narrowing them to knowing slits. "There's more to the story here."

My first instinct was to snap that she should mind her own business because nothing else was going on. Holli was my best friend, she would see through that in a heartbeat.

"Okay, I did notice he was... slightly more affectionate than usual last night. But he's never not been affectionate toward me. This was different though. He was on drugs from flying and -"

"Oh, he did the 'I'm so high I'm honest' thing?" She cringed. "He didn't say the L-word, right?"

"No, oh god. No, no, no." I shook my head. "He just said he missed me a lot."

Holli scoffed. "Oh, that's not that bad. As long as he didn't cry or anything."

"Yeah," I agreed, but my heart suddenly wasn’t in it. My fuzzy memory of the night started to slowly filter through some really fucking disturbing daylight clarity. I’d made some choices I never would have with another guy, because I was way more comfortable with Neil than I had ever been with another guy. The fact that I didn’t know why- or didn’t want to think about why- didn’t give me a lot of faith in my decision-making skills where he was involved.

In the past, I would have used that as proof that things were moving too fast, that I should put some distance between myself and the object of my confusion. I’d just had a whole week’s worth of distance from Neil, and it hadn’t helped. It had just muddled my brain up even more.

Was I doing what he’d admitted to doing, mixing up the guy I’d fantasized about for years with the man I was just getting to know? I supposed that could have been a part of it. My daydreams had all been strictly confined to sex. I’d never given any thought to what might happen if he really showed up in my life again, or what my feelings might be.
Tempting as it was to spill out all of this to Holli right that second, I wasn’t sure I could face such a conversation with a hangover. I got my coffee and headed back to my room, where I placed the mug on my nightstand and flopped onto my bed. I could smell Neil’s cologne on my pillow. I am not proud of the way I buried my face into the pillowcase and squealed like a teenager, but it happened.

So, things were moving quickly, when I hadn’t expected any change. Was that enough for me to slam on the brakes?

Not even a little bit.
Chapter Thirteen

I decided that Neil’s confusing declaration about how much he missed me had more to do with Klonopin than any amount of actual missing me. To put myself at ease about just how physical and not emotional our relationship was, I planned to show up at his place looking like a sex bomb in mid-explosion.

Holli has this really awesome D&G black tulle dress with a tiny waist and boned bodice. Normally, I would never dream of borrowing her clothes. I wear a size four, and she wears a size zero. Adding in her Amazonian height, our wardrobes are just not compatible. However, the point was not to have everything firmly strapped down tonight, or even to have the dress on for very long. Even though we had to work super hard to get the zipper up and breathing was probably not going to be an option-it was worth it.

Beneath the dress, I wore the lacy black Agent Provocateur corset I had saved for months to buy, and black silk thigh-highs with a dark seam up the backs. No panties. That's just how I was gonna roll.

When I stepped out of the bathroom all glammed up, with my hair long and loose around the perilously tight straps of the dress, Holli whistled.

"Thank you." I did a stupid little curtsey in my heels. The door buzzed, and I hurried to the intercom to answer, "I'll be right down."

"Just make sure he doesn't rip it off of you," she warned. "It's my favorite."

I grabbed my coat off the rack by the door and shrugged it on, then picked up the overnight bag I'd packed. Bending down felt like I was in a full-body cast, but my tits looked amazing. "No ripping, I will tell him."

"And don't get cum on it," she called after me as I stepped out the door.

I giggled and shushed her. I really hoped none of our kindly old neighbors heard that remark echoing in the stairwell.

The Maybach was waiting downstairs, the driver standing beside it awkwardly. "Mr. Elwood specifically requested that I not get your door for you... unless you wanted me to."

I smiled and shook my head. "Would it make you feel better to get the door?"

"A lot better, thanks," the guy said, grinning as he took my bag. I scooted inside the car carefully, mindful of the super short dress. My boobs wobbled precariously, barely contained, and I was super glad I had a coat on.

The partition between the front and back was down, so once we were underway, I asked the driver, "Hey, uh... where does Neil live, exactly?"

"Nine-sixty Fifth Avenue." The driver's eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. "You've never been to his place before?"

"No, first time." It took a minute for the address to really hit me. "Wait, did you say Fifth?"

"Fifth, park adjacent." The guy had a cheerful, working class New York accent. "There's a doorman, he'll get you pointed in the right direction."

Okay. So, I was kind of sleeping with a guy who, yeah, I knew he had some money. It hadn’t seemed this intimidating before now. Which was totally stupid, because after all, I'd been willing to sleep with him when I'd just thought he was a writer heading to Tokyo.

Still, I couldn't help but feel some trepidation when we pulled up in front of the dignified pre-war building.

"This is Mr. Elwood's guest, make sure she gets upstairs all right," the driver instructed the
doorman. I clutched my overnight bag as we headed through the posh decorated lobby, straight to the elevator.

"Mr. Elwood is the sixth floor. I'll let him know you're on the way up."

Maybe in the future it would be more comfortable at my place, where there wasn't a "get Neil Elwood laid" committee working behind the scenes. Seriously, I was expecting an elevator operator to greet me with, "Which floor? Oh, Mr. Elwood? Have a nice fuck!" But thankfully, I was on my own for the ride.

The doors opened onto a foyer that looked exactly how I imagined the hall of doors Alice tumbled into after falling down the rabbit hole. The golden wood paneling on the walls seemed to glow, thanks to the light from the bronze and ivory glass pendant fixture overhead. The floor was white and black check, all in marble. The door subtly matched the paneling, and when it opened, I expected a butler like Lurch or something to be standing there. But it was just Neil, looking surprisingly casual in a sweater and jeans.

"Look at you." He beamed at me in open appreciation. "Come in, come in."

If he thought my hair and makeup were good, he was going to die when he saw the dress. I dropped my bag at my feet as he reached to help me with my coat. I slipped my arms from the sleeves and turned to face him, so he got the full view of my epic cleavage balanced on the whim of gravity in the top of the dress.

"Jesus Christ." The blasphemy crossed his lips in a reverent gasp, and he pulled me into his arms so fast I stumbled in my too-tall heels.

The kiss I got was exactly the response I was looking for. I melted against him, my coat crushed between us, my mouth coming open under his. His arms wound around my waist, holding me up, holding me captive. He let me go too soon, though, and I tottered in my shoes, gripping his arms for support.

He raised his head, a mixture of confusion and embarrassment in his uncertain expression. My lipstick was smudged across his mouth, and there was a pause before he spoke, like he wasn’t sure what to say. "Sorry about that. You surprised me."

"That was the point." I gingerly ran my thumb along my bottom lip line. "Oh, now this is embarrassing. We're wearing the same shade."

He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. "There's a powder room through there."

I took notice of my surroundings for the first time. The checked marble from the vestibule continued into the larger interior foyer, but the walls here were painted linen white. A half-bath stood open to the right, and I stepped in just long enough to check my lipstick in the mirror. When I turned back, Neil had hung up my coat. He gestured to the other doors. "Let me show you around. I should do at least that much before I rip that dress off you."

"You can't rip it, it's Holli's, and it's her favorite," I told him sternly as I followed him further into the apartment. There was a hallway to the left of the front door. I realized the elevator must run through the center of the apartment.

"Three bedrooms that way, media room, gym, and service." He waved it off as though those details were unimportant. "And fine, I won't rip the dress."

"Service?" The word seemed utterly foreign to me as I tried to place exactly what type of room would be considered a service room. Then it snapped into place. "Oh, like a maid?"

"A housekeeper, but I've given her the night off. She doesn't live here, anyway. I use those rooms mostly for storage." He motioned toward the other side of the foyer, where a short L-shaped hallway bent out of sight. "That way is the master suite- we had better leave that part until after dinner, I think-and there is the library."
"Library?" I let him guide me with his hand on my back. He reached through the door and flipped the light switch, and it seemed far too casual a motion to herald the revelation of French Empire style furnishings and a floor-to-ceiling collection of gorgeous, leather bound books.

I scrutinized the shelves from the door. "You don't really read these, do you? They all match."
"I've read some," he defended himself. "But you're right; the books for reading are in my bedroom. These are just a shamelessly showy collection."

I walked with him to the living room, a huge space with high ceilings and a monstrously large stone fireplace. The furniture - a couch, a backless sofa, a few chairs and a low, blocky mahogany table - were all modern, but flavored by classic styles. All the upholstery was a shade of pale eggshell that highly discouraged eating or drinking near them. Overhead, dark wood beams crossed the ceiling, and the largest embroidered rug I'd ever seen concealed the wood parquet that wouldn't have matched the furnishing.

Okay. Deep breaths. Neil was really, really, really super rich. I guess it had been easy enough to ignore when he was living in a hotel room. A swanky hotel room, but still, technically homeless. Yeah, he rode around in a Maybach, that should have clued me in, but to see the place he actually called home? Well, my reality was significantly adjusted.

"The kitchen is this way," he led me through the arched glass double doors at the other end of the living room. We moved through the dining room, past the long table and its fourteen chairs, and we passed through another door into the kitchen.

"I was just cooking dinner," Neil explained, moving away from me to the huge marble-topped island in the center of the room. There were tall wrought-iron chairs positioned on the side opposite the stove, and I took a seat as gracefully as I could in the world’s tightest dress. On the other side of the island was a cutting board heaped with bok choy and sliced mushrooms.

"You gave your housekeeper the night off so you could cook for me?" That was very sweet, and it put me more at ease. I watched as Neil expertly cut a pepper into thin slices, his forearms flexing subtly beneath his rolled back sleeves.

He smiled and scraped the slices aside, reaching for a clove of garlic. "I gave my housekeeper the night off so I could fuck you in any room I wanted."

"And to impress you with my culinary skill, of course." He looked up, winked at me, and turned his attention back to mincing the garlic. "There's water in the cooler, or white wine, if it won't make you too tipsy."

"What's wrong with tipsy?" I slid off the chair and peeked around the corner of the island. There was a built-in, glass-front cooler beneath the island's bar sink, and it was fully stocked with bottled water. Two bottles of wine rested on their side, and I was reaching for one when Neil explained exactly what was wrong with tipsy.

"I'm not comfortable playing with a sub who's drunk."

I grabbed a bottled water. "Sounds like you have plans, Sir."

There was that half-smile again, the one that made me weak all over. I leaned against the counter beside him, willing him to stop chopping up vegetables and just touch me already. Somewhere, anywhere, it didn't matter.

We were on more comfortable ground now, I realized. There was no talk about missing anyone, nothing even vaguely sentimental. I was there to be fucked, to continue our purely sexual relationship with a side of unthreatening friendship. This, I could handle.

He laid the kitchen knife aside and wiped his hands on a towel, looking down at me with amused heat in his eyes. He seemed to loom over me; I always forgot how tall he was, compared to five-foot-
four me. I felt tiny next to him, strangely vulnerable, but not afraid, even when he caressed the back of my neck and exerted gentle pressure to bend me over the counter.

"I like these stockings," he murmured close to my ear, bending down to trace his fingers up the dark back seam from my knee to the thick black band at the top. His fingers skated along the curve of one bare cheek, and he whispered in approval, "Naughty girl."

He hitched my skirt up high, exposing my naked lower half to his gaze. His palm smoothed over my skin and I shivered, waiting for the slap that I knew would come. Eventually. My pussy clenched with the anticipation, but when he lifted his hand, it was to reach for something on the counter, not to spank me.

I raised my head. He held a wooden spoon, and he slapped it hard against his open palm. "Oh fuck yes," I moaned. My toes curled in my shoes. I didn't have to wait long for the first blow, which surprised me and jerked a ragged cry from my lips. It was definitely more intense than his hand, more of a surface pain on my skin than the deep, bruising burn of a hard slap.

“What should you say, Sophie?”

“Thank you, Sir.” And I was grateful with every scorching hot cell in my body.

His other hand slipped around the front of my throat, up to cover my mouth, two fingers forcing past my lips. I sucked on them, tasting the garlic and the peppers he had cut up. I almost laughed at that, at the absurdity of being spanked over a kitchen counter in the middle of dinner prep.

"You'll pardon me if I don't really give this my all." He smacked me with the spoon again, and I jumped. "But I have plans for more... intense activity later. I wouldn't want you to be too sore to enjoy it."

I moaned and swirled my tongue around his fingers. My clit ached to be touched, but I had no doubt he was going to make me wait an eternity before I could come.

Honestly, that didn't bother me as much as it would have in the past. I liked the idea of waiting. I knew that the entire time he was teasing me, making me die from anticipation, I was as much the focus of his attention as he was mine.

He gave me another whack with the wooden spoon, then jerked my skirt back down and pulled his fingers from my mouth. He turned away and washed his hands at the bar sink as I stood up, my head spinning. Then he went casually back to the cutting board to grate some ginger with the edge of his knife.

I stumbled to the chair I'd been in, and he passed me the bottle of water I'd forgotten, smiling pleasantly as though nothing had just happened. "I hope you like sea bass."

Damn him. He knew exactly what he was doing to me. He was torturing himself, as well; I could tell from the slight tremor in his hands as he worked.

Still, he hadn't been kidding about showing off his culinary prowess. I'd been somewhat concerned that the whole cooking-me-dinner thing had been for show, to display how "normal" he was despite living in a Fifth freaking Avenue palace. But he was actually a really good cook, whipping up an amazing meal of grilled sea bass on a bed of peppers, bok choy, and shiitake mushrooms in a ginger and chili sauce. We settled down at the nook in the kitchen.

"The formal dining room is a bit... formal, I think," he suggested, and I heartily agreed.

We talked, mostly about work and how things were going there. It was a safe topic, one that wasn't too personal for friendly chatter, nothing that would push us into real "getting to know you" territory. Unfortunately, some personal details were unavoidable. There were pictures on the wall, of his daughter I presumed. I tried not to look at those.

He must have known that I’d been rattled by his demeanor in my apartment the night before, because near the end of the meal he said, "Sophie, I want to apologize if I've... crossed any boundaries
with you. Last night I wasn't myself."

"It's okay. I just... you said something." I stopped myself. "Maybe this isn't the right time to talk
about it."

He smiled sadly. "I've learned my lesson when it comes to relationships. If there's anything you
can't talk about, that's likely the thing you should be talking about."

"I bow to your painful experience," I said, trying to make light of the situation and feeling it fall flat
between us. So clearly, joking about his divorce was a bad choice. "When you were... high on Klonopin
last night, you said that you missed me, and you weren't talking about the trip."

He nodded, and he didn't meet my eyes. It was a defense mechanism, I realized, and my stomach
dropped. When he answered, his voice was uncharacteristically quiet and serious, without any hint of the
playful teasing I was used to. "I wish things had happened differently between us. As I've gotten to
know you over these past few weeks, I can't help but think that we missed an amazing opportunity with
each other."

"Or not." I dabbed the corner of my mouth with my napkin. "I don't think I'm a fully formed person
yet, imagine me six years ago."

"True. And perhaps we wouldn't be sitting here now." He regarded me with his unreadable half-
smile that I will probably never figure out.

My heart was racing, and for entirely different reasons than my earlier excitement. This was heavier
than I'd imagined the night would be. I was caught between being afraid of what I was feeling and being
afraid of what he was feeling. The lack of control was unsettling.

He reached across the table and took my hand in his. I felt like I might get up and bolt, until he
linked our little fingers together in the classic pinkie-swear pose. "Let's make a pact. No matter what
happens with our current arrangement, we remain on friendly terms. I don't ever want to go six years
without seeing you again."

There was that sneaky knot in my chest again, the one I never realized was there until it eased
slightly at something he said or did. "I can live with that."

There was a long moment between us, one that had begun in comfortable silence then ended with an
awkward clearing of the throat on Neil's part.

The mood needed a reset button. "So, any big after dinner plans?" I slipped my shoe off under the
table and ran my silk-covered toes up his ankle.

He raised an eyebrow. "As a matter of fact, I have to give you your present."

I pushed back my plate. "I am always ready for presents."

* * * *

We didn’t clear the table before he led me to the master bedroom. He turned up the dimmer switch,
bathing the walls in a soft golden glow from the inset lights.

"Wow." His bedroom that was arguably as large as my apartment.

Huge windows displayed a spectacular view of Central Park. One wall was entirely dominated by
dark wood shelving. This was clearly where all the books that didn't have matching leather bound covers
lived, and in the middle of them was the biggest bed I'd ever seen in my entire life.

"Some headboard." I whistled to signify how impressed I was as I walked toward the shelves. I
spied a biography of John Adams beside a copy of Hugo's *Les Miserables*. They both had creases in
their spines.

I may have felt a swoon coming on.

"I told you I read," he said defensively as he moved through the seating area in front of the marble
fireplace. It was definitely a smaller hearth than the one in the living room, but still... the man had a
fireplace in his bedroom. And couches and chairs that I was pretty sure were antiques. He disappeared
through a door that was the same dark wood as everything else in the room, and called for me to follow
him.

It was a walk-in closet. Wait, strike that. It was an honest-to-god dressing room. Suit jackets and
shirts hung in order of color and texture. There were drawers everywhere, cedar-lined, judging by the
crisp scent in the air. Illuminated glass shelves displayed watches and cufflinks that each probably cost
more than a year of my salary. Further back was a collection of shoes that cemented my opinion of Neil
as some kind of male Carrie Bradshaw, and a doorway that led to the master bath. The floor in here was
herringbone patterned wood parquet, but forced air vents heated it at foot level. For bare feet.

Okay, the guy I was having sex with was rich enough that he had special heaters for walking
barefoot in his closet. I may have been in over my head.

A nearly full-length trifold mirror was built in between the jackets and pants, and lit from above
with can lights. He stopped me from going any further, and sat down in the delicate white wing chair in
front of it. No shit, he really had room for an honest-to-god chair in his closet.

My closet was just a pipe that wasn’t supposed to bear weight.

"Why don't you take that dress off?" he suggested, settling back and resting one ankle atop his
opposite knee.

"I thought I was getting a present," I reminded him.

"You will. I'd like mine first." He braced his elbows on the arms of the chair and steepled the tips of
his fingers. "It's not a request. Take off the dress."

A shiver raced down my spine. God, I loved following instructions.

I reached behind me for the zipper, conscious that he could see my every movement in the
reflection behind me. Because of this, I posed my hand, reaching under the zipper as though I were
plucking a berry, and slowly drew it down. The room was so quiet that I could hear every tooth part and
the whisper of the tulle as I pushed the fabric from my shoulders. I gave a little wriggle, and the dress
fell free, revealing my black lace overlay corset.

"Who did you wear that for?" he asked, his deep voice warning that there was only one right
answer.

"For you, Sir." My breasts swelled over the top of the corset as I took a deep breath.

"And you didn't wear any panties? Was that also for me?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Tell me why." He fixed me with his intense green gaze, almost predatory.

I wet my lips, my pulse pounding between my legs, my pussy flooding with every beat. "Because...
I wanted to make it easy for you. I wanted you to be able to touch me."

"You don't have to make it easy for me." He looked my body up and down, and it was like a
physical caress. "If I wanted you, I could have you. We both know that."

"Yes, Sir." He would find no argument from me. Not when I felt like this; all I wanted was to please

I could say that, and mean it with my entire soul, without fear of reproach. We could surrender
ourselves to each other when it was a game. He could give himself wholly to me, through his control,
and I would own him as much as he owned me.

"Come here." He crooked a finger at me, and I obeyed easily, walking toward him until he held up a
hand to stop me. "That's far enough."

He reached out with two fingers and traced the neatly trimmed line of hair on my mound, down my
slit, parting me, skimming over my already inflamed flesh. "Tell me again... when can I have this?"

"Any time, Sir." I took a breath, knowing my request would be denied before I even uttered it.
"Now, Sir."
He took his hand away. Just like I knew he would. He stood, putting his arms around me to gently turn me, until I faced our reflections in the mirror. He held my gaze in the glass, one hand splayed possessively across my stomach over the corset. With his other hand he stroked my hair back from my bare shoulder, his touch lingering on my skin. He reached into the corset, his fingers kneading my breast beneath the satin lining, pulling my nipple free to peek above the black lace. "You are perfection, Sophie."

I whimpered as he circled my nipple with his thumb. He swirled it over the peak, further puckering my skin and raising gooseflesh on my arms.

"I think you're ready for your presents now," he murmured against my neck. "Take this off. Leave the stockings and heels. I'll be right back."

He left me in the closet, moving off to somewhere in the bedroom. I unhooked the front of the corset and let it fall, frowning at the red indentations it had left on my skin. Ah well, if it didn't bother him to leave red marks on my ass, it wouldn't bother him to see my clothes leaving them everywhere else. I snickered at that, and from the doorway Neil asked, "What's so funny?"

"Nothing." I shrugged. "Just giddy with anticipation."

He raised an eyebrow at me, his gaze dropping to my exposed breasts for a moment before he held up my present. Or, presents, plural, since he held an item in each hand. In his left, a broad, leather-covered paddle about the size of a small cutting board; in his right, an open jewelry box holding two long, tweezer-like clamps with delicate black beads dangling from them.

"Oh." I took a deep breath at the sight. I'd heard about stuff like this before, and seen it on the internet in some very enlightening videos, but I never really thought I would get a chance to try it out. I'd never been entirely sure that my previous partners wouldn't make fun of me for expressing an interest.

Now, here was a partner who not only wouldn't laugh, but who'd taken the initiative to make one of my fantasies a reality. Even though he couldn't have possibly known.

He set the box and paddle on the shelf below his suit jackets. "You're not running away, that's encouraging."

"I wouldn't leave right now if this place were on fire." I pressed my thighs together. "Please, Neil."

"Turn around." His voice was suddenly gruff, and that only made me hotter. "What are you to call me?"

"Sir," I purred, unable to stop the giddy smile that broke across my face.

I gave a sideways glance to the mirror and saw him smiling to himself, too, as he pulled the clamps from their black velvet bed. "Can I trust you to keep your eyes open?"

I shivered. "Yes, Sir."

"If you keep your eyes open, I will let you come before we leave this room. If you close them, I'll make you wait a very, very long time. Do you understand?"

"What about blinking, Sir?"

He swatted my behind lightly. "Obviously blinking is allowed. But I want you to see yourself coming, Sophie."

"Oh." My chest jerked with my sudden breath.

He lifted one of the nipple clamps and slid the ring down to adjust the tension. Though the clamps were open as wide as they could go, they still dug firmly into my nipple when he pushed them into place. The tightness was immediate and intense, but he slowly slid the ring toward my nipple, one tiny push at a time. "Tell me when it's too much."

I was sorely tempted to say "when!" and call the whole thing off, but once the initial shock of the new sensation wore off, I found myself wondering with a sort of perverted curiosity how much I could
take. I groaned as the tension grew, felt my eyes fluttering closed, but then I remembered his warning, and what he'd promised.

The deep, burning pinch grew too uncomfortable, and I gasped, "too much," before he released some of the tension, just a bit. Then, with the same careful attention, he repeated the process on the other side. When I looked in the mirror, I saw my nipples, dark red between the black pinchers of the clamps, and felt the motion of the dangling jewels in my swollen, aching breasts.

He lifted the jewels of one clip with his index finger. "Do you like them?"

I nodded. The sensations they caused were so keen and bizarre. While they did hurt, it wasn't an unbearable pain, and the tips of my nipples, caught between the long, slender teeth of the clamps, were already more eager, pleading to be touched. When he let go of the jewel, the swinging motion of even that slight weight seemed to shudder through my whole body. He spread his hand and touched me lightly with just the fleshy pads below his fingers, slowly brushing back and forth over my aching nipple. Even that gentle caress seemed like lightning through me.

He lifted my breasts in his hands, bent his head to flick his tongue over the throbbing points constrained by the clamps. I gasped at the amplified feeling, the familiar pull that made my cunt grasp helplessly. But all too soon, he let me go, to stand there full and heavy and aching as he looked me over.

"Would you like to come now, Sophie?" he asked, cupping my cheek and tilting my head up to look into my eyes.

"Yes, please, Sir." Was that my voice, all needy and tremulous? Could that really be me?

He pulled me against him, his soft sweater like briars against my oversensitive breasts. I imagined them swelling, filling, growing ripe like peaches straining at their own skin. He stepped back and pulled his sweater over his head, and I wanted him to embrace me again, to bring our naked skin together. Instead, he dropped to his knees before me, reminding me, "Keep your eyes open, or I'll stop."

Parting me with his thumbs, he leaned forward and swiped his tongue over my straining clits. A long moan of relief tore from my throat, and my eyes began to slide closed, but I stopped myself, fixing my gaze on our reflection. On his big hand grasping my thigh through the stretched black silk of my stocking. On his tongue curling out to taste me, his lower lip dragging over my engorged flesh as he sucked my clit into his mouth.

He drove me crazy tapping with his tongue one moment, licking in long, steady strokes the next. He growled against me, his fingers sinking into my thigh as he jerked my leg over his shoulder. I couldn’t move away from him, not without falling on my ass; I had to trust him to hold me up, because I couldn’t do it myself at the moment.

I stared, transfixed at the image in the mirror. There was the man who so overwhelmed me with his sexual power that I would do anything he asked. His hands and mouth were on me, giving me pleasure because it pleased him, because in that moment I was the center of his world. He wanted me. He wanted to control me, to possess me, to make me surrender to him completely and take all that he had to offer. Yet at the same time he was kneeling before me, worshipping me, as enslaved to me as I was to him.

And that was when I realized. I had fallen for him completely.

It was my relief at finally acknowledging it that triggered my climax, and I sank my fingers into his hair, holding him to me, holding on for dear life as my cunt spasmed and my nipples throbbed. He held me up with his arms wrapped around my thighs, and I braced myself with my hands on his shoulders, never letting my eyes drift closed for a moment, taking in every detail the mirror could show me.

Neil looked up, and I looked down at him, my heart squeezing in the vise grip of his gorgeous green eyes. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm..." I took a breath and reached for one of the clamps, sliding the ring down and slipping it off.
"No-" he warned, moving to stop me, but it was too late. The blood rushed back into my sensitive tissue, and it seemed to have brought its friend the knife gang with it. I grasped my breast and winced in pain, trying to ignore the fact that he was plainly trying to cover up his shocked amusement at the situation.

"Oh, Sophie, I'm so sorry, I should have warned you before," he covered his mouth with one hand, his eyes squinted shut from laughter.

"You should have warned me that my tits were going to die?" I whined plaintively, but I laughed, because he was laughing and I knew this would probably seem funny an hour from now. "Shut up," I giggled in pain.

"Here." He brushed my hand away and bent his head to my other breast, slowly sliding the ring on the clamp back a little bit at a time. As the tension eased, he lowered his mouth over my tortured flesh, laving me with his tongue until I was gasping. It still hurt like a bastard, but it was an amazingly good pain, lessened remarkably under the gentle suction of his mouth. When the rubberized tips of the clamps released my nipple, it didn't feel nearly as bad as it had with the other one.

"There," he said, lifting his head to brush his lips across mine. "All better?"

The tenderness in his voice, in the way his hand skimmed up and down my arm, felt like a fist to my ribs.

"Y-yeah," I managed, my pulse skipping erratically.

I was fine. Better than fine. I was in love with my boss.

And I was totally fucked.
Chapter Fourteen

There are times when it's appropriate to do the big relationship confrontation moment.

When you're lying across your boss's lap, naked except for high heels and thigh highs, getting your arms tied together with jute rope... that's not the right time.

It had taken me all of five seconds to decide what I was going to do with this whole being in love with Neil thing. I was going to ignore it. Not because I thought I could make it all go magically away, but because there was no need to rush into anything. He'd made it clear to me that our arrangement was monogamous, and he wasn't in the market for an actual dating relationship. There was no ticking clock on our attraction, so the pressure was off, more or less.

Besides, in love with someone or not, I had sincerely meant it when I'd told him that I wasn't ready to share my life with anyone. I liked spending time with Neil, but I also liked having my own space, autonomy to make my own decisions, and freedom to come and go as I pleased. In a real relationship, you had to take the other person's time and the investment of their feelings into consideration. I didn’t think I could do that right now. Besides, I wasn't sure where Neil stood on the relationship front anymore.

Instead of running out of his apartment screaming in terror from my emotions, I decided I'd stay, and have a damned good time with him.

"This should keep your hands out of the way," he explained as he looped and layered the rope to make a kind of braided sleeve around my forearms. I was positioned with my hands at the opposite elbows, my arms bent Barbie-style behind my back. He continued, pausing occasionally in his speech as he concentrated on the rope, "There is a danger... of an inexperienced participant reaching a hand back rather than using the safe word. The last thing I'd want is to accidentally... swat your poor fingers."

He bent his head and kissed the palm of one of my hands, then patted my bottom. "How does that feel?"

"Not too tight," I assured him, wriggling my fingers. They didn't have that disembodied feeling indicating cutoff circulation. "It'll take some getting used to."

"I have bandage scissors in my nightstand. If you feel yourself becoming panicky or claustrophobic, I can cut you out of this very quickly." He traced a finger down my spine, and over the cuff of rope binding me.

He helped me to my feet and walked me over to his bed. His big hands steadied me, and it all felt entirely surreal, like I was some helpless doll. It was a little scary; without my hands, I was very much at his mercy. The thrill of the safe scare made me giggle, trepidation tickling my clit.

The mattress stood much higher than the one at the W, so when he bent me over the side, with a pillow beneath my turned head, I had to practically stand on my toes, even in my heels.

I watched him walk back to the closet, to retrieve the paddle, and when he returned he asked, "How much do you want this, Sophie?"

"On a scale of one to ten?" I asked, wetting my lips and smiling at him. "Twelve hundred, Sir."

"Twelve hundred seems a bit excessive." He stepped up behind me and rested the paddle against my butt. I clenched my muscles then remembered to relax. He wouldn’t do it until he could catch me off guard. “But I think we can do twelve.”
Oh. I guess I had misunderstood the question. Twelve seemed like kind of a lot now.

The first crack of paddle against my flesh was more surprising than painful. In fact, it didn't hurt much more than a firm slap from his hand.

"Are you taking it easy on me?" I asked, lifting my head as best as I could, without using my arms.

“I don’t like your tone.” He smacked me again, this time hard enough to steal my breath in a sharp gasp. The stinging pain blossomed out from the wide point of impact, and I squirmed, pressing my groin against the edge of the mattress.

"There will be none of that," he warned, holding me motionless with a hand splayed across my lower back. "You’ve got ten more to go before you can even think of touching yourself. Stay still. Now, what do we say?"

"I’m sorry, Sir," I said, a little breathily as the next blow landed, then two more in rapid succession with no break between them. That was enough to pull a cry of pain from me, and I shocked myself with the loud, ragged sound.

I tried to imagine just what it would feel like if he really let go, if he really gave it to me as hard as he could. Tonight, it was enough to feel the wicked sting of leather slapping my backside, the jarring impact of the paddle nearly knocking me off my feet. My fingernails bit into my palms, and more than once I tried instinctively to move my hand back to stop him. Neil had been so right. Even though I wanted this, even though the wake of every blow sent more blood throbbing into my clit, I would have tried to stop him in the most stupid way possible, and wound up with mangled fingers.

After the seventh and eighth he stopped, brushing his palm over my burning skin. He threaded his hand into my hair and gently tugged my head back. “Four more. Do you think you can take them?”

I moaned, “Yes, Sir. Please Sir.”

What was it about this that made me so hot? The waiting, I supposed, and the endorphin rush that followed in the wake of the pain. But more than any of that, I realized, it was the trust. The sense of doing something dangerous, but not actually being in any danger, because I knew Neil would never hurt me. I could enjoy a hard spanking and a punishing fuck because I knew that while he could make me feel so many things - lust, pleasure, anticipation, pain - he would never actually make me feel afraid. I didn't fear him, and I didn't have to fear making him disapprove of me. Everything we did together was for our mutual pleasure.

What, exactly, he got out of it, I had no clue.

The next stroke was lower, across my thighs and labia. That was a shock I hadn’t been expecting, and a strange combination of pain and relief ripped through me.

“Do you like that?” He asked, slipping his hand down to cup me. One finger pushed roughly into my pussy, and my legs wobbled.

“Yes, Sir," I whimpered, and he withdrew to set up the next blow. Another slap landed, so hard that I almost rocked off my high heels, and again it was aimed at my defenseless, exposed cunt. This time, he held the paddle in front of my face, so I could see the wet kiss left behind.

“You’re a wicked girl, aren’t you?” he mock scolded, and white-hot darts of arousal pierced every vein in my body. I wanted him so badly I was trembling, and to see the proof of my desire right in front of me almost pushed me over the edge.

“Clean it off,” he ordered me, holding the paddle in front of my face. I had to extend my tongue to lick my own wetness off the leather surface of the paddle, while his hands caressed my scalp, sliding through my hair.

He shoved my face down and moved the paddle to my backside, giving me a swift, vicious smack. Two fingers delved into me, pumping vigorously, spearing deep. I groaned and arched against his hand, and he withdrew, spreading my wetness over my swollen labia. I moaned my relief, and slowly he
pushed his fingers in again, coaxing more slick fluid from me.

“Would you like to know something interesting about wet skin?” he asked over the sound of my moans.

I nodded, gasping. Then the paddle hit me, and it felt like my pussy was on fire.

“It makes spankings hurt more.”

“Oh, fuck!” I pressed my clit against the edge of the mattress again, so close to coming that my toes curled inside my shoes. It felt like any touch at all would be enough to spin me out of control. My fingernails dug into my palms as I hung on, praying for release.

Tears leaked from my eyes when the last hard smack forced an actual scream from me. But I didn’t come and actually sobbed in my frustration.

Leaning over me, he wiped a tear from my cheek with his thumb and kissed the track left by it.

"It can’t be as bad as all that, Sophie," he taunted me, stroking his thumb over my bottom lip. His jeans rough against my thighs, he pinned me to the bed. “Tell me what would make it better. I already know what you’ll say, but I love to hear it.”

I let out a shuddering breath. I hadn't even realized I'd been holding it in. "Fuck me, Sir.”

Gently, he smoothed his palm over my welted backside. “Don’t move.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, bouncing a little with impatience as he went to his nightstand for a condom. I heard him unzip his jeans, the crumpling of the wrapper, and then, faster than I had anticipated, he stood behind me, the head of his cock prodding my backside. He parted my thighs with a hand, then positioned himself at the opening of my sex and pushed in, filling me deeply. I moaned and arched my back, gripping him as he slowly withdrew and sank in again.

"You feel incredible," he groaned, his fingers digging into my hips.

My thighs quivered with the strain of keeping my balance on the balls of my feet while he fucked me with such torturous slowness that I could feel every inch of him against every part of me.

"Do you remember what I wanted to do to you last night?"

"You wanted to tie me up, Sir," I answered on a choking gasp as he filled me again.

"Specifically, that I wanted you riding me with your hands tied. I think we’ll do that now." He pulled out of me abruptly. "Stand up."

I whimpered disconsolately as he helped me straighten. I'd been waiting all night, now I'd just gotten his cock in me and he was going to stop?

"That's enough of your pouting," he warned. "Stay there a moment."

He went to the other side of the bed, to the nightstand on what I assumed was his side of the bed. There was a lamp, an alarm clock with an iPhone dock, a pair of glasses, and a box of tissue on that side. The other nightstand was empty, except for the matching lamp. Neil opened the drawer and withdrew a metal cylinder about as long as my hand and as thick as a Sharpie marker.

"What's that?" I asked, watching as he turned it in his hands. The gleaming metal intrigued me. Whatever it was, it would feel super cold on my body, I was certain.

"It's a vibrator," he said, twisting the base. It was an incredibly sleek one, nothing at all like the thirteen-dollar plastic pseudo-dick one I had at home.

I grinned to myself.

"What I would like to do," he began, coming to my side and turning me in his arms so that the front of my body was flush against his. He brushed my hair behind my ear, his hand lingering on my jaw, and I swayed against him. "Is to set you on my cock, and use that vibrator on you."

My mouth went dry. The thing looked more like a sterile surgical implement than a sex toy, its metal surface gleaming in the low light. "Is that... platinum?"
“It was that or the twenty-four karat gold, and that one seemed a bit ostentatious.” He grinned down at me. "What do you say?"

"I don't know, Sir," I waggled my fingers in their binding. "Being on top... that doesn't sound very submissive."

"Would you like me to prove you wrong?" There was a delicious warning in his voice, a promise that he would indeed prove me wrong, and I would be a very sorry - and a very happy - woman while he was doing it.

"Please do. Sir. Please prove me wrong." I deliberately swiped my tongue over my top lip.

The hand at my jaw suddenly gripped my chin. He gave me a gentle shake, but his hold was firm, surprising me. "Kneel on the bed."

I did as I was told, my needy cunt weeping in desperation. He sat down beside me and reached for me. I guess I'd never realized how hard it would be to balance without using my arms. I was glad he was there to steady me. He pulled me to straddle his lap, and I tried to inch forward on my knees to position the head of his cock against me.

"No." He wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me with him as he scooted us up the bed. Then, lying back, he jerked my hips down, bringing me flush against his erection. The lips of my sex parted around his shaft. I shifted on him, sliding back and forth. My clit was swollen and aching, the only relief the pressure of his cock under me. I was almost embarrassed at how wet I was; I was dripping on his cock, and my thighs were sticky. The lubrication made every sensation more sleek and purposeful, and I felt my long-denied orgasm building, trying to hold back my moans so he wouldn't know until it was too late.

"Are you going to come?" he asked, grabbing my hips and holding me captive.

"Please," I practically sobbed, caught on the razor thin edge of my release. "Please, I have to!"

"You will," he soothed, leaning up to reach between us. Slowly, he eased the head of his erection into me. He reached for the vibrator and turned it on, pressing the cool, smooth metal against my clit as he thrust upward, filling me completely.

That was all it took, and I was screaming, gasping and writhing on him as my pussy gripped him in erratic waves of pleasure that shook my entire body. Pops of light burst behind my eyelids. The vibration from the thin wand was surprisingly strong, and I lifted up to escape, to get a moment's reprieve from the sensation I had been dying for only moments ago.

"I seem to remember you saying that this position wasn't submissive?" He taunted, reaching up to clamp a firm hand over the nape of my neck. He pulled me down hard, and with no way to catch myself I was at his mercy. He held me tight against his chest, lifting his hips to pound into me deeper, faster. The vibrator was trapped between us, lying along the length of my clit, nudging and sliding with every thrust, the buzzing never letting up. I twisted my hands in their binding. My nails dug into my palms. I was going to come again, oh god, I was going to come again, and there was no way to prevent it, no way to squirm from the sensation with his knees up behind me and his arms locked around my back. Tension drew my head back, tightened my body like a bowstring, and I climaxed with a long, pinched wail.

Neil laughed, breathless, never letting up the long, brutal strokes, never removing the vibrator that had become an instrument of torture. "Do you still feel you have too much control?"

"No! No, Sir!" I panted in time to his thrusts, nearly hyperventilating. My cunt was swollen and pillowy from my orgasms, my flesh impossibly tight around him. My lungs ached. My hair was plastered to my sweaty forehead. When had I worked up a sweat?

I was caught in a never-ending loop of stimulation, swinging from too much to not enough to fully satisfied and back again, over and over. I lost count of how many times I came, lost track of what I said or did. I know I pleaded with him, but the words "yes," and "no," and "please," and "no more!" shed all
meaning, becoming a despairing, triumphant litany. “Red” was constantly in the back of my mind, but I didn’t want to stop, not really. Or did I? I couldn’t tell.

His thighs slapped against my ass, the obscene sound driving my arousal higher as he pumped into me.

"You're going to make me come, Sophie," he growled against my neck. He grabbed my ass, digging his fingers in, and arched up from the bed with a groan of relief. This time, when I came, it wasn't solely because of the torturous buzzing or the relentless fucking. As he shoved deep, pulsing into me, I gave over to one last, wrenching release, focused on his words. I made him come. It didn't matter that I was tied up and totally unable to do anything but get fucked, I had made him come. The thought coaxed a half-sobbed moan from my lips. A drop of sweat fell from the tip of my nose, and I squirmed, the ropes, the vibrator, the throb of his flagging erection too much for me.

"Red," I panted, scrambling to climb off him. I fell to the bed, trying to blow the hair out of my face. As Neil immediately began to work on the ropes around my wrists, I forced myself to remain patient. It was so strange, that the binding hadn't bothered me before, but now I wanted to thrash and claw my way free.

"Easy now," he murmured, loosening the ropes quickly. He massaged my wrists, my forearms, and rolled me onto my stomach to work on my back.

"What's this for?" I groaned in relief as he kneaded my muscles, and I stretched my freed arms over my head. "Not that I'm complaining."

"You were tied in one position for a good, long time, and I don't want you to feel sore in the morning." His big hands paused in their kneading of my muscles and he added, "Well, I don't want your back sore, that is. I fear there's no hope for the rest of you."

I felt the hot blush in my face and muffled my giggles with the duvet. "Is my ass bruised?"

"Not bruised. Cherry red, though. And you're hoarse, you should drink some water." He left the bed and disappeared through the closet. I saw the bathroom light click on, and when Neil returned - unsselfconscious in his nakedness, making my stomach do little backflips - he had not only a glass of water for me, but a little package of single-use toothbrushes. "For the morning," he explained as he set my dental-care saviors on the empty nightstand. "So you don't bolt from my bed the moment your eyes open."

I smiled, remembering my panic at waking up with him that morning. "You're such a thoughtful host."

He smoothed his palm over my bottom. "Do you want me to get you some ice?"

I sat up and reached for the water. I hadn't realized how thirsty I was. "No. I like to feel it, remember?"

He picked up the vibrator from the bed and turned it off. "I'm going to go take care of this, take out my contacts then I'm going to come back to the feeling of a beautiful, naked woman in my arms. If that's all right with you?" He waited for me to lower the water glass then kissed the tip of my nose.

"I'll be here." When he was gone, I wriggled down in the big bed and smoothed my sweaty hair back from my face. I thought of Neil sleeping in here, all alone. Then I thought of his wife, sleeping in here with him, and my stomach turned sour.

I looked at the bedside table on my side. Her side? Whichever, it was still a bare and depressing nightstand, all set up for the new woman's weird tooth paranoia.

Neil came back and climbed beneath the covers beside me. "How did that go, then?"

"Amazing as always." I fluffed up the pillows behind me. There was a serious four-per-person pillow situation going on. When I leaned back, it felt like I was never going to stop sinking. It was heavenly.
"Is there anything you'd want me to do differently? For next time?"
I loved the way his voice sounded late at night, sleepy and deep. I mulled the question over, sliding my fingers along the satin edge of the duvet where it lay across my chest. "No. Honestly, you're very good at knowing what I need, and you ask what I want, which is good, too. I just don't see what you get out of it."
"I like the challenge." He rolled to his side to face me, one arm over my stomach on top of the blankets. "It's a bit like a puzzle for me, figuring out what it is that gives you the most pleasure. What you need to be able to give me your total submission."
"Good luck with that, I don't think I'll ever be totally submissive." I snorted.
He cupped my cheek, and just that small touch sent a shockwave of desire though me. Despite the fact that I was exhausted and should have been completely satiated, I wanted him again.
"You already are. You're thinking of submission as an act of humiliation." He let his fingers slide down my jaw, his thumb tracing my bottom lip. "And it can be, if that's what a sub needs. But you've been given the mistaken impression that Dominance and submission are all about taking. You take the orders, the pain, the restrictions, while I take control away from you. The reality is far different. When you submit, you give yourself to me wholly. Your desire, your attention, your mind, and you give these things to me because you want to."
"So, that makes you the taker?" I asked, sucking the tip of his thumb between my lips briefly.
"There is no 'taker.' I give you pleasure, I give you limitations in regards to the sensations you feel and how you feel them. But I'm never taking your control away against your will. I wouldn't want that."
He leaned up and coaxed me down, until our lips and tongues met in a slow, thorough kiss. His hand fisted in the hair at my nape, and he pulled my head back. I gasped as our mouths parted.
"Your trust in me, your ability to surrender totally and give yourself to me freely... that's the payoff for me, Sophie. It's an aphrodisiac."
I leaned forward, brushing my lips across his with the small freedom of motion he let me have. Then, carefully, so our heads didn't knock together, he let me go, and I snuggled down beside him.
He was so warm and naked and good-feeling against my skin. No matter how soft and fluffy the pillows were, they were nowhere near as comfortable as resting my head on Neil's shoulder.
"So, you've done this with other women before, right?" I walked my fingertips through his chest hair. "I mean you kind of talked like you knew what you were doing when we were in L.A."
He covered my hand with his, holding it flat to his chest. "Do you really want to know?"
"I asked." I rubbed my cheek against his shoulder. I would never get enough of his scent, the feel of him. "I'm not going to get jealous of the people you used to sleep with. They're not here right now."
"Yes, I have had prior relationships where Dominance and submission were involved." He idly stroked the back of my hand. "But I've also had relationships where it wasn't."
"Which way is better?" If I ever did get long-term with someone, they would have to be able to make me respond the way Neil did. I couldn't imagine it any other way.
His hand stilled, pressing over mine. I could feel his heartbeat beneath my palm. "Being with you is better. Either way."
My chest squeezed painfully. But it was the good kind of pain.

** ** **

Waking up with Neil beside me was the most exquisite, perfect feeling.
I was all comfortable and warm and safe - a demented thing to revel in, considering I'd never actually been in anything close to danger in my entire life. Sleeping with Neil's warm skin pressed to mine, his strong arm around me, made me feel protected, even if I didn't need protecting from anything.
I wriggled in his embrace and reached for the single-use toothbrushes on the nightstand. I quickly
tore one open and stuck it in my mouth, hurriedly scrubbing away my morning breath.

"Vanity, thy name is Sophie," Neil murmured sleepily from behind me as he released me and rolled away.

"Ish not vani-y," I muttered around the brush. I reached for the half-full water glass and quickly swished some around my mouth. "It's just manners."

His hand closed over my hip, and I scrambled to replace the glass on the nightstand before he jerked me down in the bed, smoothly covering my body with his.

"Well then, I have excellent manners," he said, his suspiciously minty breath in my face. "Because I've already been up for morning ablutions."

"Oh, and that isn't vanity?" I wriggled beneath him as he reached over me to a remote on the bedside table. He hit a button and the shades over the windows slowly rose, flooding the room with daylight, unimpeded by neighboring buildings.

"Now, we have the entire day to ourselves. And I haven't the faintest clue what to do with you." The head of his cock prodded between my thighs, making a liar out of him. He knew exactly what he wanted to do with me.

All it would take was a shift of my hips, and he would be inside me. I held his face in my hands.

"You didn't shave."

"You like my stubble," he pointed out, rubbing his cheek against my throat.

I sighed, totally content as he nibbled and sucked along my jaw, up to my ear, finding that totally weird and totally awesome spot behind it, the spot that could make me come when he paid it enough attention.

"I do," I moaned, stretching my neck to give him more room to tease me. I lifted one leg around his waist and his cock slid into me, pulling sighs from both of us.

"That... oh, that's lovely," he murmured against my neck. “But I should really get a condom.”

He was right, I knew, but he felt so damn good, I didn’t want to stop. At least one of us had the presence of mind to be responsible.

“Hurry, okay?” To punctuate my sentence, I squeezed him with my internal muscles.

“Good lord,” he cursed, dipping his head to my shoulder. His breath on my skin, the prickle of his unshaven chin against me, the feeling of him deep inside me, with no particular hurry to be anywhere else... okay, I could now fully understood why he was into sleepovers. I couldn’t think of any better way to wake up.

He pulled out and rolled away from me, rummaging through his nightstand, then quickly sheathed himself. He was back between my legs with a speed that both impressed and flattered me, and I giggled.

"Something funny?" he asked as he rocked against me slowly, reaching down to hook his arm under my knee, holding me wide open so he could sink deeper.

"Just enjoying my morning," I gasped, my fingers fisting in the pillow beside my head. "That's good, just like that."

"Just like this?" He withdrew slowly, until I was shaking and panting, desperate to have him back. But in the position I was in, I couldn't really move.

I clamped my lips together tightly, a catch in my breathing the only sound I could make. It was odd, but the daylight made me feel a little self-conscious. Sure, my morning breath was taken care of, but my makeup was probably smudged, I didn't even want to think about what my hair looked like, and this close up he could probably see every pore on my face.

And just like that, I was out of the moment. He went still inside me and lifted his head. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Okay. It was difficult to lie to him when he was on top of me. "I'm just feeling a little...
self-conscious."
"Why? Is there an audience here that I'm not aware of?" He pretended to be concerned as he looked over his shoulder.
"You know, you could be less sarcastic, with your dick in me." I wriggled. "Come on, let's just - "
"No, we will not 'just.' There's no point in continuing if you've got something on your mind that's going to prevent you from enjoying yourself." He moved to roll away from me, but I locked my legs around his hips.
"Okay, okay." I scrunched up my face. "I feel like it's different, at night. Night is supposed to be this dirty, wrong time. Mornings aren't supposed to be sexy. And I mean, I look- "
"You look absolutely fucking gorgeous." He kissed me, smoothing hair away from my brow. "You look like a woman who was well and thoroughly shagged last night, and who's waking up all mussed and sweaty and - " he broke off to bury his nose in my shoulder and sniffed loudly - "reeking of sex to do it all over again."
"Reeking? That's some sweet talk there," I giggled, but he did, strangely, make me feel better.
"Sophie, I don't care if your makeup is smeared, or if your hair isn't perfect. The only thing I care about is that a beautiful, sexy, confident woman half my age wants to do depraved things with me in the bedroom."
"And in the kitchen," I reminded him with a snort. "There might be some depravity we missed in the bathroom," he suggested, pressing deeper inside me. The motion dragged a long, slow shudder through my body. He covered my mouth with his, swept his tongue in to tangle with mine. The heels of my hands rested against his shoulders, my fingers curling and uncurling helplessly as our bodies and tongues writhed together. When he lifted his head, he added, "Perhaps we can find out after breakfast?"
I nodded, breathless, and rocked with him as he thrust into me.
"Mornings aren't supposed to be sexy," he muttered, leaning his forehead against mine. "Really, I had thought better of you."
"Oh, shut up and fuck me." I grabbed one of the pillows and smacked him with it.
We had a brief, playful struggle, wrestling with each other until he held both my hands under his, pinned to the mattress.
"Tell me what you want. Tell me what it is you need, and I'll give it to you," he pledged against my mouth. His hips lifted and he pulled out of me until just the head of him stretched my cunt.
I looked up, into fierce green eyes that sent shockwaves of arousal through every cell in my body. I could have played the game, said something really racy to tantalize him, but I knew I would never beat him at dirty talk. "You. I want you."
He filled me again, so quick and hard it took my breath away.
"Fuck me hard," I whispered, and it turned into a moan as I moved with him.
He released my hands to sit up and grasp my hips. "What was that?"
"Fuck me," I repeated, though he didn't need my urging. He surged in me, rocking my hips in his hands, pulling my whole body down the bed with the motion until my back was bowed.
"I love to hear you say that," he groaned, grinding deep. "Louder, Sophie."
"Fuck me!" I shouted. I hoped there was good soundproofing between him and his neighbors. "Fuck me! I want you to fuck me harder!"
He grabbed my arms and pulled me up, into his lap. We were caught in a tangle of my hair, our limbs and tongues, and when he pulled free of me he said gruffly, "Get on your hands and knees."
I guess I really do get off on anticipation more than anything else, because switching positions seemed to take a lifetime, and I relished every second of it. He caught my hair and wrapped it around his fist, jerking my head back. "Is this all right?"
"Yes!" I pounded my hand against the mattress. "Please just fuck me already."

He drove into me so hard that I lost my balance and my teeth knocked together, but he didn't let up. I'd asked for this, and a hard, punishing fuck was what I would get. I howled my relief as he pounded into me, my hands clenching the sheets until my knuckles were white. Every time I slipped down, unable to hold myself up under the force of his thrusts, he pulled me back up, going deeper, bringing inarticulate shouts from my throat.

"Like that, Sophie," he growled, jerking on my hair. "Let me hear you."

His other hand caught me around the waist, pulled me half up so all I could do was lean on his arm as he shoved two fingers between my folds to rub my clit.

"I'm coming!" I gasped in total disbelief at the intensity building to a rapid breaking point. How could he do this to me? How could he make me want him so much, so fast? I was almost furious at him for his easy knowledge of my body. But it's really hard to hold a grudge during an orgasm. I came screaming his name, spasming all around him.

He let go of me, let me fall forward and followed me as I went down, pressing me into the mattress as he groaned with his release.

"There," he said, out of breath, slipping from my body a little more with each heartbeat. "Isn't that so much better than a cab home in the dead of night?"

I wiggled beneath him, and he rolled off me. I sat up, tucking the cushiony duvet around my chest and beneath my arms. "Okay. You proved your point. Overnights are pretty awesome."

"You should respect the wisdom of your elders," he said with a tired chuckle.

"Oh, the wisdom that sent me home with no panties on one of the very first times we fucked?" I reminded him.

"And you learned an important lesson from that, didn't you?" He reached for a few tissues from the box on the nightstand. When he'd disposed of the condom in the small trash basket beside the bed, he pulled me down beside him. I happily snuggled in at his side. His arm was trapped under my waist, and his hand splayed at the small of my back, sliding down to squeeze my bottom. "You didn't wear panties this time, did you?"

"No, but I did bring some." I nibbled my lower lip and batted my eyes at him. "More black ones. Boy shorts, very cute. I'm sure you wouldn't be interested."

He pulled me up tighter, his fingers digging into my ass. "Why don't you put them on and see how interested I am?"

"Okay, even you must have a refractory period, horny as you are," I pointed out. "Besides, I left my bag in the foyer."

"Why don't you run out there and get it?" He kissed the tip of my nose. "Then come back and sit in my lap, wearing nothing but those panties. I will make it worth your while."

I took a breath, the imagined picture of Neil's hand down the front of my panties searing through my mind.

"Okay, but it's chilly in here. I'm taking your sweater." I rolled out of the bed with considerable difficulty. Seriously, I had no idea how Neil got up in the mornings at all. The damn thing was so comfortable and cushiony, I would call into work every single day and just lay around.

I picked up his sweater from the floor in the closet and tugged it over my head. It hung to mid-thigh on me, and I had to roll the sleeves back.

"You wear that better than I do," he quipped. "Go on then. I want you at least once more before breakfast."

I giggled and hurried out of the room, sucking in my breath when my toes encountered the cold marble in the foyer. He really needed to get those floor-level heating things all around the entire
apartment. I scooped up my bag, then stopped. I smelled coffee. *Huh. That's weird.* I thought he'd given his housekeeper the weekend off. Maybe he had one of those coffee machines with a timer on it. That would be amazing. I could take a cup back to bed for him. I set my bag down and sprinted on tip-toes through the living room and dining room.

I was grinning like an idiot at the thought of having my morning coffee with a side of Neil when I pushed through the kitchen door. Then it all fell spectacularly apart. There was a woman seated at the kitchen counter. I gave a startled yelp at the sight of her.

She smiled like a Bond villain and tilted her head to one side, warbling a falsely chipper, "Good morning."

It was Emma. Oh god, it was Neil's daughter.
Chapter Fifteen

"Sophie?" Neil called from somewhere far off in the apartment, alarmed. He must have heard my startled shriek.

In hindsight, I should have yelled back, "I'm fine," or "It's just your daughter," but all I could think was that he would come stampeding into the kitchen naked before I had a chance to tell him anything at all. It was bad enough I was standing there in his sweater, and nothing else, in front of Emma. So I shouted a loud, hysterical, "Have pants on!"

"Oh, that's lovely. Thank you, for that," Emma said, blinking and turning back to the magazine open on the counter. She had a cup of coffee beside her, too, and the dinner from last night had been cleared away.

So... she had been there for a while. Great.

Neil came into the kitchen behind me, tying the belt of a black bathrobe. His expression changed from concern to confusion to horror in an impressively short span of time. "Emma? What are you doing here?"

"I was supposed to be here. We spoke earlier this week." Her gaze raked me up and down. "But you must have had other things on your mind."

"You were coming in on the twenty-ninth," he asserted, as though just saying it aloud would somehow reverse the entire, horrible, situation we were in.

"The twenty-eighth." She lifted her mug and sipped from it. "I suppose when Tony wasn't at the airport, that should have been my first clue that you'd gotten the date wrong. Again."

"How, uh," Neil cleared his throat. "When did you get here?"

"I got here right around, 'I want you to fuck me harder.'" She lifted her eyebrows and blinked innocently at him, challenging her father to some silent battle of wills.

I heard Neil's sharply indrawn breath behind me. "I suddenly very much regret the way the morning has gone thus far."

I tugged the bottom of the sweater down. It could have reached the floor, but I would have still felt way naked. Emma had already heard me having sex with her dad, she didn't need the full peep show. "I'm going to just... go."

"You don't have to go," Neil said, following me into the dining room. He looked briefly at the swinging kitchen door, then back down at me. He lowered his voice so we wouldn't be overheard. Oh yeah, now he thinks of that.

"Stay. Have breakfast. It's the least I can do."

"No, you don't owe me anything," I said quietly. "You mixed up some dates, no big. We can get together another weekend."

"No, I insist. Please, there's no reason you can't be here, just because Emma is. We're all adults. I'm sure I don't need to explain myself to her." He put his hand on my upper arm, his thumb kneading my flesh through the sweater. "Look, go get dressed, and I'll talk to her. It could be a blessing in disguise, the two of you meeting. You might really like each other."

Too late, I thought, but I didn't argue with him. This was the absolute worst way he could have introduced his daughter and me. It would have been preferable if we'd never met at all. Since Neil and I weren't serious, there was no reason to play 'meet the family'. I wasn't about to take him home to my mom or anything. Hell, I hadn't even mentioned I was seeing someone when I'd spoken to her last. It was just easier that way.
But, he really wanted me to stay, for whatever reason, and I wasn't going to strain things between
the two of us. I would get dressed and join them for dysfunctional family breakfast. I had a feeling
Emma would make a stronger case for why the whole thing was fucked up than I ever could.

I mean, really, I thought to myself as I donned the tight jeans and snug, long-sleeved, v-neck t-shirt
I'd packed intending to look casually hot for Neil. Now, I worried about how much cleavage it showed.
A lot. The answer was a lot of cleavage.

If you'd caught your mom with some guy your age, you would react the same way. He wouldn't
even have to be my age. I'd run off a pretty impressive string of chronologically appropriate men when
I'd been a teenager and my mom had dipped her toes back into the dating pool. Maybe if Emma and I
had met through work or friends, we would have had no problem with each other. But once you threw in
that whole pesky part about me fucking her dad? I really couldn't hold it against her if she didn't want to
become instant BFFs.

I dragged a brush through my hair and pulled it back in a low ponytail. Neil came in just as I was
about to brave the kitchen again.

"Sue left a quiche in the refrigerator, it's heating up now. We can eat it while my vegan daughter
judges us accordingly." He went straight to the closet. When he emerged, he was wearing sweatpants
and a cheap blue t-shirt from a half marathon.

This was, with the exception of nakedness, just about the most casual I'd ever seen him. And it was
bizarrely hot.

He picked up speaking as though he'd never stopped. "This is all my fault, because if I had
mentioned it to Sue, she would have made something else for breakfast, but I forgot what day my only
child would be returning from London. Let me reiterate: I forgot that my daughter would be zooming
across the North Atlantic in a flying metal death trap." He sat on the sofa, thumb and fingers spread
across his eyes to massage his temples.

"So..." I sat beside him and rubbed his back absently. "So, the talking didn't go great then?"
"Not at all." He stretched his face down with his hands. "And I have to go back in there."

"Oh my god." I coughed a disbelieving laugh. "You want me here for this because you're afraid."
"I- um." he stammered. "Yes, I suppose I am. It's going to be insufferably awkward. And I don't
want to go through it alone."

"Don't you think it's only going to be worse if I stay?" I asked, getting to my feet.
"Perhaps, but..." he sighed. "I like being with you. I don't want to cut our time together short. And
your presence generally improves my life, so if I'm going to endure the most uncomfortable father-
daughter breakfast ever, I might as well do it with you beside me for moral support."

"Fair enough. I helped make the problem." I leaned down and kissed his deliciously rough cheek. I
felt a momentary twinge of disappointment that we wouldn't be putting that stubble to better use today,
after all.

Back in the kitchen, Emma was sitting at the breakfast nook, staring intently down at her phone.

Neil cleared his throat, and when she looked up, lifting one eyebrow in an eerie impersonation of
her father, he said patiently, "Emma, I didn't have a chance to introduce you before. This is my girlfriend
Sophie. Sophie, this is my daughter, Emma."

Excuse me, girlfriend? What? Now was definitely not the time for that conversation, though. I
really didn't want to have to explain to this stranger that I was involved in a no-strings, friends-with-
benefits relationship with her father. Oh, no worries, we're just having hot, meaningless sex is all.
Doesn't that sound so much better, Emma?

"Nice to meet you, Sophie," Emma said, but she didn't try to shake my hand. "I didn't know my
father had a girlfriend. So soon after his divorce."
Neither did I. I slid onto the seat opposite her, and scooted down the bench to make room for Neil. Emma looked immediately back at her phone, and Neil was busy taking the quiche out of the microwave, so I distracted myself by examining the framed photos on the wall above the breakfast nook. There was a much younger Neil, holding a smiling, pink-cheeked toddler in his arms at what appeared to be a polo match. In another, the same girl, older, with pigtails in her hair, stood proudly in front of a sign that read "Llewellyn Academy". In the next one, Emma at age six or seven held a springer spaniel puppy in her lap.

"That was Merry," Neil explained, and when I looked to him, his eyes were on the photo. He slid the quiche onto a trivet in the center of the table then turned to get some plates. "I bought her for Emma for Christmas one year. You should have seen the look on her face when she came downstairs and there was a real puppy, sleeping in its bed right in front of the Christmas tree."

"And that is exactly the kind of charming tableau we try to discourage, dad." Emma set her phone aside at the sound of the toaster. She slid from her seat and retrieved her bagel, returning to the table with it and a jar of cashew butter.

"I think it's terrible when people buy an animal to celebrate a holiday, then just get rid of it," I said, trying to sound as totally in agreement with her as possible. "But I'm sure Neil knew it was going to a good, responsible owner."

"I don't believe in owning other sentient beings. That's slavery." Emma smiled at me as though I'd just said my alphabet out of order or something, but she felt I was very brave for trying.

Neil returned with plates and forks and took a seat beside me. "Emma works for the Animal Protection Fund."

"Oh! I've heard of them." I beamed at her. "You guys do some really cool work."

"I'm glad you like it." Emma nodded. "Now, Sophie... what grade are you in?"

"Emma..." The warning tone in Neil's voice didn't go unnoticed by either of us. I'd hated to listen to my friends fight with their parents in front of me, and this was eerily reminiscent of that exact scenario. It really creeped me out.

"Oh, dad, I'm only teasing. She knows that."

I was one hundred percent certain she was not joking.

She continued, "I have to break the ice a little. This is a rather disturbing morning all around, isn't it?" Emma leaned on her elbows and fixed me with a reasonable facsimile of polite interest. "So, how did you two meet?"

Was this a trick? What did I say? I highly doubted Neil had discussed past one-night stands with his daughter, but we didn't really have a cover story in place for something like this.

"Sophie and I met a few years ago," Neil answered for me. "We recently reconnected."

"So I heard." Emma paused with her bagel halfway to her mouth. "You know, if you need me to stay somewhere else this week, I can. Michael's, or Elizabeth's - "

"That won't be necessary. And I would appreciate it if you would not mention this to Elizabeth, should you see her during this visit." There was a tick in Neil's jaw when he spoke his ex's name. In the brief mentions he'd made of her to me, he hadn't sounded quite so irritated. Was Neil's daughter close with his ex-wife? Or soon to be ex. Was the divorce final? Should I have figured that out first? I mean, it didn't matter if he was legally married, the relationship was over, right?

Oh my gosh, no wonder Emma had taken such an immediate dislike to me. If she was close to her stepmother, of course she would be offended when her father seemingly moved on so quickly. That Neil and I didn't have a serious relationship didn't matter; Emma didn't know the details, she had only heard the world "girlfriend."

"Don't worry," Emma said lightly, not even looking up at Neil as she delivered her next barb. "I'm
not going to tell her you have a woman staying over within days of her moving out. It would destroy her.

I wished I had a super power that allowed me snuff myself out like a match and reignite somewhere else.

"I'm sorry, this... this is too weird. I'm going to go." I shook my head and stood, trapped between the wall and Neil, hoping fervently that he would move and just let me escape.

He did, thank god. "Let me walk you out," he said, sliding from his seat and shooting his daughter a very terse look. I had been on the receiving end of just such an expression many times from my mother.

I didn't take any of it personally. All of this, absolutely every single bit of it, was between Emma and her father. It had nothing to do with me. I was just a convenient catalyst.

"I'm sorry, this was a total disaster," Neil said as he followed me to the bedroom.

"It's okay." I collected up the D&G dress from his closet and carefully folded it into my overnight bag. "I would probably be pretty grossed out to find my mom with a guy my age."

That was the worst possible thing I could have said. Neil looked like I'd slapped him. "Grossed out?"

"You don't gross me out," I stated firmly. I went to him and stood on my tiptoes to put my arms around his neck. He hesitated a moment, clearly wanting to be grumpy with me, but he couldn't resist my patiently upturned mouth. His lips brushed mine and his arms tightened around my back briefly.

"But think about it from Emma's perspective," I said quietly when I stepped out of his embrace. "You have parents. You must have been uncomfortable with the idea of them having a sex life."

"I fear it may be a little more complicated than that." Neil sat down on the sofa. He glanced up at me, guilt in his eyes. "Emma isn't happy about my divorce. She grew quite fond of Elizabeth. Emma was one of the bridesmaids, actually."

"I kind of guessed that she was Team Elizabeth." I went to his side and sat down, my hands on my knees. It was a good thing Neil and I weren't serious, because I couldn't imagine Emma ever putting on a bridesmaid dress for me. Not after the introduction we'd had. "Maybe the 'girlfriend' thing just surprised her. I know it shocked the hell out of me."

"Sorry about that." He gave me a sheepish sideways glance. "I never thought we'd have to explain our relationship to anyone. Secrecy has kept us in a bit of a bubble this whole time. The only person in my life who knew about you was Rudy. I was unprepared, and I didn't want to tell my daughter that you're the woman I'm casually fucking."

I nudged his knee with mine. "It sounds like she'd be more comfortable hearing that, than thinking you were in a relationship."

"And I didn't want to hurt you," he added, looking into my eyes. "You mean more to me than just casual sex."

My newly in-love heart squeezed super hard at that, and I had to give myself a split-second mental toughness talk: I was not, under any circumstances, going to scream out, "I-love-you-lets-go-to-Las-Vegas-and-get-married-right-now!"

The best thing I could do was make a joke out of it.

"The sex is pretty fantastic, though." I leaned against him, rocking him slightly to the side, and he laughed.

"Next weekend?" he asked hopefully.

"Um... yeah." I felt a weird pang at the thought that I wouldn't see him until then. "Do you have a really busy week?"

"Not particularly, but with Emma here..." he grimaced. "I'm sorry." "No, it's fine." It wasn't. I wasn't fine with it at all. I was jealous and bitter, and I felt shitty because I
knew I had no right to be. Neil was Emma's dad, and if he were the kind of guy who would give his kid the brush off - no matter how old the kid was - I wouldn't have had any interest in him, anyway. "I love that you have a good relationship with your daughter. At least, most of the time. You're both really lucky."

"Do you want to go home in the car?" he asked.
I shook my head. "Call me old fashioned, but I kind of enjoy the so-called 'walk of shame.' It's really more a 'walk of pride because I got some.'"

"That you did," he agreed.
He walked me to the elevator, waited for it to arrive, and gave me a thoroughly sweet kiss. And I let it be sweet. Because it was foolish to fight what I was feeling. He obviously cared for me, he'd said as much. But we were both happy with what we had. We didn't need to pretend it was anything more or less than it was. The elevator dinged, and I stepped out of his arms. Frowning, I reached up to brush my fingers over a smudge on his neck.

"What is it?"
Oh man. Now I really felt bad. "I think I gave you a little hickey last night."
He clapped his hand over his neck, and he was actually blushing. "Bloody hell, woman, I have to go back in there and have breakfast with my child!"

Grinning, he leaned down for one last kiss, and I gave him a quick peck before I darted into the elevator. We could drag the goodbye out all day, and I knew it was because neither of us wanted to be apart.

I felt amazing. I felt like the Grinch must have felt when his heart grew three sizes.
Except, when I stepped out of the building and onto Fifth avenue, I missed Neil already.

* * * *

I was glad to have taken the train, instead of Neil's offer of a car home. It gave me time to think about the morning in a neutral space.

Neil's daughter was an animal advocate. All of the changes to the beauty department suddenly made sense. And the cuts to Jake's story. Was this something Emma was asking Neil to do? He had to know it was a bad idea.

I considered what I knew of Emma. It wasn't a lot, beyond the fact that she was Neil's daughter, and she would now hate me for the rest of my life. I dropped my head in my hands, grateful that this train car was mostly empty. Listening to the tinny noise from other people's headphones or being stared at by some creepy dude who was trying to see under my clothes would not have helped my mental state at all.

So, Emma was big time into animals. Which meant she probably hated the fashion industry altogether. After all, it wasn't exactly like designers and cosmetic companies were falling all over themselves to protect animals. And now Emma's father owned Porteras. How much influence did she have over him?

I had no idea how a father/daughter relationship worked. My own dad had cut out when I was a year old. He'd picked me up for visits now and then until I was about six, but it wasn't until I was a teenager that I'd realized the driving force behind those daddy-daughter days had been my mother's desire for them to happen. He'd come to my high school graduation, given me a card with twenty bucks in it, and then gone back home to his wife and other children, whose names I couldn't quite remember. That had been the last time I'd seen him. It seemed completely unlikely to me that if I woke up tomorrow caring deeply about animals, he might alter his personal - and professional - behavior in any way to honor my convictions. Clearly, that wasn't the case with Emma and Neil.

The puppy under the Christmas tree was my first clue that she might be a little spoiled.
But Emma had seemed so antagonistic toward Neil. Because of the divorce? Was he trying to make up for her disappointment in losing a stepmother? Making unwise business decisions didn't seem to be the best way to handle that.

By the time I got to the apartment, my brain was spinning. I was so caught up in my speculation that Neil was trying to buy his daughter's love by running Porteras into the ground - and my guilt over the fact that I was speculating anything about Neil's relationship with his daughter at all - that when I unlocked the door and stepped inside, I didn't bat an eye to find Deja standing in the kitchen in nothing but a t-shirt.

"Oh. Hey." She looked super embarrassed, and I waved her reaction off.

"Don't worry, literally the same thing just happened to me." I hung up my coat. "Well, not literally. Wait... you're out of context."

"Yeah." She drew out the word with a comical grimace, her eyes sparkling.

Holli emerged from her room, wrapped in her sexy, short black satin robe. The back had an amazing art nouveau peacock embroidered on it, and I had massive wardrobe envy on the rare occasion that I saw it. Holli reserved it almost exclusively for wowing overnight guests.

"Hey there. I thought you weren't supposed to be back until tonight," she said, heading to the kitchen sink. She filled the coffee pot with water while she waited for my answer.

"I wasn't." It was totally inappropriate for me to be angry with Emma for spoiling my Sunday. But I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my tone. Hey, I'm only human. "His daughter dropped by. It did not go well."

"Oh god. How 'not well'?" Holli's nervous gaze darted to Deja. "I mean, if you can tell us."

There were millions of men in New York, so I figured I was safe so long as I didn't name names. "Um, she heard me and her father having loud, aggressive sex. That 'not well.'"

"That'll screw a kid up," Deja noted with a lift of her eyebrows.

"No, she's an adult," I answered before I thought to stop myself. Okay, there was more than one rich middle-aged man in New York City I could be involved with.

Deja nodded. "Ah. And would she happen to be a condescending blonde who can't keep her travel itinerary current with her father's personal secretary? Because I got a very terse email from one of those about fifteen minutes ago."

I opened my mouth to say something, but all I could really do was gape at her.

"Hey, your secret is safe with me." She looked from me to Holli and back again with a kind of deer-in-the-headlights expression. "I figured it out on my first day at the office. I don't care who you have sex with. And I definitely prefer it if my boss is getting laid. I find it makes my job a lot easier."

"You can't tell anyone," I warned.

"Never." Deja crossed her heart, then did a full-body shiver. "I'm sorry you have to deal with the ice maiden, though."

I didn't feel comfortable responding to a slam against Neil’s daughter. Even if I kind of agreed with the description. I changed the subject. “You know, Deja, this whole pantsless thing kind of ruins your super cool rock-chick image from the office."

"Yeah, um. I wasn't really planning on staying over but..." Deja looked like she physically couldn't help smiling at Holli. The long, sweet moment that they held each other's gazes made me feel like a definite interloper, so I headed toward my room to give them privacy.

"I'll get out of your hair. I think I'm going to try and catch up on the sleep I didn't get."

In my room, I grabbed my laptop off my nightstand. I opened Chrome and paused, my fingers hovering over the keys.
I'm really not a fan of the whole "Google your romantic interest" trend that has become so commonplace, but I wanted answers about the situation. Granted, I wasn't about to find results for, "Does Neil Elwood get along with his daughter and if so, why would she want to tank my job?" but I hated feeling so damned impotent and in the dark.

Fuck it.

I typed "Neil Elwood" in the browser's address bar, and braced myself for results.

Can I just say how weird it is to be dating someone who has a Wikipedia page devoted to him? I clicked the link and looked over my shoulder, like someone was going to be standing there, waiting to catch me. I read the bold top line, and my guts churned. **Neil Charles Leif Elwood, MBE (born 24 March 1964). Okay. He's a fucking knight apparently. That's heavy.**

I almost covered my eyes as I scrolled through the intro paragraph. Businessman, I knew. Philanthropist, what? Land mine victim charity, what? This was the guy who was spanking my ass raw on the reg? The gist of things seemed to be that I was in way over my head. My eyes scanned the section about his early life - Born to Rose (nee Arden) and Leif Elwood, youngest of four children, lived in London until he was seven, family moved to his father's native Reykjavik - you know, all of the stuff you do when you're not the child of a poor single mom from Michigan. I dropped my head to my hands.

To the right of the page, beneath a picture that looked more like the man I'd met in the airport than the way he looked now, was a bar with background facts. And I nearly choked when I saw that under "partners" it listed **Valerie Stern (1984 – 1988) above Elizabeth Walton-Elwood (2007 – 2012)**

Stern? As in... Elwood & Stern? Another check of the dates made my stomach churn. Was his business partner Emma's mother? That was it. Obsessive, stalkery Googling took over the rest of my day. I learned that Neil had first worked for the British arm of his now deceased father's media corporation before breaking out on his own to work for... Richard Branson. And oh, look, there was a photo of Neil and Richard Branson, at some black tie event in the 90's. Standing next to Paul McCartney. I also learned that Neil was the tenth richest Brit, owing to his shares in his father’s media and property management companies in Iceland. His estimated net worth was 6.5 billion British pounds.

And I had argued with him over paying for room service.

I shut my laptop and set it gently aside, as if it were some highly unstable compound.

There was a knock at my door, and Holli called, "You can stop hiding in there out of politeness, she's gone."

"I wasn't hiding," I told her as I opened the door. "I was giving you some space. I thought you weren't going to see her again."

"I was undecided." Holli followed me to the bed and sat on the edge while I flopped across it sideways.

Staring up at the crack in the plaster above my bed, I set my billionaire problem aside for a moment. "Are you any closer to a decision on her?"

Holli considered, scooting back and pulling her legs up criss-cross. "I like her. I'll definitely see her again. But let's not go picking out toasters to put on the registry."

I grinned and teased, "Holli and Deja sittin' in a tree..."

"What about you? Two consecutive nights. You never stay the night. And getting caught by his daughter!" Her jaw dropped. "Please tell me she did not walk in - "

"No! But it was bad enough. She heard everything. She totally hates me now." I gestured guiltily to my laptop. "Then I come home and find out, oh, Neil is not only like, a billionaire with his own company, but yeah, he's a knight and he hangs out with a Beatle every now and then."
"Yikes. But... according to Deja, you should be in there with him." Holli bit her thumbnail. "I didn't tell her, by the way. She brought it up on her own."

"What do you mean 'in there?'" I snorted. "We've had sex, I've already closed that deal."

"... don't think it's just sex for him, Soph. Deja said that he asked about you several times while he was in England. Always trying to see how you were doing in the new job and stuff, making it sound like he cared about you as an employee, but still. She thinks the dude is in love with you."

"No, definitely not." I forced myself to kill the goofy smile I felt coming on. Like, strangle it with my bare hands kill it. I did not need to start drawing hearts and flowers around his name in my notebook. "Neither of us are in a place to pursue anything serious."

The memory of that Wikipedia page flashed through my mind. He'd been with Valerie Stern for three years, married to his wife for two, although they'd apparently dated for a few. Was that as long term as he got?

Why did that bother me?

Of course, he'd promised we'd stay friends even if we stopped sleeping together. Had he made the same promise to Valerie? Was that why they were in business together? Or had that been a do-the-right-thing move, giving the mother of his child a job after he cut out on her?

"Ugh!" I pulled my pillow over my face so I could scream into it and kick my legs in childish frustration. Sitting up I groaned, "I keep assigning him all these sinister emotional motives for practically everything he does. Like, 'Oh, he's doing this because he's a bad father,' and 'Oh, he's doing that because he feels guilty about his ex.' Why can't I just like him?"

"Because you really, really like him," Holli said with a pitying smile. "You're trying to find ways to avoid liking him. That's the first sign."

"Oh, like you with your 'undecided' on Deja?" I blew out a long, exasperated breath. "You're right though. I love him. I am in love with the guy I started a casual relationship with, and I'm afraid of what that means."

Holli shrugged. "Why does it have to be mean anything? You love him. Great. But you don't want to get married and do the happy family thing, you've always been pretty clear on that, right?"

"Yeah," I conceded. "I don't see myself cut out for that kind of life."

"So, you love him. Enjoy the time you're spending with him. If it turns into something more, then it does. If it doesn't, well... you're with him right now. Just roll with it."

"How can you say something I've already said to myself, and make it sound ten thousand times smarter?" It was true. A lot of the time, the voice of reason in my head was just Holli's voice calling me a dumb ass. "I guess I just don't like the thought that he might not feel the same way about me."

"Um, he feels the same way. Trust me. If Deja picked up on it, then he's into you." Holli stood and stretched. "I'm gonna take a shower, and then I'm having lunch with my agent. On a Sunday, so you know it's good news, if it couldn't wait until tomorrow. Keep your fingers crossed, okay?"

I held up both my hands, giving her a total of four sets of crossed fingers. "Consider them crossed."

At least one of us should have something awesome happen in our career, I mused as I reached for my laptop again. As soon as the screen blinked on, I closed the browser window. I didn't need to know any more. Holli was right, I wasn't in this relationship because I wanted some traditional romantic fairytale. I was seeing him because we were great together in bed, and we got along as people. And so what if he had some big, impressive past? All the awesome shit he'd done in his life had happened after twenty-four. I was twenty-four right now, so there was no reason I should feel inadequate just because I didn't have a legend of British rock on speed dial. I wasn't going to worry about how different we were. I was just going to enjoy being with him.
I went to work on Monday morning feeling really great about the positive direction things had taken. I'd been promoted - on my own merit and not, as I had feared, because of who I'd slept with - and despite the current cluster fuck going on in the beauty department, we were actually doing okay. We'd found a really cool, under-recognized beauty brand we'd made the focus of the hastily overhauled January spread, and even though it had put us behind on February, the sky wasn't falling like it had been during my first week.

Unfortunately, working in the same building as Neil and not seeing him was psychological torture. I felt like an obsessed middle-schooler, which I really didn't like. I forced myself to focus, and worked so I was away from the door. I didn't want to catch myself looking up every ten seconds, trying to get a glimpse of him on the off chance he was walking through the main floor.

The only way Neil and I were going to be able to continue our relationship outside of work was if I could keep concentrating on my job. Which is why when I went to his office at the beginning of my lunch hour, it had nothing to do with us dating, and everything to do with Holli and Deja dating.

After seeing the two of them together in the apartment, I'd decided that I had to meddle. Just lightly. Just to give Deja a hint. Because from what I'd discerned from our past six years of friendship, dating Holli was like trying to solve the puzzle box from *Hellraiser*. Deja was doing me a solid by not blowing the whistle on my extracurricular fun times with Neil, so I owed her a solid right back.

"Hey, Mr. Elwood isn't here," Deja said, looking up from her computer when I pushed through the door.

"That's okay. I'm not here to see Mr. Elwood, I'm here to see you." It was still super bizarre to be back in this office, standing in front of the desk I'd worked behind for two years. I looked over to the empty desk across the room. "Still no second assistant?"

"No, I don't really think he needs one," Deja said tapping a button on her keyboard before swiveling her chair to face me. "Either he's not demanding enough, or I'm the most capable assistant in the universe."

"I bet it's the second one."

She gave a little laugh, but I could tell she was eager to talk about Holli. Her eyebrows shot up, and she smiled a big, unnatural smile. "So... how's Holli?"

"Good, she's good." I nodded, my lips clamped together as I tried to figure out how to say what I wanted to tell her. "Look, I think you guys could be really good together. But there's something you should know."

"Oh?" she asked warily, her smile fading a little. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Well..." I took a breath. "Holli is really, really sensitive about her weight."

Deja laughed in disbelief. "Um, she weighs about two pounds! I wish I was so skinny."

"I know, and that's the problem." I'd lived with Holli since freshman year at college, so I'd had plenty of time to see how the well-meaning comments of strangers had affected her. I really hoped I could make Deja understand in a few minutes what it had taken me years to learn. "She gets a lot of crap for being so skinny. People get snotty with her and accuse her of having an eating disorder, or they give her a bunch of praise for her willpower. She just gets tired of it. The truth is, it's just how her body is. She has as much trouble gaining weight as most people do losing weight. Then you get a bunch of jealous people taking digs at her, and there's no way she can win."

"Oh my god." Deja looked slightly ill. "And here I was, all weekend with my stupid, 'Oh, I'm so
jealous of you, you can eat whatever you want, I wish my thighs didn't touch, blah blah blah." She dropped her head into her hands. "Deja you fucking idiot."

"No, look, don't beat yourself up." I felt kind of bad, though I didn't know why. If I were routinely offending someone, I would definitely want to be told, and I was sure Deja appreciated hearing this. "She really likes you. And I think you guys would be so great together. Just, in this case, an apology might go a long way."

"Will do," she assured me. "Thank you."

"I'm about to go grab some lunch. Do you want me to bring anything back for you?"

Deja shook her head. "No, I've got this avocado wrap thing in the fridge. Go, have a good one."

As I turned to leave, Neil came through the door, followed by Hope. He looked startled to see me there. "Hello, Sophie."

"Hello, Mr. Elwood. I was just on my way out." I passed him and nodded at Hope. "Hello."

"Getting along alright in the beauty department, dear?" Hope asked. She was about one hundred percent more pleasant now that she wasn't working with Gabriella.

"Things are going great. A few bumps, but it's going great." I nodded at her and Neil, catching his eyes super briefly before I headed through the door. I'd just made it to the lobby when my phone vibrated with a text message from Neil.

That skirt is driving me insane.

I smirked to myself as I exited the building. I was hoping he'd noticed my floaty green skirt beneath the hem of my short white wool coat. I had definitely started to dress with an eye to what Neil would find attractive. Nothing inappropriate for the work place, still fashionable, but I'd figured out early that he was pretty into skirts. A flash of our night in the hotel six years previous came to me, his hand gripping the back of my waistband and roughly jerking down my jeans. A hot flush suffused my body, starting at my torso and spreading to my limbs. Okay, so maybe the clothes didn't matter. Maybe he was just into me.

"Hey, Sophie!"

I startled guiltily. I wasn't even twenty feet from the front door and I was thinking inappropriate-for-the-office thoughts. When I turned, Jake was jogging down the steps to catch up with me.

"You going to lunch?" he asked, stepping to the curb to hail a taxi.

"Yeah," I said, not adding the part about going on my own. Ever since his little tantrum in the conference room the other day, I'd been avoiding Jake. It was a lot easier to do, now that I was in beauty. To him, my department was a frivolous joke, around just to pad out the magazine's advertising. He hadn't called or asked how the job was panning out. I was surprised he even deigned to speak to me anymore.

"Mind if I tag along? I've got something I want to run by you." The cab he'd signaled stopped at the curb and he opened the door for me.

Gritting my teeth, I smoothed my skirt down and swung my legs in, thighs firmly together. Jake got in beside me and gave the driver the name of an incredibly pretentious sushi place that was currently the rage among the elite at Porteras.

Fucker didn't even ask me if I wanted sushi.

He turned to me and flashed the big smile he reserved for when he wanted something. When I'd first come to Porteras, that smile had given me a little crush on him. Once I'd learned he had a girlfriend, I'd firmly resolved not to crush on him. Now that I'd seen how moody and weird he could be, I wasn't as jealous of Amanda anymore.

His eyes dipped to my bare legs before returning quickly to my face. "I just wanted to touch base with you. Find out if you're still happy working for Porteras."
What a strange question. We'd always been chummy at work, but he'd never seemed overly concerned about my career. We usually always talked about his. "Um, I just got a great promotion. Why wouldn't I be happy?"

He nodded, still smiling, and chuckled like we were sharing some private joke. "Right, I mean. With all the changes, I'm sure you guys are drowning in work over there."

"It's... been a little stressful," I admitted cautiously. "How about you? Are you kind of over the whole Versailles thing? I saw the layout, it looks amazing."

"No, it's definitely... It's something. It's not what I wanted it to be, but it's still going to be good for my portfolio." He settled against the seat. "I wanted to let you in on something happening behind the scenes. But I need to know you're on our side."

_Ominous, much?_ "Side? I don't - " I stopped myself. Whatever he was going to tell me, it would be something I wanted to know, either to protect Porteras or to get ahead in my own career.

_Not to protect Neil?_ I asked myself, in a voice that, again, sounded suspiciously like Holli. But if Holli had been here, she would have wanted me to get some juicy dirt. If she was going to be my really inept conscience, I'd better do what she said.

"Of course I'm on your side, Jake. We're buddies, right?" I smiled, imitating Holli's practiced expressions for modeling. Obviously, I wasn't as good at it as she was, but I didn't think Jake would notice I was lying, so long as it was the lie he wanted to hear.

God, how did I not realize what a sleaze he was? Had he been on good behavior when Gabriella had been around? Or had I just been too swamped in her demands to notice anything about the people around me?

"Absolutely." He adopted the tone of a professional multi-level marketer, too earnest to be trusted, like he would promise me anything to close the sale. "So, you didn't hear this from me. But apparently Neil Elwood's daughter is an animal rights activist, and that's why he's making all of these crazy demands at the magazine."

My jaw dropped. First of all, at Jake's concern that this was somehow confidential information. It had been on Neil's Wikipedia page when I'd checked it yesterday. Second, that Jake had no clue I might have already known. Which meant my unethical, clandestine romance with the boss wasn't the object of office gossip yet. That was a relief.

My phone buzzed. I couldn't resist checking the message. I held up one finger. "Hang on, work text."

I kept my expression carefully neutral as I read: _I'd like to push that skirt up and devour your cunt. _

"It can wait," I said, quickly turning off the screen. "You were saying?"

"Well, from what we've heard, a lot of designers were already giving him side-eye when he bought the company, for exactly that reason. Apparently, Emma Elwood has her father wrapped around her little finger. He'll do anything for her," Jake said in total disgust, as if the very idea of a father's love revolted him. "So, she decides to shun her daddy's offer of a cushy job at his company in favor of pretending to have a real job at Global Wellness, and now she wants him to take Porteras vegan or something."

I shook my head. "Mr. Elwood seems pretty smart. I mean, he's run all those other magazines - "

Jake cut me off with a condescending laugh. His teeth were so straight and white. He was like a snake wearing dentures. "Yeah, car magazines? Housewife stuff, tabloids. He doesn't know the first thing about what he's gotten into here, and he's already pissed off a lot of the makeup artists doing the shoots for February's issue. They have to use only cruelty free products."

"Same edict for the beauty department, too," I pointed out. "So, you think it's his daughter behind all this?"
"Oh, most definitely." We'd come to a stand still in traffic, and he looked out his window, as if he would be able to see the cause of the hold up ahead. Distractedly, he added, "Oh, you'll like this. His business partner, Valerie Stern? Emma's mother. Apparently, Elwood can't keep it in his pants at work and has to give out companies like hard candy to cover up his mistakes. But seriously, you didn't hear all this from me."

I hadn't, so it was easy to cross my heart and promise, "You didn't tell me any of this."

My phone vibrated again. "Hang on, maybe it can't really wait."

I pretended to look concerned while I read: If we were alone together right now, I would push you over my desk, wrap that cute little ponytail around my fist, and pull your hair while I fucked you.

I cleared my throat and checked out the window. The traffic was still snarled. I eyed the sidewalk on the other side of the street. "Um. I guess it's kind of an emergency. I should get back."

"In beauty?" I was beginning to really hate Jake's derisive laugh. "Do you guys even have emergencies there?"

"When lip gloss calls," I offered apologetically. I wasn't running back to the office to have sex with Neil. That just wasn't a smart idea, and the last time we'd done anything there it had been a disaster. But I couldn't sit and listen to Jake's bullshit for another second without screaming and ripping out my hair. "I can't screw this up right now. You understand, right? Here, let me give you ten for the cab - "

"No way, no way," Jake said. Never once, in our entire office friendship, had he let me pay my share of anything. Because female dollars are apparently worth less than male dollars. "Go get your eye shadow emergency under control."

Ignoring the driver's protest, I got out of the cab on the left when the opposing traffic let up, and darted across the lanes to the sidewalk. I hurried back in the direction of our building, and when I knew I was out of Jake's line of sight, I ducked into a Starbucks and ordered a skim-milk latte and one of their plastic-wrapped sandwiches. While I waited, I checked my phone and considered Neil's last message.

Even though what he was saying to me was pretty tame compared to what we had been getting up to in private, seeing those words on my phone's screen had the same effect on me as if he'd whispered them in my ear. My pulse pounded in my clit, and I knew my panties would be sopping if I kept thinking about this. Still, I thought I should probably say something back.

And then I would get on my knees and suck the taste of my pussy off your cock, I typed, hoping none of the other customers would peek at my screen. I mean, if they did, it was their own fault if they got a shock. They shouldn't be reading over a stranger's shoulder, anyway.

I hit send, then grinned to myself and started a new message: I'd suck you off until you exploded, then I'd swallow your cum. Maybe I would use your little platinum friend on you while I did it.

There, that should have done it.

I got my order and headed back to the office. I figured my cover story was safe, since the department had been on the edge of crisis ever since my very first day. I walked through reception, shooting a casual glance at the glass doors to Neil's office. Rats. He wasn't where I could see him. Deja looked up, and I waved with the three fingers I could spare while still carrying my lunch.

I'd just settled in at my desk - okay, not my desk, a corner of a worktable that had been designated as my desk - when a new text came in. I grinned to myself. It was just one word: Jesus.

***

At around nine o'clock that night, my phone rang. It was Neil.

Shamefully, I had given him his own ringtone, Feist's "Leisure Suite." The sexy bossa nova beat purred from my phone’s speaker, and I scrambled to answer it, moving from the living room to my bedroom and closing the door behind me.

I hadn't heard from him since his last text at lunchtime, so I figured I knew what this call was going
to be about. "Hello?" I purred innocently.

"You saucy little tease, I had to hide an erection from the photo editing department."

"I'm sorry, who is this?" I asked with a giggle. "I give so many men erections while they're in the photo editing department."

"I should take you over my knee," he said, a mock threat, since he knew that wouldn't be anything like a punishment for me.

"Look, you're the one who started it," I reminded him.

"That I did. And I'd like to finish it."

I looked at my alarm clock and sighed. "I couldn't tonight. I have a really early meeting. Besides, staying over on a weeknight? That's a little too close to domestic for my comfort."

"No, you're right, and I've got a big day tomorrow, too. But I assume you have Skype on your laptop?"

Oh. Oh, that naughty bastard.

"I do." I reached for my laptop and pulled it onto the bed with me. "What are you suggesting?"

"Meet me on Skype in ten minutes," he instructed. "I've just sent my username to your email account."

My heart fluttered. Okay, so did another part of me. "Yes, Sir."

"See you in ten."

I hung up and looked around my room. I locked my bedroom door - not strictly necessary, Holli never barged in without knocking. But I'd never done the internet sex thing before, and the extra measure was going to go a long way toward making me comfortable. Then I looked down at my jammies. While I love my froggies, they had to go. I found a pair of sexy black lace panties in my clean laundry and pulled them on. I fluffed my hair and positioned myself against the pillows. I dotted on some quick lip gloss - I didn't have time for full makeup, and I was way too tired. Besides, he'd said he liked me any way he could have me, and I was holding him to that.

When I positioned the laptop between my feet, I was shocked at what the camera showed me. I looked pretty awesome, for someone with no makeup and hair that had been in a ponytail all day. The angle would give him a clear look at my whole body; my spread thighs, my panty-covered crotch, my tummy, my tits, my shiny, pouty lips, the entire package. I was already growing aroused at the thought of being displayed like this for him.

I sat up and checked my email, then typed his contact into Skype.

Within seconds, I had a call. I hit accept and the video icon, then hastily reassumed my position.

When the call connected, I saw Neil, sitting on the sofa in his bedroom. His computer must have been on the coffee table in front of him. He was still wearing his shirt and trousers from work, though he'd lost the jacket and his sleeves were rolled back. He was also wearing a pair of glasses. I'd never seen him wear glasses before. It was unbearably cute.

"Well, hello Poindexter," I teased. I rested one hand on my stomach, just above my panties, and the other on one thigh.

"For Christ's sake, Sophie, you can't spring such a sight on a man. We need a little warning." He chuckled, and pushed up his glasses. "Don't tease me. My contacts were giving me a dreadful headache. Consider my nerdy appearance the price you must pay for the wisdom and experience of an older suitor."

"You're in your forties, not your eighties," I scolded. "Did you like my text message?"

He reached for something off camera, a rocks glass with amber liquid in it. He took a sip, made a noise of approval, and answered, "Only if you mean 'like' in the sense that I spent the entire day fighting the urge to find a quiet place to jack off."
I giggled. "Don't start nothin', won't be nothin', you dirty old man."
He took another drink from his glass before setting it aside. "I assume you're alone, then?"
"I am. And I assume the same for you?" I lifted my head slightly, pretending to peer around him into the room.
"Alone, locked door. Though I would much rather have you here than all the way down in Chinatown." He looked fleetingly sad.
"Well, not all of us can afford Fifth Avenue," I snorted. "Are you going to feel sorry for yourself, or are we going to have sex?"
He grinned at me, settling back on the sofa and tilting the screen so I could still see his face. "All right. Why don't you... play with your nipples."
I lifted my hands to my breasts. "Like this?"
"No hard touches yet. No pinching. You're going to tease yourself, the way I would tease you," he instructed.
"Wait!" I remembered the cooling gel that had come with the sex toys he'd bought me. I leaned over to my bedside table, opened the drawer and found the small compact. "Might as well try this stuff out."
"Excellent idea," he agreed with a slow smile.
I dipped my fingers into the gel, then slowly drew them around the nipple of my right breast. I was shocked at how well the stuff worked; the moment it touched my skin, I felt like the standing air was a cold breeze. My nipple and aureole tightened into a hard peak, and goose bumps stood out on my firm skin.
"Very nice," Neil complimented, and I turned my attention to the other breast, repeating my actions from before.
I swirled my fingers around the pink tips in wide circles that narrowed with each pass. My breasts felt heavy and full, my nipples stood tall, practically begging for attention from my hands. I skimmed my palms over the sticky gel, my breath catching.
"How does that feel?" he asked, and I let out a shaky sigh. His eyebrows flicked up. "That good?"
"Very good," I murmured. "I never usually touch myself like this."
"I find that very difficult to believe." He reached for his fly and tugged the zipper down.
"Considering the greeting you gave me at the hotel." I made a noise of impatience, drawing my fingers along the bottom curves of my breasts. "That's not what I mean. Most of the time, I just head straight down south."
"Ah." He pulled his penis from his boxers. He was semi-erect and growing harder as he slowly stroked himself.
My pulse sped up. I'd watched past partners jerk off before, and it had definitely turned me on. There was something shocking and intimate about watching a man touch himself. But they had always been doing it while watching internet porn. Not one of them had ever jacked off while watching me.
"Take your panties off," he said, gliding his hand up and down. "Let me see you."
It was with great reluctance that I pulled my hands from my aching breasts to slide the black lace over my bottom, up the slope of my bent legs to my knees, and then down. I knew I was wet, and that he could probably tell, with my legs spread apart the way they were.
He sighed contentedly. "There. That's what I've been thinking about all day. I'd love to feel you right now."
"I can feel me," I teased, reaching down to press two fingertips into my opening, just a tiny bit.
"I see that." He smiled his half smile, lazily gliding his hand up and down that big cock.
"I want you," I whimpered, circling my clit. "This is totally unfair, you know."
"Didn't you wear your hair pulled back today?" he asked suddenly.
"Y-yeah." Why did that matter?
"Get the rubber band," he said, his hand stilling. "Let's try something."
I reached across to my nightstand and grabbed the hair tie, holding it up so he could see. "What exactly are we trying, here?"
I'd rather be there to do this to you, myself, but I suppose since that isn't possible tonight, you'll have to do it," he said, his voice low and dark with the promise of something incredible to come. "Put the rubber band around your first and second fingers, and spread it out."
I did as he ordered, trepidation creeping into my mind. "I think I know where this is going."
"Do you trust me?" he asked, in that tone I was so used to obeying.
"Yes, Sir," I answered. "Put the rubber band against your thigh, and use your other hand to snap it."
I swallowed and placed the stretched hair tie against the top of my thigh. Neil made an admonishing noise. "Not there. The inside."
I took a deep breath and moved my hand. The ponytail holder rested against the curve of my inner thigh, just above my pussy, and I grasped one side of the elastic, drawing it up between the thumb and forefinger of my other hand. Mentally counting to three, I let it go. Smarting pain blossomed in my skin, nothing I couldn't handle.
"Oh, Sophie, you disappoint me," Neil scolded. "Harder. Let's see it leave a mark."
I mewled in protest, but I pulled it up again, further this time, stretching the band tight. When it slapped back down, I yelped in surprise and watched as pink flushed my skin around a shocking white welt.
"Very good." Neil was stroking his cock, rolling the foreskin up and over the head, then back down as he watched me. "Now, do it again, but this time do it to your clit."
"Are you nuts?" I laughed in disbelief. "You want me to snap my clit with a ponytail holder?"
"If I were there, I would do it for you," he said again, apologetically. "I can give you the command, if you like."
"That's going to hurt like a motherfucker," I pointed out.
"Yes, it is," he agreed. "But have we done anything yet that you didn't like?"
"No," I admitted grumpily. To my dismay, I was aching, throbbing at the thought of that bee-sting of pain.
Damn him for knowing me so well.
"Then do as you're told," he warned. "Or else I won't take you over my knee. As strange as that threat may be."
I laughed and took a breath, positioning the hair tie over my mound. "Like this?"
"No, of course not. Spread yourself open."
With the two fingers stretching the rubber band, I parted my labia, exposing the hard button of my straining clit. I pulled the elastic up and held my breath.
"There. That's not so bad, is it?" He reached for his glass and took a long swallow.
I shifted my hips, dreading the pain, dreading the anticipation building inside of me. "I thought we weren't supposed to be tipsy doing this."
"As I'm not physically doing anything to you, and you're sober, I think we're safe." He nodded at me. "Do it."
I held my breath. Knowing how it would feel, seeing the evidence of the welt on my thigh, could I do this?
"Sophie." It was a warning. I was expected to do as my Sir commanded. A thrill shot through me. When we were together, I would do anything for him. And knowing that only made me hotter for him. I made a helpless noise of fear as I released the elastic. It snapped hard against my straining clit, and
the resulting shock of pain cause me to gasp and jerk my hand away. "No, no," he told me. "Don't move. Don't close your legs."

I wanted to squeeze my thighs shut to ease the burn. Holding them open prolonged the pain, and, strangely, intensified the pleasure I'd gotten from it. "Again," he ordered.

It was more difficult the second time. I knew what it would feel like, the sharp sting, the lingering ache. But I also knew the pleasure behind it, the relief of receiving a touch, even a painful one, on my needy, tortured flesh. I let the elastic snap again and restrained my cry, so it became a high-pitched, thin noise behind my closed lips.

"You want to touch yourself, don't you?" he asked. "You want to press your hand over yourself and ease that pain."

"I do, Sir," I panted. It took real physical strength to keep my fingers from straying.

"You may. Until I tell you to stop."

I pushed my fingertips over my clit, groaning my relief, rubbing soothing circles over my tortured flesh. The aftermath of the pain had left me oddly numb, though I knew that I should be aroused by my touch. Soon, though, as the sting faded and my fingers picked up their pace, I could feel everything just fine. I lifted my hips a little, rocking against my hand.

"I think that's enough." Neil's voice opened my eyes, though I hadn't even realized I'd closed them. Reluctantly, I pulled my fingers away.

"Do you want to come, Sophie?" he asked. I couldn't take my eyes off the image of his cock on the screen. I felt so utterly empty. The thought that I would have to wait until the end of the week to be with him, that we would have to be in the same building every day and not be able to touch each other... I wanted to cry.

Instead, I whimpered, "Yes, Sir."

"All right. Three more with the rubber band, for a nice even five. Then I would say you'd earned it." His smile was deliciously malicious, and my cunt clenched on aching emptiness.

I squeaked in outrage. "Five isn't an even number! Why not two more, for four?"

"Why not four more, for six?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

I looked away to roll my eyes and laugh. I really, really wanted to refuse, to rebel against the command I didn't like, yet at the same time... I really wanted to do as he said. In fact, I loved doing it. I would drop him in a heartbeat if he ever tried to order me around outside the bedroom the way he did in it, but it really pushed my buttons. It apparently even worked when we weren't in the same zip code.

"Fine," I muttered. "Three more."

Taking a deep breath, I positioned the ponytail holder and stretched it up, waiting for him to tell me when.

"You can't possibly understand how much I want you." He stroked up his erection, pausing to squeeze the head, then slowly back down.

"I think can," I panted, wetting my lips. Every part of me felt swollen and achy, from my lips to my breasts to my cunt. I wanted to come, and I knew I wouldn't until he was good and ready.

I wondered what he would do if I "accidentally" let the elastic slip from my fingers. Would he tell me I couldn't come? Would I be able to come, if he forbade me? Or would some crazy part of my brain just cut off the ability to orgasm based on his disapproval alone? The fact that I honestly didn't know scared me a little bit. Which in turn only aroused me more.

My god, he was right. I was really good at being submissive.

"I want to feel your pussy, the wet grip of you around my fingers." He took a shuddering breath. "Around my cock."
My clit quivered. My voice did, too. "I want that, too. I want you to fill me up. Wear me out."

He gave me a slow, enigmatic smile before saying, "Do it."

I gasped when the band snapped me, a direct strike that caught the hood of my clitoris and sent razor-sharp shocks of pain down my legs.

"That's one," Neil reminded me. "Are you wet?"

"Dripping, Sir." God, I wanted to be there with him, to be on my knees in front of him, begging to suck his cock.

"Show me," he urged, his hand picking up speed as I parted myself and pushed two fingers into my cunt. I withdrew them and held up the evidence of my desire, shining wetly in the blue light of the computer screen.

"I wish I could taste you. Do it for me, Sophie. Taste yourself."

I slipped my fingers between my lips, sucked them clean with a throaty moan. "Someone told me once that I taste like pineapple," I mused aloud. "I don't agree."

"Neither do I." He sounded almost offended at the notion. "If I wanted pineapple, I would eat pineapple. When I eat pussy, I'd prefer it taste like pussy. And yours is fantastic."

"Oh god." I shivered. "I might just come from the sound of your voice."

"You'd better not. Now, another snap, I think."

This time, I couldn't help my cry. My flesh was on fire, wanting to be touched, dreading the pain all the same. And I still had one to go. Neil switched hands, reaching up to swiftly undo the buttons of his shirt. "When you come, I want you to remember who makes you feel this way. Who is that?"


"One more and then I'll let you come," he promised, and his voice skated down my nerve endings like a caress. "Just once more."

I pulled the elastic up again, let it fall, and that was all it took. The pain lanced through me, but it was the touch of the wrapped band that shot me over the precipice. My clenching pussy made obscene sounds, my hips lifting, seeking his body even though he wasn't there. Mingled chills of pain and pleasurewarred on my skin, and I curled up from the bed, moaning. I knew he could see my cunt pulsing, my pelvis rocking against the mattress, my clit ruby red from arousal and shock. I fell back on the pillows, too exhausted to wipe away the tears of grateful relief that rolled from the corners of my eyes. I watched my computer screen, mesmerized, as Neil came with a groan, cum arcing onto his stomach, rolling down the backs of his fingers.

I could barely move. My clit and labia throbbed, and when I felt myself there I was hot and swollen, sharp welts raised in thin lines over my most delicate parts. And if he had asked me to, I would have done five more. Ten. Maybe it was better that he knew my limits and wouldn't push them too far.

Clearly, I couldn't be trusted.

* * * *

The next morning, at the office, I was idly testing out beeswax lipsticks on the back of my hand when India stuck her head in.

"You guys, get out here." Something about her tone set me on immediate alert.

I looked to Jessica. "What's going on?"

"No idea." But she was already sliding off her stool and heading for the door.

Everyone was gathered on the main office floor. Jessica and I slunk to an unoccupied section of wall. Rudy stood in the center of the room, casting his unreadable gaze on everyone in the vicinity. "I hope we're all here," he called out, over the hushed whispers. "Because this is a very big announcement."
Neil stood in the main aisle that ran down the middle of the room. He wore a sleek black jacket over a gray shirt, the collar unbuttoned, and he watched as the last stragglers came in from the stairwell and side offices. He waited for the room to quiet further before he addressed us.

"I want to thank you all for a fantastic issue. I am truly impressed at the way you all adapted to the changes we’ve made so far. In light of what you’ve accomplished so far, I have the utmost confidence that you’ll handle future changes just as well.

“Unfortunately, in one very important aspect, fashion doesn't seem willing to change. Many of you have been working closely with Rudy. You know his pedigree, from costuming to runway to journalism. He knows, probably better than most in this office, how difficult it can be to break new ground. So I trust his opinion in this matter, and I hope you do, as well.”

It was brief, but I noticed a hint of annoyance flicker across Rudy’s face. Something was happening there.

Neil continued, “As a fashion institution, Porteras has the opportunity to force some change in an area where it is definitely needed. That’s why, for our February issue, and every issue thereafter, Porteras will not feature any fur, any leather, any product that cannot be described as 'cruelty-free.' And we will not feature the work of any designer who includes these elements in his or her collections.”

Murmurs of shock and surprise rippled through the room, and Rudy cleared his throat loudly, waiting for them to die down enough to say, "Mr. Elwood wasn't finished speaking."

The silence that fell was like the blade of a guillotine.

"As I was saying." Neil swept the room with his authoritative gaze. "Porteras is going cruelty-free. Individual departments will be receiving memos detailing specific alterations to policy, but for the most part, these will all be common sense. A word of caution, this is considered privileged information. We will see no blog posts, no tweets, no anonymous tips from industry insiders coming from this office, or you will answer to me personally. If this news breaks before it is officially announced, I will be forced to review each department individually.”

There was a grumble of agreement, as Rudy conferred with Neil quietly. When whatever they were speaking about had been handled, Rudy called out, “I need to see Jake Kirchner and Rosie Bell, the rest of you can get back to work. We’ll be in touch.”

Neil scanned the room, seeking me out, and when our eyes met I had to carefully school my expression. I was sure he’d caught me with my mouth hanging open in shock. He gave me a brief, reassuring smile, then turned to speak with a woman from the copy editing desk who’d approached him.

I walked back to the beauty department on numb legs.

"This can't be happening," Jessica said as she followed me through the door. India was already there, slumped over her desk, her head in her hands. I couldn't believe it. I mean, I had sort of seen it coming, but nothing this extreme. "I didn't think he would actually - "

"Sink the magazine?" India gave a rueful laugh. "It doesn't matter to him what happens with Porteras. It's pocket change to him." "But all the potential money..." I couldn't imagine that Neil didn't see what a huge investment he was throwing away. Was this all to please Emma?

I thought back to what Jake had said, about Porteras burning up like a dying star. I saw that same desperation in India's expression now.

"I'll write you ladies good references," she promised Jessica and I. Then she reached below her desk and pulled up a bottle. Gran Patron Platinum. She dumped her coffee cup into the potted palm behind her desk, poured a shot, and said, "How about a toast?"
That was when it really began to sink in. *Porteras* had hit the iceberg, and she was going down. Whether her captain would acknowledge it was another problem altogether.
Chapter Seventeen

The new Elwood & Stern helmed *Porteras* hit stands on the first Monday of December. The snarky Tumblr posts starting hit the internet that night.

Neil wanted to take me out on Friday to celebrate the new issue. By the time I left work that evening, I'd spent five long days listening to whispered retellings of unhappy emails and terse meetings behind closed doors.

I didn't know if I should bring up my concerns with Neil. We had only been seeing each other a couple months. While we spent more time together than I think either of us had planned initially, things were still quite casual. I wasn't sure how much I could really talk to him about the magazine.

Of course, work came up often, but usually in the context of Neil asking me how I was getting on in the department. Once, he'd asked me what I thought of a feature he was considering cutting, but I'd quickly shut him down.

"I don't want to have that kind of access to Neil, my boss, just because I'm spending time with Neil, the guy I'm having sex with," I'd explained, and he'd agreed that was probably a good idea.

The thing was, as much as I loved Neil - and I did love him, there was no chance of denying that now - I was supposed to love myself more. I owed it to myself to protect my interests, didn't I? So, did I bring up the changes at *Porteras*, and how badly I expected them to go? Despite what I'd told him about boundaries?

We never left work in the same car, because we weren't dumb. That would have been the easiest way to get found out. Instead, I waited for him to text me that he'd left, and followed in a cab. We would take his car back to his place at the end of the night. Since our first sleepover, I'd spent every weekend with him, but we rarely went out, opting instead to stay in and eat whatever Neil cooked. He was a great cook, but I was looking forward to a real date, even if it was a dinner with Rudy.

Neil had proposed the idea over the phone earlier in the week. He'd explained that he'd been spending so much time with me, he hadn't had a chance to see Rudy outside of work. Then I felt kind of bad, because I hadn't been spending much time with Holli, either.

Then again, she'd been spending a lot of time with Deja these days.

My cab pulled up outside the restaurant, and I got out, suddenly apprehensive about the way I was dressed. The place Neil had suggested was a tapas restaurant, hip casual, and I was definitely dressed for work. I smoothed down my gray peplum skirt and adjusted the shoulders of my capped-sleeve black lace blouse. I hoped I wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb in a sea of miniskirts and sleeveless tops out to party.

Neil was waiting for me at the bar. He was still wearing the navy blue suit he'd worn to work, but he'd taken off his tie and unbuttoned the collar of his white shirt. I envied the way he always looked totally at ease no matter where he was. He stood up and came to my side, looping an arm around my waist and giving me a quick peck on the cheek.

He led me through the dining room, with a hand at the small of my back. "I've been dying to see you darling. I am so glad you're here."

Darling? We were doing endearments now? And he'd said it so easily, without a hint of sarcasm, or discomfort after the fact.

I wondered if he realized he'd said it.

Rudy stood up when we approached, and smiled politely. "Hello, Sophie."

I noticed there were two waters already on the table, and Neil perked up at the sight of the pint glass
of dark beer beside one. "Ah, they brought our drinks."

"I told him to order for you, but he wouldn't." Rudy lifted an eyebrow. "I feel like you might be dragging our Mr. Elwood into the twenty-first century."

"She's civilizing me," Neil said, chuckling.

"Better than the last one," Rudy said offhand, then, with a glance to Neil, he said, "Sorry." Awkward.

"How was work?" Neil asked, motioning to a passing server.

"Oh... we don't want to talk about work, do we?" I asked. Because I wanted to dodge the subject as much as possible. I didn't want to have to pretend that I wasn't silently criticizing every one of Neil's business choices.

"No, we do not," Rudy stated emphatically. "I want to hear more about you."

"More about me?" I looked to Neil with a smirk.

"Yes," Rudy answered for him. "He talks about you nonstop, but I'd liked to hear it from the horse's mouth, so to speak. Not that I find you horsey."

"I don't talk about her nonstop." Neil looked at me, humorously defensive. "I don't."

"Well, what do you want to know?" I asked Rudy, then, to the server who stopped beside the table, "Water and whichever sweet red your sommelier recommends."

That was my trick to sounding sophisticated in front of people when really, I just couldn't remember the names of most wines.

"I think it's wonderful that you two found each other again," Rudy said once the waitress had left the table. "What have you been doing with yourself this entire time?"

I filled Rudy in on my background; NYU, getting the job at Porteras, what it had been like to be Gabriella's assistant. It turned out that Rudy knew Gabriella a little, because they moved in the same social circles. While I talked, Rudy displayed all the characteristics of acute and intense attention. I felt like I was on a job interview.

"Let's not overwhelm her," Neil said with an uncomfortable laugh at one point.

Rudy brushed him off as though he had a lot of practice ignoring what Neil said. I have to admit, that was a quality I found quite endearing; Neil could be pretty overwhelming himself, and it was nice to see how other people coped with it.

Luckily, the waitress returned and we had to pause in my interrogation to order a few assorted plates to share.

"I'm not trying to overwhelm her, I'm just trying to get a feel for what she's like." Rudy took a swallow from his own pint glass. "Since she's such a big part of your life lately."

Neil cleared his throat uncomfortably, and I jumped in to save him. "Okay, so I'm dying to know how a costume and fashion designer ends up being best friends with a billionaire who flies commercial to pick up chicks."

Neil laughed, his relief at the subject switch palpable. Apparently, he was okay with talking his friend's ears off about me, but not with me knowing about it. "That's quite a funny story, actually."

"We met through Valerie. Emma's mother?" Rudy's eyes narrowed just slightly. He was trying to gauge my reaction to the name.

I hated to disappoint him, but I didn't know Valerie. I figured I should at least know someone before I was intimidated by the mention of her. "Oh?"

"Rudy met Valerie when he was doing a semester abroad," Neil explained. "She offered to set him up with her brother, Stephen."

Rudy nodded and laughed. "And having never met Stephen, when I arrived at Valerie's apartment and found Neil there, I just assumed he was my date."
"I was flattered, of course." Neil smiled fondly at the memory. "I thought he was a bit out of my league."

"He was a good sport about it," Rudy said with a laugh.
"And... Stephen?" I asked, looking between the two of them.
"Stephen is a tragedy best saved for another time," Rudy said, and Neil raised his glass.
"I'll drink to that." Then he did, setting his beer down and pushing back from the table. "Excuse me for a moment. Rudy, be on your best behavior while I'm gone."

I sipped my wine until Neil was out of earshot then fixed Rudy with wry gaze. "Okay. Did I pass?"
"Pass what?" he asked innocently.
"The test."

He considered a moment. "Undecided. But I'm leaning toward yes. I'm sorry to be so cold about it, but Neil is my best friend, and he's made some foolish choices in his dating past."

"Ah, then you'll be relieved to know that we're not dating." I smiled cheerfully.

"No, I know. I've heard all about your arrangement. No-strings-attached sex, right?" He smiled right back. "But I should warn you, Neil is incapable of keeping things casual with anyone. And he has a forceful personality."

I pointed to myself. "Choir. As in, 'you are preaching to.'"

"He can't help it. He's an Aries." He laughed, the first time all night he'd responded without suspicion to something I'd said. I would crack him yet. He sighed and took a sip from his beer, then said, "Don't disappoint him, Sophie. He doesn’t let people in often. I know he projects an air of unflappable confidence, but he’s vulnerable. With you, he’s more vulnerable than I suspect you know."

I shifted in my seat and cleared my throat, finally withering under Rudy’s intense stare. *Damnit.*

I wanted to say so much; that I was in love with Neil, that I would never knowingly hurt him. But I was already knowingly hurting him, by keeping my mouth shut about Jake’s cryptic statements.

*Actions speak louder than words, Scaife,* I reminded myself with a mental sigh. “You were right. About Jake Kirchner? I think he’s still working with Gabriella.”

One perfectly groomed eyebrow rose as Rudy regarded me. “What do you know?”

“Just that he thinks there’s going to be some big takeover.” I looked over my shoulder. No sign of Neil. “I feel like I can’t talk about this stuff with Neil. We’re trying to keep our work life and our personal life as separate as possible.”

“Good luck.” Rudy took a sip of water. “I’ll look into the situation with Kirchner. Then I’ll bring it to Neil, when I know more.”

The waitress arrived with the plates of food we would all share, and moments later, Neil returned, as well.

"Has he threatened you yet?" he asked with a wink as he sat down beside me.

"No. We're just talking." I beamed at him. I was relieved at having circumvented the “don’t talk about business” problem, but I still wasn’t sure where Rudy stood on the animal cruelty fiasco. Whether we’d agreed to talk about work or not, I felt like I was going to have to bring that up to Neil.

As we ate from the truly delicious sampling of dishes in front of us, I listened to Neil and Rudy talk about mutual acquaintances, stopping for the occasional aside so that I wouldn't be left behind in the conversation. It was a bit surreal, seeing this part of Neil that I'd never seen before. We spent most of our time together alone. Viewing the way he interacted with another person in his life, someone who shared a history with him... it reminded me of how Holli and I were together, able to share whole memories with just a few words. We stayed surprisingly late, drinking and talking. After a brief argument over the bill that I did not step into - the after dinner cocktails and the after after dinner cocktails had punched up a pretty substantial tab - we made our way to the sidewalk.
"Sophie," Rudy said, leaning in to kiss the air beside my cheek. "It was a pleasure."
"Ditto." I was surprised at how much I'd begun to like him. "Um, did you want to come back to
Neil's place for drinks?" The words were out of my mouth before I realized it wasn't really my call to
invite him. I looked uncertainly to Neil.
"No, um, another time I think, Rudy?" There wasn't any awkwardness in his retraction of my
invitation.
Nor was there in Rudy's easy acceptance of the conversation. "It's very sweet of you, Sophie, but I
wouldn't want to intrude further on your evening. You two have a good weekend."
He and Neil shared an clumsy, drunken man hug, and then we went to the Maybach while Rudy
took keys from the valet for a Maserati GranTurismo.
As soon as we were inside the car, I apologized. "I'm sorry, that was really not cool of me to ask
someone back to your place."
"I'm just pleased that you got along so well." Neil said, leaning against the corner of the seat and
door. Rubbing the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger he added, "And I'm glad you feel
so comfortable in my home, and with me."
"Hey, are you okay?" I asked, concern cutting through my inebriation. "You look super tired."
"I have a bit of a headache. I think I might need to see the optician." He blinked and forced a smile.
"Let me stress, this is only a small headache, and not the proverbial 'not tonight' headache."
"Poor baby." The red wine with dinner had definitely gone to my head, as had round after round of
after dinner drinks. I slid to my knees on the flat floor of the roomy backseat and climbed over to his
side of the car. I leaned against his slightly spread knees and lay my head in his lap.
"Oh, this evening has taken a promising turn." He laughed and stroked my hair away from my
forehead.
"I never get to do this," I moaned, sitting up to reach for his fly. I estimated we'd have about twenty
minutes between the restaurant and his apartment in the current traffic, so I didn't waste any time
unzipping him and reaching inside.
"You could do it any time, you know. It isn't by invitation only."
"Most of the time, when we're having sex, it's kind of all about me." My tummy fluttered when I
realized what I was going to tell him next. "My tummy fluttered when I
realized what I was going to tell him next. "Why don't we make tonight about you?"
"You don't think I take enormous pleasure from getting you off?" he sighed contentedly as my hand
slipped into his boxers to grasp him.
"I'm sure you do." I pulled his cock free. He was half-hard and growing beneath my fingers. "I want
that, though. I want to get you off. Tonight, your wish is my command. Nothing is off the table."
"Oh?" He grinned like a delighted schoolboy. It was ridiculously cute. "You know my birthday isn't
until March, correct?"
I swept my tongue over my bottom lip and leaned down, brushing my mouth across the head of his
cock. Then, with deliberate slowness, I licked him from base to tip with the flat of my tongue. My eyes
remained locked on his, and my pulse sped up wildly. His did, too, I could feel it as I pumped my fist
along his length. I fluttered my tongue against the underside of the head, along the seam between his
laus and retracted foreskin, delighting in his sudden intake of breath.
"Happy birthday to me anyway, I suppose," he groaned, dropping his head back.
Still stroking him with my fist, I rolled my lips over my teeth and took as much into my mouth as I
could. I swirled my tongue around him, bobbing my head slowly, letting saliva run between my lips,
coating him. I wasn't in a hurry. I wanted to savor this all night.
The truth was, I had been feeling a little... neglectful. After all, in most of the sexual relationships
I'd had, a blow job had been one of the first activities we'd engaged in. I'd been sleeping with Neil for
two months, and I'd done it twice. I don't think I'd ever been on more than two dates with a guy before he was at least dropping mild hints for one.

Neil could have "ordered" me to do it at any time during our D/s sex games, and he hadn't. Since it didn't feel like an obligation, I found myself fixated on his pleasure not out of a desire to impress him, but a bone-deep need to make him feel good. I paid close attention to his body and his responses as I sucked, licked, and stroked. His hand in my hair, conspicuously never exerting too much pressure. His other hand on his knee, fingers clenching and unclenching in rhythm with his sped-up breathing. I pushed my head down, flexed the back of my throat against the head of him, and his hips jerked upward.

"Sorry," he gasped as I gagged slightly. I lifted my head for just a second, to reassure him. "No worries." Then I forced myself to relax and took him in, all the way. I have kind of a secret talent where cock in my mouth is concerned. "Fuck me, that's incredible," he moaned, and I was so, so grateful for all the practice I'd gotten on popsicles at summer camp.

Granted, he was a lot wider than a popsicle, so tongue action was significantly hampered. I couldn't do much more than slide my mouth up and down him, but he seemed to appreciate it. It takes an enormous amount of concentration to not gag while deep throating in the position I was in, so I couldn't keep it up for long. I didn't need to, anyway. He grasped my chin and gently urged my head up.

"Get up here," he ordered, patting his thighs, and I eagerly climbed into his lap, straddling him in the roomy seat. He pushed his hand between my thighs, under my skirt, and groaned when he encountered the wet crotch of my panties. He pushed the scrap of satin aside and plunged two fingers into me.

"That's what sucking your cock did to me," I whispered in his ear, my breath catching as he slowly pumped those wicked fingers. "That's how much it turns me on."

The fingers of his other hand dug into my backside through my bunched up skirt, and I kissed him, gasping against his mouth, "Do you have a condom?"

He reached over to the center console, popped it open with the side of his fist and reached in, coming out with one black plastic packet.

"That's some impressive roadside assistance there," I giggled, leaning back so he could sheath himself with a bit of uncharacteristic fumbling. He tugged my panties further to the side, the tip of his cock found my opening, and with one hard upward thrust, he filled me completely. I gripped the lapels of his jacket and leaned back, lost in the dizzying sensation of being so intimately joined while still fully clothed. In the back of a car in Manhattan traffic, no less.

Holy shit, is this really my life?

He reached up and popped the buttons on my blouse, then jerked down my bra and fastened his lips around one nipple. I rolled my hips languidly, wishing for more leverage, more friction, but while the Maybach was roomy, car sex positioning was still awkward. Especially with a somewhat tight skirt riding up my thighs.

"Mr. Elwood?" the voice of Tony, the driver, asked over the intercom. "We've arrived."

Neil leaned forward and hit the button to speak. He sounded remarkably composed, mid-coitus.

"Drive us around the block once, would you?"

"Sure thing, sir."

I ground against Neil, clenched my pussy all around him. "Just once around the block?"

"Once around the block so you can button your shirt," he said, nipping at my bottom lip. "So we can head upstairs and I can fuck you silly on the most immediately available horizontal surface."

"Horizontal?" I teased. "Where is your imagination?"

I moved to climb off him, and he stopped me. "You can button up while I'm still in you, surely? Let's not waste the drive."
I blew a strand of hair out of my face and rolled my eyes at him. "You're a real pervert, you know that?"

He buried his face in my tits and groaned a muffled, "I know, darling. A total deviant."

There was that "darling" again. Where the fuck was that coming from?

I pushed his head up and started hastily buttoning my shirt. "You could at least make me come before we get around the block," I challenged. "I've been a good girl, haven't I?"

"You've been a very good girl," he agreed, his fingers skating across my chest before I closed the final button. He pushed my skirt up further, but the slim fit made it difficult. He had to push his hand between my thighs at an awkward angle to reach me.

"How about we make a bet. If you can make me come before we get around the block..." I paused to take a sharp breath as his fingers found my clit at the same time he pressed his hips up. "You can put it anywhere you want."

A shocked smile curved his mouth. "God, but you are a naughty thing, aren't you?"

I leaned down to kiss him as the car made the first corner. While one hand was occupied between my thighs, the other encircled my waist, holding me still as I tried to squirm on his cock.

"Isn't that cheating, if you help me?" he murmured. "You know, it's almost too easy, you're not fighting at all."

"Why would I fight an orgasm?" The position we were in forced his cock tight against my g-spot. Every slow circle of his fingers over my clit made my entire world narrow to the feeling in my groin. A shiver raced up my spine.

The car braked, rocking me, and I moaned. He pumped against me slowly, grinding deeper but never really moving. The hand at my waist slipped down to my ass, urging me up. My knees dug into the seat on either side of him as I gratefully lifted myself, rising until only the head of him remained inside me. I took a breath, ready to drop my hips and take him all the way in, but he clucked his tongue.

"No, no," he admonished. "Stay right there. Or maybe..." He shifted just a bit, and a shuddering cry tore from my throat as he rubbed deliciously, barely inside of me. He grinned. "There we go."

The car took the second corner. I was panting, rocking my cunt back and forth around him. The broad tip of his cock stretched the super sensitive opening of my vagina, his fingers sped up, increased pressure. I held on to the back of the seat, my breath bursting in ridiculous little mewls I wouldn't have believed if I heard them coming from anybody else, they were so porny. "I'm coming!" I gasped, in total disbelief at the sheer pleasure that shocked through me. He thrust upward, filling me completely as my pussy spasmed around him.

"Did I win the bet, then?" he asked, pulling my hips down, hard.

"Fuck!" I slammed my palm against his shoulder. My head was swimming, my skin covered in goosebumps. He kept grinding into me, kept touching me, wringing every last second of pleasure out of my orgasm until I sobbed, "No more!" against his neck. The car made another turn, and I realized I had stopped paying attention at some point.

"We're here," Neil said, reaching up to brush my hair back from my face.

I felt as tired as if I had fallen asleep on a long car trip. My legs were shaking. My thighs were sticky. Neil lifted me off his lap and tucked his erection into his pants with some difficulty.

For my part, I quickly smoothed my skirt down, even though the muscles of my thighs were jumping and my knees wobbled as I raised my butt up to wriggle the fabric down. "How are we around the block already?"

"You were distracted." He zipped his fly and hit the intercom button. "Thank you, Tony, we're ready to go up now."

The driver opened my door and I slid out. I couldn't make eye contact with him. I was positive Neil
had fucked women in the back of the car before - because who wouldn't if they had a chauffeur? - but all the vehicular shenanigans I had engaged in during my lifetime had been way more private. 

"Good night, Tony," Neil said, buttoning his jacket with one hand as he walked around the back of the car.

I noted the speed with which he ushered me through the lobby and into the elevator. We weren't in the foyer of his apartment before his hands were on me again, and when we did get inside, he didn't bother to turn on the lights.

"Get on your hands and knees," he ordered me, and I knelt on the cold marble. A thrill of trepidation went through me. Was he really going to do this here? No lube, no warm up? I slightly regretted my offer of "anywhere."

When he eased into my pussy again, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Really, Sophie," he admonished. "You didn't think I would make you do that, without any preparation?"

He reached beneath me and ripped my blouse open. Actually ripped it. My cunt squeezed on him, hard.

"You did it before," I reminded him. Then, in a breathy, put-on voice, I repeated the words I'd begged him with years before. "Please? You said anything I wanted. I've never done it before. You could be the first."

He grasped my hips in his big hands, then one thumb slid between my cheeks. "God, but you were a pouty, demanding thing back then."

The tip of his thumb pushed into my hole, and hot and cold shivers raced over my skin. "We will do it again, though, won't we?"

"Absolutely. But not without practice," He chuckled softly and slowly withdrew from my pussy, inch by aching inch. "You were so incredibly tight back then, I think you actually bruised my cock."

A shocked laugh escaped me, and was quickly overcome by a moan as he thrust into me again. "That's enough talk. Fuck me."

He did. Holy hell, did he ever. He withdrew his thumb and slapped my ass, hard. He reached beneath me, gripped the front of my bra, and jerked it down. One of the straps broke, but I didn't care. I knew he was good for a replacement. He shoved my skirt up further, and pounded into me until I was screaming, wailing, thrashing on his cock in some serious indecision as to whether this was pleasurable, or agonizing. When I came, it wasn't a peacefully breaking wave, but an urgent, electrical current that seized my limbs and sapped my entire body of strength. I collapsed on the floor, shuddering at the cold marble on my bare chest. He followed me down, forcing himself into my involuntarily resisting body, growling in relief.

It was probably the only time I'd ever been fucked beyond my capacity to speak or function. He helped me to my feet and guided me on my shaking legs to the bedroom. He turned the lights on, very low, and helped me out of my clothes, because I was stumbling and clumsy trying to do it on my own. Then he left me for a moment to go into the bathroom, and I collapsed in the bed, not really meaning to fall asleep, but unable to stop myself, all the same.

I don't know how long I slept, but when I woke, the room was dark and Neil was lying beside me, snoring softly. I smiled to myself and rolled over to snuggle him.

In his sleep, Neil wrapped an arm around me and shifted his body against mine. One foot crept between mine, hooking around my ankle.

My heart ached. I loved him. I loved him way more than I should have. And I was pretty sure he loved me, too. We hadn't said it yet, and that was nice; I didn't think I could handle an "I love you," when "darling," had thrown me for a pretty significant loop.
But that brought a whole other level of anxiety. He hadn't said he loved me, and we weren't exactly dating, no matter how much time we were spending together. I had meant to talk to him about *Porteras* tonight, about the lukewarm reception his changes had been receiving. Instead, I'd just gotten fucknesia and forgotten about the whole thing. Was that for the better? If I told him about my concerns with the magazine, would he think I was being too pushy? Would he end things with me if I spoke up? It seemed like a long shot that he might, but I was almost unwilling to take the chance.

That strengthened my resolve. There was no reason I should hold my tongue and not tell Neil something I felt he needed to know, just because I was afraid of his disapproval. If he did love me, then he would value my independent thought, right? And if he didn't, would I really want to be with him?

Well, even if I did, I shouldn't. I decided I'd mention my concerns over breakfast.

* * * *

"'Usually, *Porteras* is as thick as a Bible,'" I read aloud the next morning, leaning over the kitchen island while Neil whisked eggs in a ceramic bowl. He'd started cooking breakfast for us on mornings after I'd slept over. It had become a pleasant little routine. Except for maybe this morning. "'But the staggering volume of advertising has been notably trimmed. Is this the decision of Elwood and Stern, *Porteras*'s new parent company, or a line in the sand drawn by designers loyal to the toppled *de facto* fashion ruler, Gabriella Winters?'"

"We've made some changes, and people are welcome to respond to them," Neil said mildly, pouring the thoroughly beaten eggs into a hot frying pan on the stove. He was wearing a t-shirt and sweats, the way he usually did in the morning, and the kitchen towel thrown casually over his shoulder made the ensemble oddly sexy.

"Yeah, but this isn't *people*, this is an editorial in the *New York Times*," I pointed out, as gently as possible.

"The digital edition," he nodded to my iPad. "Hand me the peppers?"

I put my iPad down and reached for the shallow dish with chopped green bell peppers in it. "Don't you think maybe too many changes, too quickly... It's not going to inspire confidence in readers who kind of worshipped Gabriella. And what’s going to happen in January, with the new ban on all designers who use animal products? I think you're limiting a lot of choices on behalf of the readers. That's all I'm saying."

"I don't want to talk about work, Sophie. This is the rare occasion where I don't have to think about the damned magazine at all." He was definitely irritated with me. I wasn’t used to that, and I really didn’t like the sick feeling in my gut that resulted.

But this was important to me, and I had made a promise to myself that I wasn’t going to back down just to keep him happy. "That damned magazine is my job, Neil. My only job. I think I have a right to be concerned about it."

He turned, whipping the towel from his shoulder to drop it on the counter. "Do you really think the magazine is going to fail over one bad issue? There are growing pains every time a company changes hands; it's the nature of publishing."

"It's not going to be just one bad issue," I argued. "Going entirely cruelty free severely limits the magazine's ability to sell ad space, or to get designers to support us."

"And that doesn't really matter at all, does it? Because in the end, *Porteras* is the most important fashion magazine in America. In the world. If we decide no... orange, for example, then orange falls out of favor," he explained distractedly, turning back to flip the omelet.

"But you don't just say, 'no orange.' You feature the designers who aren't using orange in their collection." How could he not get this? "If you say, 'no fur, no leather, no animal testing,' you're ruling out such a huge chunk of advertisers and designers. You're basically telling some of the biggest, most
important companies in the world that they're not welcome at *Porteras* anymore."

"And they aren't. New designers and cosmetics companies will step in to fill their places. This could be a revolution. A welcome one, I think."

I tried a different tactic. "What does Rudy think?"

His non-answer told me everything I needed to know. The pan clattered onto the cold back burner. "Rudy is a genius when it comes to fashion, no one would argue otherwise. But he doesn't know the first thing about publishing."

"So, he thinks it's insane, too?" I shook my head. "Do you listen to anyone? Or do you just pay them huge amounts of money and then ignore their opinions?"

Neil picked up a stalk of green onion and slapped it on the cutting board in exasperation. "This isn't a conversation I'm willing to have with you, Sophie."

"Why? Because I'm just a lowly beauty editor?" I snapped.

"Assistant beauty editor," he reminded me tersely as he chopped the onion. "Oh no, he did not."

"Fine." I turned to stalk away. The hell I was going to take that from him. Behind me, he swore under his breath. I heard the knife clatter to the countertop. He caught up with me and put himself between me and the door. I hate when people do that. If I weren't so fucking rational, I would have just knocked him down. Damn my logical calm.

He put one hand on my shoulder to stop me, and he was cautiously gentle as he did it. "Are you really going to storm out of here just because we got into a silly little argument?"

"Yes!" I shrugged off his arm. "And it's not silly. This is my job! This is my career. I have to be able to support myself, and I can't do that if the magazine goes down in flames because you wouldn't listen to anyone."

"I listen to people," he argued, and when he gestured with his hands, droplets of red splashed across the front of his t-shirt. "I listen to - "

"You're bleeding!" I was immediately grateful for the lack of omelet in my stomach. I could not handle blood. Not mine, not someone else's. The very sight of it freaked me out.

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"What?" he frowned at me, exasperated further at my interruption. Then he spotted the blood running down his arm. "I barely nicked myself."

"Are you arguing with yourself for bleeding? Really?" I raced for the counter and grabbed the towel. "You can be so fucking obnoxious."

"Will you stop sniping and help me?"

"Okay, hang on." I swallowed my squeamish fear and reached for his hand. "I swear to god, if you get even a drop of blood on me, I'm going to puke."

"Here." He snatched the towel and wrapped it around his hand. "I could have sworn I just barely nicked myself."

I suddenly felt lightheaded. The room blacked out around the edges, and everything in the center got fuzzy. My stomach gurgled, and I tasted bile at the back of my throat. "Whoa. I really don't feel good."

The plan was to stagger to the island and throw up in the bar sink, but I ended up just sitting on the floor and leaning my back against the cooler door with my eyes shut. Neil hurried over, as if he would try and catch me, but I waived him off. "Seriously, if you get blood on me - " I felt a dicey burp well up in my throat, and I turned my head.

"You really are going to be sick, aren't you? Over a little bit of blood?" Now he laughed softly, and I wasn't impressed.

"I'm sorry, I think blood should stay inside of a person," I snapped. "Besides, now that you're not
"dying, I'm mad at you again."

"I very well could be dying," he argued. "This thing is gushing, I hope I don't need stitches."

I made an only-slightly exaggerated retching noise.

"Sorry." He laid his non-bloody hand on my knee. "I hate that the decisions I'm making at work are troubling you. I hope you know that if anything ever did happen, I would find a way to make it up to you."

I thought of the "& Stern" part of his company's name, and the gossip Jake had passed along in the car. I didn't like the idea of a similar arrangement. "But that's not what I want. You're not obligated to make sure I succeed in life just because we had sex."

"I didn't think I was," he said, a little defensively. "But I wouldn't let someone I care about suffer from my mistakes. There's such a thing as being too independent, you know. I didn't get where I am entirely on my own steam. Every successful person I know had help somewhere along the way."

I didn't respond. I couldn't think of anything to say. And it was remarkably difficult to not admire him a little for admitting that, which wasn't terribly helpful when I wanted to stay angry.

"Nothing is going to happen to Porteras," he said firmly. "But if it did, I would help you find another job."

"And I wouldn't be able to take a hand up from you. It wouldn't feel right." I shook my head. "I don't want people to think I'm with you because of who you are, or the money you have. And I don't want anyone thinking that any measure of success I might ever have is because I slept with you. I want to get by on my own merit, okay?"

"I know." He smiled reluctantly. "It's a very admirable quality."

"Then why argue with me? I mean, I suppose I can understand you not wanting to talk about business with me. After all, I'm sitting here saying, 'no special treatment because I'm fucking you,' but I'm wanting you to listen to me about how to run the company. I guess that's not terribly fair." God, I hated when my own parameters for something came back to bite me. I had to pick, one way or the other, and I realized I wanted Neil to respect this boundary more than I wanted to try and give him my take on how Porteras should be run. "But I don't want anything from you. I just want you."

"I know. And it's rare that someone comes into my life solely under that pretense." He looped his uninjured arm around my shoulders, gave me a tight squeeze, and kissed my forehead. "I suppose that's why I love you so much."
Chapter Eighteen

Have you ever seen a nature documentary where a lizard will stand near something similarly colored and freeze out of pure fight-or-flight instinct? That's how Neil looked about half a second after he said he loved me.

I had the strangest thought that this might be the moment everything fell apart between us. That he hadn't meant to say it - okay, he obviously hadn't meant to say it - and now he couldn't figure out how to take it back, so he would be horrified and call everything off.

Before he could think too much about it, I asked, "Do you?"

"I, um." He looked pretty green around the gills, like I had a few moments before, I'm sure. "What I meant to say..." He wet his lips, made a sort of pained grimace, laughed, and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger as though he'd just gotten the world's worst headache. "I had planned to say that in a much different way. When I wasn't bleeding through a kitchen towel, for one."

I took his hand and slowly unwrapped it, steeling myself against the nausea that gripped me. The bleeding had finally slowed, though the cloth was alarmingly saturated. "Look. It's not even that bad. Just a little scratch."

"Oh?" His voice cracked like a teenager's. It was kind of adorable. "Good god, here I thought I'd severed an artery."

I gently closed his fingers and pressed the towel back into place, trying hard to ignore how freaked out I was by all the blood. "I love you, too."

He looked over at me with a fleeting smile. "I'm relieved. I didn't say it because I expected anything from you. I knew what you wanted from this relationship from the very beginning, and I'm not trying to push - "

"I know, I..." Wasn't telling someone you loved them supposed to feel good? This felt like getting punched in the chest.

He studied my face, waiting for something. I could see the longing for reassurance in his eyes, and I hated myself that I couldn't give him what he needed.

"I must admit, I was hoping that some day, not today, of course, but some day I would tell you that I loved you, and you would... respond differently." He tried to laugh. It was a miserable try. He stood and went to the sink, dropping the bloody towel into it and rinsing his hands.

"I can't help how I responded, sorry." God, now I felt like an asshole. "I'm afraid."

"What are you afraid of?"

"If we're in love... doesn't that change everything we have?" I really wished we could go back to ten minutes ago, even though we had been fighting. At least then I knew where we stood with each other. I got to my feet, but I kept my distance. "Doesn't that mean we have to start spending all our extra time together and watch the same shows together and coordinate our schedules? Christ, I don't know, would I have to have holiday dinners with you and your daughter? Would I have to tell my mom about you? She's seven years younger than you. She is not going to take this well! This was all so much easier when it was just about the sex - "

He had slowly approached me as I ranted, and now his kiss cut me off mid-sentence, which I would have normally been furious about. It helped at the time, though; I had felt myself emotionally escalating with every word that came out of my mouth. With his lips on mine, his hand in my hair, I felt considerably calmer.

Neil lifted his head. "Nothing has to change, Sophie. I love you. If this is finally happening, if we're
finally going to be together, I'll take it. Even if it means you don't spend your holidays with me or introduce me to your family. If you never even want to keep so much as a toothbrush here." He kissed my forehead, and pulled me into his arms.

"I'm arguing with you about being in love with you," I muttered, feeling foolish. "I was trying not to bring love into this. I didn't want to complicate things."

"Well, I'm sorry I'm so damn lovable." He tilted my chin up to smile down at me, then he kissed me. His undamaged hand cupped my jaw, his nose brushed against mine. It was the softest, most romantic kiss I'd ever had in my entire life. And that knot in my chest came completely untied. I was in love with someone, and he loved me back, and nothing bad had happened. The world hadn't ended.

I was so relieved; I almost failed to notice what he'd actually said a moment before. I pulled back, frowning mildly up at him. "Um. Finally?"

He did the prey animal freeze thing again.

"How long have you been in love with me?" A thrill of trepidation curled through me. I ordered it away.

"Six years." Absolutely no hesitation on his part. His arms still encircled my waist. "I fell in love with you that night in L.A."

That freaked me out, but way less that it probably should have. "Are you kidding?"

"No. Not at all." He paused, his expression pained. "I could tell you the exact moment, it's that fresh in my memory."

I didn't say anything. I wasn't sure there was anything to say.

So, he told me, anyway. Looking into my eyes, his own full of raw emotion, he told me the exact moment he'd fallen in love with me.

"We were in the bar at the airport. And you shrieked in total outrage because I didn't like William Faulkner's writing."

My mouth fell open. "Neil... that was like ten minutes after we met."

"I know. And I'm aware that it sounds crazy. Better than love at first sight, you must admit." He said the rest in a rush, as though he were trying to talk over the fact that he'd just admitted to loving me for six years when he hadn't even known me for a full day at the time. "You didn't hide a contrary opinion to impress me. You were so young... It amazes me now that I know just how young, and yet you were so self-confident. Here you were, a journalist - well, you let me think you were a journalist - and you thought I worked for a magazine, but you didn't kiss my ass or try to network.

"And you were utterly fearless. You were flying to a foreign country for the first time in your life, to a place where you didn't speak the language and you didn't know a soul. And you didn't even have money for a hotel room. But you weren't worried about that. You were more interested in defending Faulkner. I knew then that you were the perfect woman for me." He smiled sadly. "And that I had met you too early in your life to do either of us a bit of good. I wrestled with the idea of continuing a relationship with you in Tokyo, but I was afraid. I thought I would ruin you, try to mold you into what I thought you should be. So I tried to let you go and move on. And I've been making a ridiculous mess of my life ever since."

I didn't know what to say. Neil was really, actually, not-fucking-around in love with me. Apparently, he had been for some time. It was my turn to go all lizard-in-the-desert.

"I shouldn't have told you," he said, his expression falling.

"No." I shook my head and smiled. "No, I'm so glad you did."

He kissed me again, his lips warm and soft, and I melted against him. He loved me. Neil Elwood and I were in love.

And I was still pretty pissed off at him.
"You shouldn't have said that, you know." I pushed my hair back from my forehead as I leaned away. "About my job. Being just an assistant editor. That was a cheap shot."

"I know. I meant it to be. I'm not proud of that." He looked at me with such earnest sincerity my heart ached. "I really am sorry."

"I won't hold a grudge against you forever. Just maybe like, forty more minutes." I gestured at the counter. "You can make it up to me by finishing breakfast. And not bleeding on it."

We ate at the island, because there was more room for our gadgets. That sounds demented and sad, but Neil liked to read the paper on his iPad, and I liked to make my morning perusal of *The Huffington Post* on my phone, so it was nice to share the comfortable silence while we ate. I got up to get more coffee, and on impulse I stepped over and refilled Neil's mug, too. When I sat back down, he casually took my hand and squeezed it, without looking up.

Sometimes, the simplest things can take your breath away.

I pulled my hand back and stood, stretching with a loud groan. "I think I'm going to go take a shower. Do we have anything on the agenda today?"

"Nothing at all. If you want to go out, I wouldn't be adverse to a jog through the park, maybe one last time before the snow really hits. But if you want to stay in, I'll serve my sentence on the elliptical."

Neil was pretty careful about exercising, which was awesome, because it meant he didn't encourage me to slack off on the weekends, either. I'd gone running with him a couple of times, and then we'd come back to the apartment all sweaty and exhausted to tumble straight into shower sex. But this morning, I just wasn't feeling the urge to hit the crisp winter air.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not. I'm super tired. And my knees are killing me. It's like some perverted billionaire fucked me on a hard marble floor last night or something." I stood beside him and leaned my head on his shoulder as he flipped a page on the screen of his iPad.

"If it's any consolation, I'm sure his knees suffered, too." He pulled my hand to his lips and gave it a quick smooch. "Go on, get clean."

So, my bathtub at home is great, but spoiled as I was when it came to getting wet and soapy, I had to admit that Neil's master bath was pretty impressive. It was accessible only from his drool-worthy closet, making it this private little oasis cut off from the rest of the house. In addition to dark wood cabinetry and relaxing golden light from glass fixtures, there were more of those marvelous floor-level forced air ducts warming the natural stone tile. The toilet was in its own little room, beside the his-and-hers vessel sinks of brown stone. The shelves on one side of the counter were bare, waiting for the day I would be comfortable leaving something there.

I opened a cupboard and pulled out a few fluffy white towels. Another really great thing about Neil was that at his house, I could use as many towels as I wanted, and I didn't pay for it on laundry day. Staying with him was a bit like staying at a hotel in that respect. I giggled to myself as I reached through the shower door to turn on the taps. The shower was a spacious cube with corners of matching natural stone and three glass sides. There was an amazing square shower head in the ceiling that was like standing in the rain, as well as a gleaming metal detachable head and the standard wall-mounted spray. There was a garden tub in the bathroom, too, but with a shower ripped from my wildest plumbing fantasies, I'd never bothered to try out the alternative.

As I stood under the downpour from the ceiling, washing the shampoo from my hair, my mind spun. We'd said it. We'd admitted that we loved each other. Now that it was in the open, it made things... different.

At dinner, Rudy had said Neil couldn't do anything halfway. Did that mean we were into serious relationship territory? Was the clock ticking on the "leaving a toothbrush" front?

Worse, would things get boring between us? It seemed like a petty thing to worry about. Neil loved
me. Shouldn’t I just be happy with that? But if we were "in love," didn't we have to leave all the fun, kinky stuff behind?

In the past, when relationships had gotten stale or we’d argued over something, I’d been okay with cutting the guys loose, because I didn’t want to do the work. Neil was different. Without meaning to, I'd gotten exactly what I'd been afraid of for most of my short adult life: A real, grown-up relationship that was going to require actual investment.

"Sophie?"

I opened my eyes at the sound of Neil's voice. He had a towel wrapped around his waist, and nothing else on.

My heart did a crazy little flip-flop at the sight of him. Glass shower walls didn't hide much, even if they were a bit steamy, and I felt oddly exposed before him. He pushed open the shower door and shut it behind him with a soft click, deftly avoiding the falling water in the center of the small space.

"I hope you don't mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," I breathed, pressing my thighs together. The last time we'd been in here, he'd fucked me hard from behind while my tits pressed against the cold glass wall. I was not going to argue with him if that's what he had in store for me today.

He motioned me away from the center shower and turned off the water. "Come over here, would you?"

With his back to me, I noticed the silver gleam of a pair of handcuffs tucked into the top of the towel at his waist, and a thrill shot through me. "You're not in here to get clean, are you?"

He shook his head slowly, and reached for the cuffs. He turned to face me, and held them out. Obediently, I presented my wrists. Goose bumps popped up all over my wet skin, and the chill only heightened my anticipation. He locked one cuff around my left wrist, not too tight, then closed the second clasp around the other one. He positioned me in front of the gleaming steel fixtures and pushed my arms over my head, ducking beneath them so our bodies were pressed together, my hands helplessly bound behind his neck.

"I would appreciate it if you didn’t pull," he warned me. “I don’t want my neck wrenched or your wrists bruised. So, do me a favor and try to keep from falling.”

"This sounds a bit intense," I teased. Inside though, my libido was rioting.

"It's going to be, I assure you." He reached for the detachable faucet and deftly unscrewed the head from the hose, tossing it aside to clatter on the tile.

Oh, good lord.

Look, if there is one thing any reasonably horny woman knows, it's the value of good water pressure and accessible plumbing. Apparently, at least one unreasonably horny man knew it, too, and he had just handcuffed me to himself in the shower. He grinned at me as he reached over my shoulder to turn the tap on. When he tested the water from the hose on the inside of his arm, I couldn't help but notice how the stream dented his flesh. My thighs trembled.

He trailed the hose down the front of my body, splashing the warm water over both of us. Then he smiled maliciously and said, "And here we go."

I rose up on the balls of my feet, my breath whooshing from my lungs as the spray hit my clit directly. He pressed the opening of the hose lightly against me, intensifying the pressure. I'm almost embarrassed to admit it, but I think it took me all of eight seconds to groan with an orgasm that set my skin tingling.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" he asked, wrapping his arm around my waist to hold me still as the water cascaded down my legs. "I missed that. You'll have to do it again."

"Oh, fuck!" I cursed, trying to twist away from the relentless sensation of the water on my post-
orgasmic, over-sensitive clitoris. This was worse than the hair tie, because there was no change in intensity, no let-up. The muscles in my thighs were jumping and I called him every name in the book, hurled every swear word I knew at him as I sobbed and broke over the edge again.

The only word I didn't say was "red." I had a sick desire to see just how far I could go, how much I could endure, and when I realized that, it was enough to bring me over a third time. By the fourth I was screaming, writhing against his body as he held me captive over my instrument of torture. I tried to close my legs, and he forced his knee between my thighs. I could feel his hard cock against me through the wet towel. I wanted to hold on to him, wanted to collapse, but all I could do was stand there on the balls of my feet, my calves cramping as I came again and again, until they felt more like explosions of pain than pleasure, and with one final howl of desperation from my hoarse throat I shouted, "Red!"

He turned the water off with one hand and released the safety latch on one of the cuffs with the other. He was quick enough to catch me as I fell into his arms, as boneless and exhausted as if I had gone running after all. If the entire experience had taken a full ten minutes I would have been very surprised, but it had felt like hours.

He held me at his side and helped me stagger from the shower, wrapping me in the towel I'd gotten for myself and leaving his sodden one behind. He led me through the closet, into the bedroom, and very thoroughly dried me. Then he pulled back the still-mussed bedding and ordered, "Get in."

"Are you going to fuck me?" I asked, wriggling under the covers.
To my surprise, he pulled the duvet over me, leaned down, kissed me briefly, and said, "No. I told you, I have to serve my time on the elliptical."

"Oh." I felt a little silly, being disappointed by that. After all, I'd just practically passed out from orgasms in the shower. I might not have survived intercourse.

"Take a nap, darling." He kissed me again, smiling against my mouth. "You'll want to be well-rested. I get all my best ideas while I'm working out."
I giggled and squealed and slid down in the cushiony, comfy heaven that was his bed.
How could I have ever worried that things might get boring between us?

* * * *

Monday morning I was too sick to work. That had happened to me once, maybe twice in my entire life, and I'd always pushed through. I figured I'd be sick anyway, so I might as well get paid for it. This time, though, I couldn't possibly push through my illness; I'd spent most of the morning hugging the toilet.

"Hey!" Holli stuck her head through the door and frowned. "Are you hung over?"

"No." I tried to shake my head, but that was so not a good idea when I seemed to be violently motion sick. "I called off work. I may have barfed up some intestine."

"Gross. Guess what?" She leaned against the doorframe, and waited patiently for me to dry-heave over the bowl before continuing. "I got a really, really big job."

"That's great." It was difficult to sound enthusiastic, but I tried. I pushed my sweaty hair back from my forehead and propped myself up on my elbows on the toilet seat. "What is it?"

"It's in January..." she began, trying to sound mysterious with her excitement rising the whole time. "It's in Paris..."

"Oh my god." I forced myself to my feet and splashed some water from the sink into my vomity mouth before lurching at her. "Oh my god, you're doing Paris fashion week?"

"That's why I had lunch with my agent on that Sunday a few weeks ago! I knew that day, but I couldn't tell anybody until this week. It was torture!" Holli accepted my hug very cautiously, as though she wanted a hazmat suit. She ducked under my arm. "Please don't give me what you have."

I stepped back. Even though my guts were still roiling, I was overflowing with happiness for my
friend.

Okay, no, that wasn't happiness.

Holli raced out the door as I fell to my knees again.

* * * *

It was a little strange returning to work in the wake of my fight with Neil and the declaration it had led to. Before, going into the office and knowing he was there had been a naughty thrill for me. Now, it was frustrating. Denying our relationship now didn't seem kinky or fun. It was just kind of depressing.

I came back to work on Tuesday. I was in reception for all of two seconds before Neil walked out of his office and intercepted me.

"Are you feeling better, Ms. Scaife?" he asked, falling in step beside me as I headed across the main floor to my department.

"I am, Mr. Elwood, thanks." I kept my tone light, and noticed that when we got to the beauty department, he almost put his hand at the small of my back as I went through the door. I turned quickly and looked up with a neutral, professional smile. "Do you need something?"

"No, just..." his eyes moved past me to Jessica, who was editing photos on her laptop at the big central table. She barely noticed him there. "Just making sure you're all right."

He'd called the night before, and I'd still been sick as a dog. A little reassurance - from his girlfriend and not his employee - might make him worry less. I went to my desk, pulled my phone out of my purse, and texted him. I'm fine. I'm feeling much better. Must have been a twenty-four hour thing.

"Morning, Jess," I said as I tapped out the message. I hit send and said, "Sorry I called off yesterday. Was it too much of a pain in the ass around here?"

"No, not bad at all." She shrugged. "You'll probably have to play catch up, but at this point in the issue, the fires are mostly put out. I'm sorry you had such a shitty weekend, though."

"Actually, it wasn't so bad. I didn't get sick until the middle of the night, like Monday morning." I was just glad I hadn't done it at Neil's. I'd woken up and promptly puked in my lap. That would have definitely killed the romance between us. "Do anything exciting?"

Jessica shrugged. "I went to a party in the village. Okay band, bordering on mediocre. You?"

"I spent the weekend with my boyfriend." I got a little thrill out of talking about Neil without anyone knowing I was talking about Neil. There was no way I could ever tell Jessica or India that my boyfriend was Neil Elwood, and not just because it would endanger my job. I'd heard them talk so much shit about him; they would be mortified if they knew I was in love with him.

"Oh!" I said quickly, remembering. How could I forget? "My roommate got hired to do runway for fashion week in Paris!"

"Wow!" Jessica's eyes went wide. "So, basically, she's made it."

"Yeah!" I hadn't really thought about it, but... yeah. For a model who'd be happy standing in front of cars at auto shows, Holli had really exceeded her own career expectations. "She's totally psyched."

The door opened. I looked up, expecting India. Instead, Jake stepped in. "Sophie, do you have a minute?"

I looked to Jessica. "Do I have a quick minute?"

"India isn't here yet, so..." Jess shrugged. "Go for it."

"Okay, but it has to be really quick," I told Jake as we walked out of the department. He led me to the emergency exit stairwell in the corner. We slipped through the door, Jake seemingly oblivious to the stares of some of our coworkers.

"So, you know it looks like we're coming out here for some super secret meeting, right?" I was kind of annoyed. I knew he was still under the impression that I was on his side, but I had no idea what his side was or what he thought he was plotting to accomplish.
"We are coming out here for a secret meeting." He looked over my head, through the small window in the door. "I wanted to be the first to tell you. I'm leaving."

"Leaving? As in, quitting?" It wasn't as huge a surprise as he was making it out to be. I had been expecting him to leave way back when Gabriella was still with us. Not because he'd been unhappy, I was just certain he would get a massive book deal or something and not need us anymore. Because despite all the flaws in his character that had become magnified about a thousand percent in the past couple of months, he really was a talented guy. He knew exactly how to work with photographers, how to describe the look he was going for to compliment his words, and how to cooperate if those visions didn't quite match up.

"It's Porteras's loss," I told him, and I meant it.

"It doesn't have to be your loss, though." He put one hand on the wall beside my head and leaned in, way too close. Because we were being covert, I guess?

I took a half-step away from his arm. "What do you mean?"

He blew out a breath and looked to the door. "You have to swear you won't tell Elwood. I don't know what's going on with you two, but I can't trust you with this information if you're going to run right to him with it."

Jake could have slapped me, and I would have been less stunned and shocked. "What?"

"Oh, come on," he said with a roll of his eyes. "You were in his office that day, with the door locked. I was there. And then you suddenly got promoted."?

"That's not how I got the promotion! Gabriella - "

"Gabriella put you on a list, I know. Look, I know how hard it is. I've done things I'm not proud of to get jobs, believe me." He had a look on his face that said we're the same, I understand you.

But he didn't understand. He didn't understand me at all.

He smirked down at me. "Gabriella has backers, lots of financial backers, as well as the support of several major designers. They're going to start their own magazine."

"Good." I meant that. Neil's weird new policies were going to kill Porteras, anyway. "I hope she'll be very successful."

"You don't have to hope. She's going to be successful. She's picking up the advertisers that are fleeing this place like rats off a sinking ship." Jake straightened and put his hands in his pockets. I wanted to smack the smug off his stupid face. "You're looking at Gabriella's second-in-command at the new publication. Do you want in?"

"What?" I thought I might choke on my tongue.

"Like I said, it's all hush-hush right now. But I can talk to Gabriella, see if you can't maybe get on board. You might be her assistant again, at first, but there's definitely a chance for advancement. Are you in?"

I wanted to say was: Let me see. Work another two years for the woman who thought I wasn't good enough to take along on this new venture in the first place, driving her dog to get its malfunctioning colon cleansed, and betray the man I love in order to do it? Sign me up, and which foot do you want me to shoot myself in, the right or the left?

But my sense and reason overrode that. Working for Gabriella on a new magazine? People would kill for that opportunity. Could I really pass that up? She had too much pull in the fashion world to fail at this. Her new magazine would be a phenomenal success, fueled by the ire of former Porteras readers alienated by the changes Elwood & Stern had made.

"I would definitely consider it," I said carefully.

"Good." He grinned at me. "At least you know you won't have to do anything depraved behind locked doors with Gabriella."
No, I'd be compromising my dignity in front of everyone. Much better.
I staggered out of the stairwell, feeling like I'd been hit by a truck.
I turned back and gave Jake my most serious look as I asked under my breath, “Is she making an announcement soon then? Courting subscribers?”
Jake grinned and said, low, an eye out for anyone who might overhear, “That’s the beauty part. She has someone who works right here at Porteras who’s borrowing the mailing list. Postcards and emails will hit subscribers this Friday.”
Borrowing? Stealing. Someone was going to steal the subscription list for her, so she could poach subscribers from Neil? It wasn’t unheard of for publications to share subscription lists, but not with rival publications. Doing it this way was dirty and underhanded.
But if Porteras went under, did I really want to go down with it?
Sirens that screamed, “Tell Neil!” accompanied every warning light flashing in my head. This was serious. Someone taking that list would affect… well, it would probably mean everyone who ever had access to it would be suspect. Maybe they would all get fired.
Maybe I would get fired. Who better than me to give her that list, since I’d had my nose about six feet deep in Gabriella’s ass the whole time I’d worked for her? They were going to suspect me. Oh god, Neil was going to suspect me.
But how could I tell him? I might lose my job either way, when the deception got uncovered. It wouldn’t be a secret for long, only one confused subscriber would have to write in and ask what the junk email or postcard was about. By that time, the damage to Porteras would be done, though. If Gabriella knew I was the whistle blower, I wouldn’t get a job with her. But if I didn’t tell Neil, I was betraying him on a pretty personal level.
I loved him. Could I really keep this a secret from him?
Chapter Nineteen

Friday night, I was feeling way better from my illness. My stomach was still kind of jumpy and sour every once in a while, but I attributed that to the whole stressful ethics issue I had going on.

I was dying to see Neil, but a little concerned about the secret job offer/office espionage that would undoubtedly blow up during the coming week. I knew I had to warn him about the subscriber list, but I wasn’t sure it was my place to break the chain of command. Did that fall under “let’s not discuss business?” I had already warned Rudy to keep an eye on Jake, and I assumed he wouldn’t have kept my suspicions from Neil. Rudy was sharp, and nothing serious would get past him.

If a real job offer panned out, I would bring it up with Neil then. If he was super mad about it, we'd deal with it. And if he couldn't respect me for prioritizing my career over him, then maybe I'd fallen in love with the wrong guy, no matter how great the sex was, or how much fun we had together. I needed to stay Team Sophie.

I headed to Neil's place straight from work, and actually beat him there. I waited for him in the lobby.

"This is why you need a key," he said when he arrived. He took me into his arms and kissed my forehead before he released me and urged me toward the elevator.

"A key?" I considered that as the doors closed us in. "On one hand, you're obviously not afraid that I'll just drop by at a weird time or move in while you're at work."

"Sophie, you won't even leave a spare toothbrush at my place, I don't think I have to worry about you moving in uninvited."

"Ooh, that reminds me, did you get my bag?" For the past few weekends, Neil had sent someone to the apartment to pick up my weekend bag, so I didn't have to schlep it to work. I think Neil would have been thrilled if I would have just left some extra clothes and things at his place, but I was nowhere near ready for that.

"Tony picked it up this morning." The doors opened and we stepped into the small vestibule. "You were about to tell me your other hand."

"What other hand?" I asked, momentarily puzzled.

"The hand that will ultimately decline a key to my apartment," he said, not meeting my eyes as he unlocked the door.

"Oh, that hand." I tried to keep my tone light, because he was right, I wasn't going to take a damn key. "Well, on that hand, I would have a key to your apartment. That might be a little heavy this early."

He held open the door for me and dropped his briefcase in the foyer. "Do you mind terribly if we order in tonight? I'm a bit tired."

Now that we were standing together in familiar lighting, I noticed the dark hollows under his eyes, the slight pallor to his complexion. "Are you okay? You're not coming down with that thing I had?"

"Oh, I’m fine. Just a little tired is all." He smiled bravely, but I felt a cold chill of worry. Every time we got updates at work lately, it seemed like bad news disguised as good news. I realized he must have been under an enormous amount of stress over the past week.

I was determined to make the night as relaxing as possible for him. Maybe I’d bring up the meeting with Jake, but not tonight. Not when Neil looked so run down.

We ended up ordering pizza and cheap red wine and eating cross-legged on the bed in the media room.

"You said media room, I imagined like, a plasma screen and a rack of DVDs," I said, looking up at
the tray ceiling and recessed lighting. The bed we sat on was surrounded by movie-theatre-style seats, five behind us, two rows of two on either side.

"I had this done when Emma turned sixteen. She and her friends had sleepovers in here." He gestured to the projector overhead. "Replaced that a few times since then, of course."

"Oh, of course." I snickered.

"Don't make fun of me for having money," he scolded. "You'd have more of it yourself, if you'd let me pay for the pizza."

"No, I have to pay for some things."

He took a swallow of wine. "I forgot to mention... Emma will be here tomorrow."

"Oh." Well, I'd thought I was feeling better from my stomach bug, now not so much. Maybe I was just getting an ulcer from stress. "Emma will be here..."

"Tomorrow," he said slowly, the corner of his mouth twitching as he gauged my reaction. "But I'd like you to stay. You two had a disastrous first meeting, and I'd like you to be able to get along."

I reached for the wine bottle and poured myself another glass. "Does she live here, or..."

"Part time. She travels a lot, for her job, organizing events and fundraisers all over. When she's in town, I very graciously let her stay here, rent free, to prevent her from moving in with her horrible boyfriend." He pushed the pizza box toward me and reclined on his side.

"That probably won't work forever." I shook my head. "That's about the gist of it." I covered my mouth with my hand as I spoke, chewing up my last bite. I dropped the crust into the top of the box and grabbed one of the flimsy paper napkins to wipe my hands. "Well, Sir, I don't know what you had in mind for the rest of the evening, but I think I broke your 'don't get tipsy' rule."

The glasses we'd been drinking from were bigger than the ones I had at home, and I was fairly certain I'd drunk most of the bottle on my own.

"Yes, I see that." He reached up, taking my chin in his hand to tilt my face to one side, then the other. "You're pink cheeked."

"That's not the wine. It's anger at these morons." I shrugged his hand off and gestured at the screen. "'We really liked the Cape Cod, and it was perfect for our needs, but it had waaaaaaaall paaaaaaper.'"

"We really liked the Cape Cod, and it was perfect for our needs, but it had waaaaaaaall paaaaaaper."

He laughed. "I can't tell you how much I needed this tonight."

"Bad TV?"

"You." His smile slowly faded. "I find that when I'm with you, it's impossible to worry about anything else."

Oh, Neil. Maybe that was his problem. He was too happy to see the colossal mistakes he had made with Porteras. Or maybe he saw them, but like an oncoming train, couldn’t avoid them.

The problem wasn’t the changes he’d made. The problem was he’d made too many, too soon. I was starting to get a sense of what Rudy had referred to as Neil’s “forceful personality.” When he saw something he wanted, he went after it tenaciously. While that was admirable, it wasn’t always sensible.

We'd already had the "never ask me about my business" talk where this subject was concerned, and I so didn't want to rehash that argument. Not when I was full of red wine and an alarming amount of pizza - which shouldn't have been a turn on, but I challenge anyone to not be turned on sitting on a bed, even casually, with Neil Elwood.

"Do you ever watch porn in here?" The word 'porn' makes me giggle. I can't help it.
"Sophie, don't be juvenile." He sighed impatiently. "Of course I do. The picture is incredible and there's no danger of getting semen on my laptop."

I shook my head and covered my face with my hands, laughing as he got up from the bed and relocated the pizza box and wine glasses. "Is that something you'd be interested in? Watching porn and fucking in here?"

It felt like such a natural question, like he was asking me if I'd like pancakes for breakfast. "Yeah, I think it could be fun. You know... I've never been with someone who talks about sex the way you do. I mean, in my other relationships we could have sex, we just couldn't talk about it like this."

"If you can't talk about it, you damn well shouldn't be having it," he observed, draining his glass in a heroic swallow.

"You're right." I got to my knees on the bed. It was made up with pillows and blankets that matched the burgundy velvet upholstery of the theater seating around it. "Is there any reason we can't watch porn and do dirty stuff tonight?"

"None at all." He walked slowly over to bed, an uncertain expression on his face. "I'm a bit surprised, though. I thought women of your generation had a problem with pornography."

"I'm pretty sure you've seen women of my generation in porn," I said dryly.

"Well, of course. I only meant..." he paused, and laughed. "You're a feminist. I assumed that feminists... didn't care for that sort of thing."

"We're not a hive mind, Neil." I rolled my eyes at him. "I like porn. Not like, the animated stuff with tentacles. And nothing super degrading. If you bust out a box of barely legal girls crying as a specific fetish, I'm probably not going to be happy about it."

"No, nothing in the 'barely legal girls crying' genre, I'm afraid." He sat down beside me and reached for the remote. He hit a button to open up a menu on the screen, selected "private" and entered a password.

"This is impressive." I looked up at the projector. "Is there a hard drive in that?"

"Of course. Every porn-loving billionaire in his right mind is going completely digital these days." He hit another button on the remote, and a gallery of thumbnail images popped up. "What are you in the mood for?"

I snorted as I looked at the pictures. There was a very similar theme going on there. "Looks like redheads are my only option."

"Oh yes, um," he looked over at me with an embarrassed, apologetic grin. "I like redheads."

"I hate to tell you, but I don't think I would look good as a redhead." I lifted one long lock of decidedly brunette hair. "I could try it, if you want."

"You'd better not," he warned. "Don't ever change your appearance solely to please me. I love you exactly the way you are."

"As long as you don't hire some new redhead secretary to bend over your desk, I'll be happy." I pointed to the upper left corner of the screen. "What's that one?"

"Excellent choice," he said, his expression brightening. "Do you speak French?"

"Not even a little."

"Well, the plot isn't really important. The dialogue is atrocious." He started the video.

I frowned. "Do you speak French?"

"I do."

"Do you speak any other languages?" This was a fascinating side to him I'd never really considered before. He'd probably had a way better education than I'd had.

"Besides English? Icelandic is my second language, but I'd consider it almost native. I'm fluent in German and French, I speak some Dutch, a bit of Greek. I can do a tiny bit of Japanese, but I never quite
get it right, and I’m reliably informed that my accent is awful." He flashed me a smile and hit another button on the remote to dim the lights. "What about you?"

"Spanish." I shrugged. "Not fluent, but I do okay."

"That's perfect then, isn't it?" He sat down beside me and ran his hand down my back. "I can cover for us in Nice, you can help us get around Malaga."

I snorted. "Right."

"I'm serious." A slight frown creased his forehead. "Sophie, I would love to go away on a holiday with you. To have you all to myself for more than two nights in a row, to spend all day with you and hold your hand in public without fearing someone from work is going to spot us. Just to relax with you, without work hanging over our heads."

"We go to dinner together. We go running together," I pointed out. But he was right, we were both silently rehearsing our cover stories the whole time. Oh, it was meant to be a business dinner, not a romantic, candle lit one, but the wait staff wouldn't take no for an answer. "Maybe that's something we could do in the future. Go some place warm and sunny, where I can wear a bikini."

"Where you can sunbathe topless," he suggested lasciviously. "I'm going to go get a condom."

"Hurry," I told him, lying back on the bed and walking my fingertips down my tummy.

"Never." He leaned down to kiss me, as on screen the woman in the porn crawled across a bed, speaking softly to a nude man with a truly glorious physique.

"Wow." My eyebrows shot up. The dude had to have a twelve pack.

"I'm still here!" Neil laughed from the door, but it sounded like he was only half kidding.

The actress reached for the actor's erection and slowly stroked it, whispering her lines. I slipped my hand beneath my shirt to stroke the curve of my breast.

That's how Neil found me when he came back, and he stopped at the end of the bed to watch me lazily circling my nipple beneath my t-shirt.

I smiled up at him. "What's she saying?"

"Oh, um, that it's all right, her sister won't find out, but that she's always wondered what he was like in bed." Neil shrugged and sat beside me. "I told you it was a stupid plot."

"No more stupid than 'It appears our flight is cancelled, would you like to get a room with me?'" I teased, mocking his accent.

He tackle-hugged me, and we rolled together on the bed. He buried his face in my neck and sucked noisily on my skin, tickling me, making me squirm and laugh and gasp all at the same time. Finally, he let up, pinning me beneath him. One hand went to the top of my yoga pants - I wanted to be comfy on the weekends, but I wasn't quite ready to spring printed flannel pjs on him - and slipped inside. My last giggle died away on a contented sigh as he stroked me. He pushed my t-shirt up with his other hand, cupping my breast, and covered my mouth with his mouth, my body with his body.

I smiled up at him as his fingers found my clit and pressed in slow circles, then I tilted my head back to watch the video. In this position the picture was upside down, but it didn't hinder my enjoyment any. The woman on the screen ran her tongue up and down the man's cock, maintaining eye contact with the camera as her fingers curled around him, coated in her saliva.

My reaction to the sight was a bone-deep shudder.

"I prefer scenes like this," Neil said, nibbling along my jaw. "When it seems genuine. I detest the over-loud, obviously faked enjoyment in some videos."

"Oh my god," I whimpered, rolling my hips under him. "I totally agree. I like it much better when it looks real."

His fingers slipped down, two of them sliding into me. "This is very real, isn't it?"

"All real," I moaned. "All for you."
"You'll drive a man crazy, talking like that." He sat up and pulled off his shirt, and I did the same. I'd taken off my bra when I'd changed out of my work clothes, and his hands and mouth were on me before I got my t-shirt over my head. I pulled him back down with me. I loved the way our skin felt pressed together. I loved the weight of him between my legs, the heat of his mouth on my nipple, the roughness of his hairy chest against my belly.

The actress moaned around the shaft in her mouth, and my throat went dry.

"Hey." I sank my fingers into his hair and gently tugged. When he lifted his head, I looked him in the eye and said, "I want to suck your cock."

He grinned at me and leaned up, and I started to sit up as well. He placed one hand against my chest. "Stay there."

I watched the screen as he rose from the bed and stripped naked. The woman in the movie was getting more enthusiastic now, her mouth bobbing up and down her partner's glistening erection. Neil came back to the bed and knelt over me, a knee on either side of my ribcage. The tip of him brushed my lips, and I opened my mouth, raising my head a little to take him in. I reached up to grip him, and he intercepted my hand, guiding it to the side of my breast.

I could take a hint.

I squeezed my tits together around him, letting my tongue swirl over the head of his cock as he thrust. I was surprised at how much of a tease it was, not being able to suck him deep into my mouth. That only made me want to do an even better job on what I could reach.

Neil's hand snaked down my stomach, into my pants again, to finger me as he slowly fucked my breasts. I lifted my hips, rocking under his gentle strokes, whimpering as his other hand traced slow circles around each of my nipples in turn.

I started to giggle. I couldn't help it.

"Are you laughing?" he asked, laughing a bit himself.

"I am." I let my head fall back and moaned again as he pinched my clit between his thumb and forefinger, rolling it from side to side. "I'm just having such a good time."

And that was it, really. I was feeling so damn fantastic. Here I was, doing something I'd rarely done with other partners, without any fear or shame, because I knew Neil loved me, and he genuinely loved fucking me. We could try anything and he would still be into me, and ready to try other things.

Not that this was a failure, by any means. While his fingers were doing a lot more for me than his cock was at the moment, I got a naughty thrill just from being held down by him, having him dominate me by virtue of position, even if he wasn't going full Dom tonight. I lifted my head again and took him into my mouth, still somewhat breathless from laughter. After a few long, slow licks, I had to lower my head again, but I held my breasts tighter around him.

"You know, if you came like this, you would blow all over my face," I said, as though it were an innocent observation. It totally wasn’t.

He groaned and closed his eyes.

I whined in disappointment as he withdrew his hand from between my legs.

"Get up," he ordered, swinging one leg over me. He offered me his hand and I took it, climbing to my knees in front of him. He pushed me onto my hands and gave me a sharp slap on my ass before he jerked my pants down. I felt his weight shift, his arms brush my thighs, and then without any warning, he pushed his face against my vulva. He sucked my clit into his mouth and I jumped, but he held my hips, urging me to tilt my pelvis for easier access.

In the porn, the woman was on top of the man now, straddling his face as he devoured her pussy. The noises she made were too breathless and spontaneous to be fake. She sounded like she was really, really getting off. Like I was really, really getting off with Neil’s nose brushing against my labia, his
tongue tapping my clit.

"Let me hear you," Neil begged, pressing kisses across my ass, down my thighs. "I'm going to make you come, Sophie. And I want to hear it."

"Oh, fuck," I gasped as his fingers shoved into me. He knew exactly what I needed. I needed him to be rough with me, to make me feel more than just pleasure. To feel that little twinge of fear, when there was nothing to fear. To feel helpless, when I held all the power.

He pressed against my g-spot with two fingers, hard, and rolled my clit under his tongue. My gaze fixed on the woman on screen, how her thighs trembled around her partner's face, how she gripped one breast and ran the fingers of her other hand through her hair. Neil's thumb replaced his tongue. His teeth grazed the curve of my buttock and I shuddered; he bit me, hard, and that was all I needed. I sobbed and shook, grinding back on his hand. I threw my head back as my pussy clenched around his fingers. And I totally let him hear me.

"Fuck," I groaned again as he withdrew his hand. After a brief pause to put on the condom, his cock took the place of his fingers. With my pants still around my knees, and his knees on either side of my calves, I might as well have been tied up because I couldn't move. He pushed in, hard, then drew back and shoved again. There was nothing I could do but hold on, rocking with him, my balance precarious, my fingers digging into the blanket beneath me.

In the video, the woman was on her partner's lap, facing away from him, the camera angled to show every thrust of his erection into her shaved-bare pussy. They were going at it pretty vigorously, her tits bouncing as she rode him. What we were doing was just the opposite. Neil would slam forward, then withdraw slowly, so I felt every inch of him drag along my sensitive channel. My internal muscles gripped him in tight flutters. My eyes rolled up at the unbelievable sensation.

"How can you feel so amazing?" He teased me, leaving just the tip of his cock in me until I whimpered. He filled me, so deep I gasped, and leaned to sweep my hair aside. His lips fell on my nape, his tongue laving the skin there, and I shivered, overcome by the rasp of his sharp stubble against my ticklish neck. Every cell in my body was on fire for him. Every sense had attuned totally to sex; the video feeding graphic pictures to my brain, the sounds of the actors on the screen mingling with my own harsh breaths. The scent of Neil's cologne had become a powerful aphrodisiac, and it only heightened my desire now. Every centimeter of my skin had come to total awareness, every touch too much and not enough.

He picked up speed, his hand reaching around to caress my throat. He didn't exert any pressure, just left his hand there, possessive over the soft skin of my neck, his thumb brushing up and down in the curve below my ear. A thrill shot through me at the territorial nature of his touch. When we were together like this, I belonged to him, body and soul, though I knew that he would never seek to actually own me. I almost wept at the security of that feeling. Pleasure twisted through me like an arc of lightning, every muscle tightening as I panted and ground back on him. The feeling snapped and writhed, and I writhed with it, tossed in the storm of my own violent climax. It took me a moment to realize the hoarse, half-shouted moans were wrenching from my throat, not the actress on the screen.

My thighs trembled, as did my arms, from the strain of staying up. Before I could collapse, Neil pulled out and gently pushed me to the bed. He tugged down my pants, and I kicked them off with exhausted legs, turning to my back and reaching up for him. He settled between my legs, kissed me, kissed my jaw, my neck, as he sank easily into my body.

His hands found mine and brought them up to either side of my head, threading our fingers together as he moved. I rocked my hips in time to his thrusts, lifted my head to meet his greedy mouth with my own. When he came, his groan was muffled by my lips. His head dropped to my shoulder as his body jerked involuntarily against mine.
He leaned up on his elbows to kiss me, breathing hard, his weight still pinning me to the bed. I giggled, disentangling our hands so I could reach up and touch his face. "You know what would be a terrible obituary? 'Twenty-four year old suffocated under billionaire boyfriend.'"

"Ha ha," he groaned, grimacing as he slipped from my body. The moment he rolled to my side, I got up and crawled toward the head of the bed. "Post-sex snuggle time?"

His eyes were closed, but he smiled. "Give me a moment to get rid of this."

He ditched the condom in the remaining wad of pizza napkins and climbed beneath the covers. He used the remote to stop the video. I cuddled at his side. "This is basically a perfect Friday night."

"I couldn't agree more." He hit a button on the remote, and the lights dimmed as he wrapped his arms around me.

An hour later, we still hadn't moved. I lay sprawled over Neil's chest, while he stroked my hair down my back with one slow hand.

"Do you want to go to the bedroom?" he asked, his voice rough from wine and drowsiness.

"In a minute," I murmured. "I'm all snuggly."

"We can sleep in here, if you like." He suggested, and I heard it through his chest. "I stayed in here many a night while Elizabeth and I were having our differences."

I lifted my head slightly. "Is the divorce final yet?"

"Mmhm." His eyebrows rose. "It was final before I came to Porteras. But as per the terms of the divorce, she had sixty days to move out of this apartment and into the house in L.A."

"Oh." I had a sudden, burning curiosity about this woman I had been trying not to think of for so long. But trying to pretend she never existed wasn't fair to Neil. He'd been through a divorce, very recently. That had to be traumatic. "I hope you don't think that you can't talk to me about all of that. I love you. I don't want you suffering through a difficult time feeling like you can't talk honestly with me."

His hand stilled at my back. "You surprise me so much."

"I'm not trying to surprise you. I'm just trying to be a good friend. Or a good girlfriend, I guess."

He resumed his slow petting of my hair, and I laid my head back down. "Well, I suppose it's only fair to tell you... don't expect Emma to be particularly warm when she's here tomorrow."

"I kind of considered that ship sailed when she accidentally heard us having sex," I reminded him. "She wouldn't have liked you, anyway," he admitted with some reluctance. "She doesn't trust people easily. I think that's my fault. She had a good relationship with Elizabeth, and she was hurt by the way the marriage ended."

"That doesn't seem very fair. You couldn't have a baby just to stay married. Not if you didn't want one."

He wrapped his arm around me to give me a squeeze. "Are you sure you don't mind talking about this?"

"Not at all." I scooted up the bed to lie on the pillow and face him. "Am I supposed to be jealous of your ex? Sensitive about admitting you've been with other people? You're with me now. What would be the point?"

"Fair enough." His small, sad smile pierced my heart. This whole time, he'd been hurting, and he'd hidden it to make things easier for me. "Elizabeth never mentioned her... yearning for motherhood, if I can sarcastically borrow her phrase, in the two years that we dated and later lived together. It was only after we signed a prenuptial agreement that held a clause for child support that the idea seemed to organically occur to her."

"Oh." I didn't know anything about prenuptial agreements. I had no idea they could cover child
support. "I take it that it was a lot?"

"Fifty thousand per month in addition to whatever family court awarded. For two children, it went up to seventy-five thousand, then an additional ten for each child thereafter." His eyes met mine. "When we came back from our honeymoon, she admitted she'd had her IUD removed a few weeks before the wedding. That was a rather difficult blow to my trust."

"But you stayed with her?" I wasn't sure if I could have stayed with someone who seemed to be playing me like that.

"I stayed. For a year, a year and half. It took me a long time to face that our separation wasn't going to end in reconciliation. I wanted to make things work. Partially for Emma. She and Elizabeth hit it off right away, and they were very close." He paused. "And partially for myself. I loved her. I didn't want to believe she'd had her change of heart because of the prenup. I'm still not entirely sure it was. And I believe that Elizabeth's affection for Emma was genuine, but Emma is quite hurt by the whole thing. She's angry at Elizabeth, and at me. I think she blames me for not protecting her from a person who ended up disappointing her."

Emma was my age, so she would have been nineteen or twenty when her father had gotten involved with Elizabeth. "How old is Elizabeth?"

"Thirty-six." He raised an eyebrow. "Don't worry, I don't have a string of twenty-four year olds in my past."

I rolled my eyes at him. "That wasn't what I was worried about. I was just thinking how devastating it would have been for me, at twenty, to make friends with a woman who was older than me, to develop a supportive, encouraging relationship with her, and then have to doubt that friendship. She probably doesn't blame you for not protecting her. She probably blames Elizabeth for hurting you. And herself, for not protecting you."

He studied my face for a moment, and I worried briefly that I might have said the wrong thing and insulted him. Then he said, with a slow smile of admiration, "You're a very intelligent person, Sophie."

"I do okay for myself most of the time." I leaned over and kissed him. "You got divorced. Shit happens. It's not like you got married planning to get divorced. You don't seem like the temporary marriage type. Don't take this the wrong way, but I think you'd make a pretty awesome husband."

"Oh my, that does raise some red flags, coming from a woman who's too afraid of commitment to accept the offer of space in the medicine chest."

He kissed me again, smiling against my mouth. "But I'll hold onto hope."

My stomach lurched. I didn't want to examine that statement too much.
Chapter Twenty

The next morning, Neil and I went through our usual routine. We woke up, pretended we would get out of bed, didn’t, talked about getting out of bed some more, didn’t, then finally got up when it seemed like we might be in serious danger of another weird morning meeting with Emma.

“Since it’s so close to lunch time already, would you mind if we just sent Sue out for bagels?” Neil had to raise his voice over the sound of my hairdryer. He was shaving at his bathroom sink, a towel around his hips, his hair pushed back and wet from the shower.

I shut off the hairdryer and fluffed my mostly-dry brown waves, frowning at myself in the mirror.

“Um, I think I’ll pass on breakfast. Something about meeting your daughter again is giving me serious butterflies.”

“I don’t know why,” he said, frowning as he tilted his head back to drag the razor up his throat. “It isn’t as though I’m looking for a new mother for her. If she doesn’t like you, or if you don’t like her, you’re both adults. I assume you can both be civil to each other.”

“As the day is long,” I agreed, but mentally, I added, **at least I can be.**

Sure, the last time I’d seen Emma had to have been a shock for her. If I had walked into my mother’s house and overheard her having sex with some random stranger, I would have put my head in the oven.

No matter what Neil said, this was his daughter. Her not liking me might affect things between Neil and I more than he anticipated.

I wrapped up the hairdryer cord and took it to my overnight bag to exchange for my curling iron. Okay, so it’s not like I needed to impress Emma. But I would feel a lot better if I looked awesome today.

“This is a treat for me,” I chirped as I plugged in the cord. “I never get to see you shave.”

“Only because you don’t stay the night during the week,” he reminded me. “You’re welcome to stay any time.”

“I know. I still just... need my space. And my sleep.” I grinned at him.

“Fair enough.” I knew from his tone that he was trying to act like my rejection didn’t bother him. He put his razor aside and splashed water onto his face.

While he wiped away the remaining shaving cream with a washcloth, I casually strolled back to my bag. I pulled out my toothbrush. It was still wet from when I had used it that morning. It was also brand new, though I didn’t expect Neil to have noticed. He watched me in the mirror as he patted his face dry, then dropped his gaze to the brushed steel toothbrush holder between the two sinks. I didn’t meet his eyes, but I knew what a big deal this was to him.

He tried so hard to act as disinterested as I was acting nonchalant. Both of us were terrible actors.

A giggle bubbled up my throat as I dropped the toothbrush into the holder. When I looked up, he wiped his face and tossed the towel on the counter. “Come here,” he growled, catching me around the waist. He hauled me onto my tiptoes, and bent his head to kiss me. My fingers dug into his forearms so I could balance.

It seemed so bizarre to me that such a little thing would make him happy. And it was just a toothbrush, after all. A part of my mind argued that it starts with a toothbrush. Then I’d be leaving a pair of shoes, a portion of my wardrobe, then **Bam!** We were living together. I figured I could most likely space out those steps pretty wide, though, and there was no reason we ever had to go beyond “toothbrush,” anyway.

He lifted his head and grinned down at me. “I fucking love you.”
“I fucking love you, too.” I squeezed his arms and stepped back. “Come on, we can’t be naked this time when she gets here.”

Neil was dressed and headed to the kitchen before I was done with my hair, so I hurried to put on a little lip gloss and mascara. I dressed super casual, in jeans and a fitted blue tee. I padded through the foyer on my bare feet, and heard the sound of a key in the door.

I seriously debated running as fast as I could, but I didn’t, because I knew I would get caught. The door opened and Emma stepped in. She forced a smile of resignation, a wordless, *let’s get this over with*, and said, “Hello.”

“Hi,” I said, offering a half-hearted wave.

She stood silently for a moment, shrugged, her eyebrows shooting up as she gestured toward the hallway that led to the other bedrooms. She went in that direction, towing her wheeled suitcase behind her, and I went to the kitchen.

Sue, the housekeeper, was at the kitchen island, grating ginger that smelled like heaven. I was surprised at how effectively the scent calmed my nervous stomach.

Sue was in her thirties, blonde, tan and fit, and probably the best private chef in the city. On top of that, she did the cleaning and the laundry, so I always felt super guilty if we left our clothes strewn across the floor or something. She worked from nine AM until eight in the evening, so some mornings I hurried out of bed and tidied up before she got in.

“Don’t bother to ask her for a crumb, you’ll be cruelly denied,” Neil warned me from the breakfast table.

“You said you wanted lunch at noon. It’s eleven-forty. You missed your window.” Sue winked at me. “I will look the other way if you get yourself a bowl of cereal, Sophie.”

“No thanks.” I didn’t think my guts could handle food with the way my nerves were jumping. I got myself a cup of coffee and slid onto the bench beside Neil. “Emma’s here.”

“Oh?” He looked up, trying to disguise his alarm. “She was headed to her room. We said ‘hi.’ Don’t panic.” I sipped my coffee, trying to be a little center of calm while Sue cooked.

She was nearly finished with lunch by the time Emma came into the kitchen. Neil got up from the table and went to greet her.

“Hello, sweetheart,” he murmured, wrapping her up in a huge hug. “How was your flight?”

“No babies, no hacking coughs.” She shrugged and stepped back, her hands in her pockets. “Hi, Sue.”

“Welcome home, Emma,” Sue said, looking over her shoulder from the stove. Emma’s gaze reluctantly fell on me, because there was nowhere else to go. “Sophie.”

“What else was I going to say?”

“The table is set in the dining room.” Emma gestured over her shoulder with her thumb. “Are we being exceptionally posh for a reason?”

Neil nodded and came back for his coffee. “I thought we might all have lunch together. You could get to know Sophie a little better that way.”

Emma’s eyebrows rose. “What a wonderful idea.”

We moved into the dining room, with Emma leading the way. Neil put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed reassuringly as we passed through the door.

“So, Sophie,” Emma began as she scooted her chair in. She sat to the right of the head of the table, where Neil took his seat. “Are you living here now?”

“What?” I took my chair, to Neil’s left. “No, no, no.”

The corners of Neil’s mouth twitched. “Sophie stays with me on the weekends. We don’t get a chance to spend much time together during the week.”
“Ah.” Emma reached for the carafe of ice water on the table and poured herself a glass. “That explains why the TV room is in shambles.”

A totally unsubtle shade of red crept up Neil’s neck.

“I’m only teasing,” Emma chided. “I think it’s sweet, really. And I’ll be out of your hair tonight.”

“Oh?” Neil lifted an eyebrow, but didn’t meet his daughter’s gaze. “Will you be staying with - “

“With Michael?” she finished for him. “Yes. I’ll be staying with Michael. My boyfriend. Of two years. Surely you don’t have a problem with a twenty-four-year-old woman spending the night with her boyfriend?”

“Touché.”

Sue emerged from the kitchen and set a huge, square black bowl on the table. I had gotten way too used to amazing food. When I went home on Sunday afternoon, I would end up standing over my stove, staring sadly into a little pot of mac and cheese. Neil’s housekeeper had spoiled me into major food dissatisfaction everywhere else.

Lunch was a salad of mixed lettuces, sprouts, and shredded kohlrabi. On top were three chilled fillets of some kind of white fish. Sue dished out the food for us - and brought out a non-fish-touching salad for Emma - and left.

Emma cleared her throat and addressed me. “Sophie, I feel we got off on the wrong foot the last time we met. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize my father was dating anyone, and it came as a bit of a shock. Especially so soon after his divorce.”

I paused mid-chew, and hastily swallowed. I took a sip of my water before I answered. “It’s all right. I honestly don’t know how I would have reacted to catching my mom with a boyfriend like that.”

Oh god, why did I have to bring up the fact she’d heard us having sex? Could the floor just swallow me up, please?

Neil swooped in and saved us. “Sophie is a beauty editor at Porteras,” he said, reaching for his water glass. “They’ve recently gone completely cruelty free.”

“Have they?” Emma speared some lettuce with her fork. “That’s very... forward thinking of you.”

“Mm,” Neil intoned noncommittally. “It was your mother’s idea.” He glanced at me briefly, then down at his plate. “I’m just keeping Porteras warm for her, while she - ”

“Grapples with her inability to do the humane thing and euthanize her old, yappy dog?” Emma rolled her eyes. “How is it working out, Sophie?”

Why was she asking me? How the fuck did she expect me to answer that? Especially now that my head was spinning at the idea of Neil no longer working at Porteras. Why hadn’t he mentioned this to me?

I knew how she expected me to answer, but I didn’t want to lie. Not just to get her on my good side. So I didn’t really answer at all. “It’s been... interesting. It’s been a lot of work, but we’re discovering some cool products we would have never sought out before.”


“Oh, I’m so pleased to hear it,” Emma said, beaming at her father. Then, as she looked back to her plate, she added, “Lots of untried lipsticks to fill up the pages, and in a neat ripple effect, no one sprays poison in a rabbit’s eyes.”

“Emma, could you at least dim your hostility?” Neil asked, sounding perfectly pleasant.

I wondered if all their family lunches went over like this, or if I was the magic ingredient making it all possible.

I was ready to settle in for a rough meal when Emma put down her fork, closed her eyes, and said, “You know what? You’re right. I’m sorry. Sophie, I am sorry. I have been very rude to you.”

“Oh?” I don’t know why I sounded so surprised by that. I already knew she’d been rude. “If it helps
any, I’m very understanding. You could continue being rude to me, and I’d probably get over it.”

“What an odd thing to say.” She smiled, and it was actually genuine. “I like that you’re so honest.”

“No one would ever accuse Sophie of withholding the truth.” Neil said over his water glass.

I thought about Jake and Gabriella and whatever they were scheming, and my guts knotted up. *Shit.* I should have told him last night, exhausted or not. I resolved I would tell him as soon as possible.

“So, how did you guys meet?” Emma sat up in her chair, very straight, and said, “This is me, putting on my ‘taking an interest’ hat. So you’d better make it good.”

I’d just slid a bite of fish into my mouth, so I chewed while Neil answered. “We met at LAX. We were both on the same flight to Tokyo. It got delayed, and we... took the opportunity to get to know each other better.”

“Gross,” she said with a forced smile and a nod. Then her forehead creased with confusion. “Wait, you haven’t gone to Tokyo since we went last year. Were you and Elizabeth-“

Neil looked like a man who could see the train coming, but he just couldn’t get off the tracks in time.

Well, she’d liked my honesty before. I hoped she would still appreciate it now. “It was before they got together, actually.”

Her narrowed gaze slid to her father, who was swallowing water at a rapid rate. “Exactly how long before?”

“Six years ago. We met six years ago. I was eighteen,” I stated firmly, before Neil could try to bluff his way out of his daughter’s interrogation. Better to get it all out now, I figured. “If it makes you feel any better, I told him I was twenty-five.”

Emma pushed her plate back and slowly folded her hands in her lap. “This was a lovely salad. It’s a shame I won’t be able to finish it.”

“The way Sophie and I met...” Neil paused and released a resigned sigh. “Things happened the way they happened, and I don’t regret any of it. That’s all I can say without digging myself a deeper grave.”

I snorted. “Look, it’s weird. It’s incredibly weird. Let’s just face that fact and move on.”

“Good idea,” Emma agreed reasonably. She smoothed her napkin in her lap. She forced a smile at her dad. “Mum wanted to know if you’re coming for Christmas, and if you were, would you be bringing anyone?”

As she asked the question, her gaze slowly drifted over to me, in the most obvious way possible. Neil answered cautiously. “We... Haven’t discussed anything yet. Tell your mother I’ll talk to her this week.”

“Oh, you and Emma’s mom have Christmas together?” I don’t think my mom and dad had ever even been in the same room together after he’d left us.

“Every year,” Neil explained. “We tried to parent Emma as a team as much as possible, even after we separated.”

“That’s really cool.” My heart hurt a little. Emma was so lucky to have had a father. But it was totally weird to think of Neil in that context, at the same time. Here was a woman my age, who saw him in a completely different light than I did. A context I could never understand, because I hadn’t had a father. Maybe that’s why this felt so weird.

“I’m going to go grab my sweater,” I said, pushing back from the table. “I’ll just be second.”

I’d left my loose, comfy sweater on the counter in Neil’s bathroom. It had kind of been my escape plan, if I felt the need to get away gracefully. I’d thought it had worked, but then I heard a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I called, and quickly touched up my lip gloss in the mirror, so he’d think that’s what had taken me so long.
“I am so sorry to spring that question about Christmas on you,” Neil said as he stepped up behind me. “Valerie asked me last week. I was meaning to bring it up, but I couldn’t think of a way to do it without frightening you off.”

“It’s okay. For all you know, I don’t celebrate Christmas. I might be in a Satanic cult.”

“You could come along,” he suggested. “Stay a week at my country house. We could celebrate the new year in Paris.”

My head spun at the thought. I had only been to Paris once, and that had been on business for the magazine. I hadn’t had the chance to really enjoy the whole experience. I was dying to go back.

But Christmas with a romantic partner? That was a bit heavy, considering we’d just started seeing each other in October.

I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. I turned and reached up to put my arms around his neck. “Thank you. That’s very sweet. But I’ll be spending the holiday with my family back in Michigan.”

He scrunched his face up in embarrassment. “Yes, of course. I’m sorry, that was stupid of me.”

“Nah.” I shook my head and rose on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek before I turned back to the mirror. “It’s easy to forget that we don’t actually live in our little fortress of solitude, isn’t it?”

“Would that we could.” He stepped closer, trapping me between his body and the edge of the counter. “After the holidays, then. Let me take you away somewhere.”

I tilted my head to the side as he bent to nuzzle my neck. The feeling of his lips brushing my skin, the smoothness of his shaved face, pulled a sigh from deep in my chest. “Is it that easy? You just decide we’ll run away to somewhere exciting, and we go?”

“Do you have a passport?” he murmured against my neck.

“Mmmhm.” God, the things he could do to me with those lips, that voice. He could have proposed a trip to Siberia in January, and I would have agreed.

“Then it’s that simple. If you wanted to go.”

My stomach turned over with dread. It all sounded fine and romantic now, but what would happen after I told him about Jake and Porteras? I had to tell him, even if this wasn’t the most convenient time.

“Listen... there’s something I have to–”

“Sophie?”

I frowned at the sound of Emma’s voice. I heard her knock on the bedroom door, and Neil guiltily stepped back.

“In here,” I called back cheerfully. Ugh, I really hope she didn’t think we’d been getting up to something.

I hurried out, into Neil’s bedroom, as she opened the door cautiously. “Your phone was ringing. They called eight times in a row, so I thought it must have been an emergency.”

“You didn’t think it was an emergency the fourth time?” Neil teased her, and I shot him a look. I didn’t want him to chastise Emma, even in jest, for anything having to do with me. Not when we were at an uneasy peace about our weird situation.

“Who the hell would call me eight times in a row?”

The screen of my phone lit up like a light bulb over my head, and the dreaded ringtone started playing. “Imperial March” from The Empire Strikes Back. I’d changed it in a fit of pique on the first day Neil’s company had taken over Porteras.

“Sophie, you’re white as a sheet,” Neil said in alarm. I swayed on my feet and he steered me to the sofa.

“It’s Gabriella,” I said, feeling legitimately dizzy. I’d always heard the term “triggered” applied to stuff that reminded people of horrible things in their past. I didn’t think there was a single thing in my life that had been so psychologically scarring that I would have an anxiety attack to be reminded of it.
But Gabriella’s number was on the screen, and she was waiting for me to take her call.

“Emma, can you excuse us?” Neil asked softly. Emma left and closed the door behind her, and he sat beside me on the couch while I stared at the phone in my palm. It went to voicemail, and within seconds, the ringtone sounded again.

Neil nudged my knee with his. “It might be important.”

“It might not. She could be calling ten times in a row because she can’t remember the phone number for her dog’s acupuncturist.” I tried to laugh, but it came out as a sob. I dropped my head to my unoccupied hand, mortified. I was crying in front of Neil. Jesus Christ, I was crying in front of him.

“Sophie...” he sounded as alarmed as I felt. His arms went around my shoulders awkwardly. “I didn’t realize you were so...”

“Cowed by my old boss?” I laughed sadly and wiped my eyes, pulling out of his embrace. “Hey, guess what, I have been the submissive in a relationship before. I just got paid for it.”

That depressed me so much, I cried harder. Neil took my phone from my hands, swore at it, and muted the ringer.

“What’s going on?” he asked gently. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

I felt so horrible. He’d praised my honesty over lunch. To his daughter. Whose trust he was trying to earn back. “Look, there’s something I have to tell you, and when I do, I’m afraid you won’t like me very much.”

He looked slightly alarmed. “Sophie, I can’t think of anything that would make me not like you. But if it’s really that bad, perhaps you’d better just say whatever it is, so we can get the fight out of the way now.”

“You’re scheduling our fights?” I couldn’t help my tearful burble of laughter. “Okay, just... remember that I love you, okay?”

The phone was ringing again. I reached for it, silenced it, and when I set it aside, he took my hands. I’d never seen him look so cautious, like he was braced for something really horrible, but he didn’t want to believe it would be as bad as he anticipated. Then I realized I probably looked just the same.

“Remember Jake Kirchner?” I looked into Neil’s eyes for some kind of acknowledgement. His mouth parted, and a vertical line appeared between his eyebrows. He didn’t remember, and he was going to try a guess. I rolled my eyes. “The editor who resigned this week?”

“Yes, oh. The insufferable one who always wedged Truman Capote references into as many conversations as possible.” He shook his head in amusement then froze. “You told Rudy to keep an eye on him. I assume this phone call has something to do with his resignation?”

“Jake left Porteras because he’s going to work with Gabriella on a project.” I took a deep breath. I figured I might as well get it all out. “She’s starting up her own magazine. That’s where your advertisers are going. She’s going to crib Porteras’s subscribers and you’re going to have to fold. She’s got someone who can feed her the subscription list, but I swear to God, Neil, it’s not me.”

“Well, I didn’t expect that.” Neil pinched the bridge of his nose. “How long have you known about all this?”

“I had a vague idea something was going on while you were in London taking care of your mom,” I admitted. “That’s why I told Rudy to keep an eye on Jake. And I wanted to tell you about the subscription list, but you looked so tired and things were going so well with us... I didn’t want to stress you out any more.”

He looked hurt. I wasn’t prepared for that.

“Jake is trying to get me a job with Gabriella’s new organization. He told me earlier this week and I hadn’t made up my mind, so... I felt like I couldn’t tell you.” I’d picked my job over our relationship. This kind of thing probably happened all the time with people who dated coworkers, right?
Except... Neil wasn’t just a coworker. He was my boss.

“Oh shit,” I whispered. “I just told my boss that I was conspiring with a competing publication.”

He didn’t look at me. He pulled his hands away from mine. Very quietly, like he was fighting for control, he said, “Sophie. You’re fired.”

I considered it a personal victory that I didn’t start crying again. My biggest worry was that if I cried, Neil wouldn’t actually fire me, and that would make me feel all manipulative and shitty. I already felt manipulative and shitty enough.

“Answer your phone. We’ll talk about this, but I need a moment to myself.” He got up and left the room, and I wondered if I was supposed to run after him.

No. He needed a moment, I would give him one. And I would see what the hell Gabriella wanted.

I took a deep breath. The phone was ringing again. I answered it.

“I don’t remember it ever taking twelve calls to get in touch with the Sophie I knew.” Gabriella spoke slowly, dragging each word out like honey dripping from a bottle. “I hope this isn’t a indication of what I can expect in the future.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t near my phone.” Why was I apologizing? I didn’t work for her anymore. I didn’t have to answer the damn phone if I didn’t feel like it. Given my current state of unemployment, I wasn’t going to mention that part.

“The details don’t concern me. I need you to meet me for brunch tomorrow afternoon. One o’clock. My assistant will text you the restaurant.”

And then she hung up. I don’t know what I was expecting, but I’d thought she might not treat me like her employee, since I wasn’t anymore. I guess that faith was woefully misplaced.

I found Neil in the living room. A few weeks ago, he’d replaced the white couches Elizabeth had chosen with a black leather sofa and matching armchairs with deep seats that were perfect for curling up in, but which probably infuriated his daughter. Neil was on the couch, slouched in the corner of it, one foot up on the cushion, his wrist braced on his bent knee as he stared at the flames in the fireplace.

“Hey,” I said from the door.

He looked up. “That was fast.”

“She just wanted to ask me to lunch tomorrow.” I shrugged. Then, without thinking, I blurted, “I’ll probably go home tonight. You know, be well- rested.”

He gazed silently at me for a long time. I felt like I was on trial. I suppose I did that to myself, so I endured it.

Finally, he said, “Please keep in mind as we have this conversation that I do still love you, and I am in no way suggesting we end our relationship. I would rather cut off my own thumb than break up with you.”

“So, fired from the magazine, not fired as your girlfriend. Got it.” I breathed a long, shaky sigh of relief.

That struck me as odd. I wasn’t as bothered about losing my job as I would have been by losing Neil? Where the fuck were my priorities?

“But,” he began, and he let that “but” hang between us a moment. “You didn’t tell me you had a potential job offer at a competing company. And you knew the situation was serious. I can’t help but feel a bit betrayed.”

“It wasn’t personal,” I said quickly. “Please, don’t feel like I was thinking I would pull something behind your back.”

He nodded. “I don’t think that. I think that you considered your career options, and you considered how this might affect our relationship, and you chose your career.”

“Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do?” I thought that was what I was supposed to do. Not give up
career opportunities for a guy, not let love get in the way of business... It’s how I’d ordered my
priorities. “I love you, Neil, but I didn’t want to throw away an opportunity for myself because I was
dating you.”

“You didn’t have to throw away the opportunity. But you could have at least had the decency to
give me some clue, some warning.” He got up from the couch and went to the door, shutting it firmly. I
had the same sense that he did, that this conversation might get... loud.

“I did give you warning,” I reminded him. “I told you the way Porteras was running, you were
going to have trouble. And we weren’t supposed to talk about business, remember?”

“That is such bullshit, Sophie. You offered conjecture on the future of the magazine when you knew
there was a greater threat that actually existed. And the only reason you didn’t tell me was because you
apparently didn’t trust me to handle the problem in a way that wouldn’t cause negative consequences for
you. I have been a far better boss than Gabriella, and your loyalty still lies with her.”

So, this was a professional beef? I didn’t know how to get around that one. “I told Rudy. I followed
the chain of command at Porteras for this kind of thing. I wouldn’t have done anything different if I’d
still been working under Gabriella.”

“I think,” he began, weighing each word carefully before he said them, “that you’re right when you
say you were submissive to Gabriella. In a purely non-sexual, and a completely unhealthy way. What
job has she offered you?”

Oh, this wasn’t going to be fun to admit. “She hasn’t offered me any job, yet. Jake thought she
might want me to come back as her assistant.”

He nodded slowly. “So, you risked your job at Porteras and your relationship with me to be an
assistant to a demanding, borderline abusive boss who calls you until you cry? When you’re already a
beauty editor with my publication?”

“Assistant beauty editor,” I reminded him quietly.

“Then maybe it is better that you don’t work for me, after all.”

“You’re right. That was a sad truth we were going to have to face eventually, anyway. I can’t work
with you and look out for myself. I’m always going to be in a position where I can spy for you, so I’m
always going to be wondering if I should use what I know for me, or for you.”

“Spy for me?” he was audibly disgusted. “I have asked you to do no such thing!”

“You’re asking me to right now!” How couldn’t he see that? “You want me to be your girlfriend
some of the time, your employee the rest of the time.”

“You’re asking me the same thing!” His gaze shifted to the door, and he lowered his voice. “You
don’t want me to treat you differently than any other employee, but when I don’t listen to your
doomsday predictions for the magazine, you’re hurt and offended.”

I was hurt and offended now. Not because he wasn’t right. He was. We were clearly two people
who were not equipped to navigate the oceans of ethical problems we had made for ourselves.

“I think our situations are a little different here. I’m making the choice to fight for my forty-
 thousand a year job, you might take a hit on a few of the millions sitting in your bank account.”

“Billions,” he was infuriatingly quick to correct. “And I regret to inform you that forty-thousand is
far less than a few million. I still have more to lose. Besides, do you really believe that you would be in
danger of homelessness or starvation if you lost your job?”

“Yes, Neil, that’s what people do! If they don’t have as much as you do, people start to care about
losing a paltry sum like forty-thousand dollars!” I didn’t care if Emma overheard, or Sue in the kitchen.
“And if they lose their jobs, they sometimes lose their apartments or their friends when they can’t repay
rent money.”

He pushed his hand through his hair. I had never seen him this angry, even when we’d argued in the
that morning he’d cut his hand. “And you could prevent all of that from happening with a phone call. If things were really bad, if you were going to be thrown onto the street, you could come to me! But you don’t want to admit it, because you know that if you asked me for anything, if you asked me for a million dollars right this instant, I would give it to you. I would do that because I love you, and that terrifies you because you don’t want to love me!”

I felt like someone had jammed their shoulder directly into my sternum. I thought I might have trouble breathing, but luckily, the pain was completely emotional. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You do it with everyone in your life. Do you really think Holli will kick you into the street? No, of course you don’t really think that, but the thought makes it easier to hold her at arm’s length rather than trust that she loves you and would never treat you that way. When people care about you, you get scared. It’s why you’ve never had a serious relationship before. And you’re doing it to me now.” He looked so... wounded.

He swallowed, and his voice sounded painfully dry when he spoke again. “You knew I would be furious with you over something like this.”

“You are furious,” I pointed out. My vision got all wavy. No. I was not, under any circumstances, going to start crying.

“No.

I was not, under any circumstances, going to start crying.

Why? Because then he’ll see you’re vulnerable? And he’ll know he’s someone worth crying over?

Oh god. He was right. He was completely right.

“Yes. I’m incredibly angry with you right now. But I’m not stupid, Sophie, and neither are you. You knew you should have told me what was happening at Porteras, but you were too afraid to admit that you might care about me more than you care about your job!” He paused, clearly frustrated. “I love you. If you had come to me and told me this was going on, I wouldn’t have prevented you from leaving the company to work for Gabriella again. I wouldn’t have liked it, but I wouldn’t have stopped you. I trust you to do what’s right for you. You can trust me to do what’s right for you, too.”

That made the tears start flowing. Damnit.

He came over and took me in his arms, and I didn’t resist him. He held me and let me cry all over his shirt that had probably cost more than my rent. He kissed the top of my head. “I don’t want you to go home tonight.”

“I don’t want to go home, either.” I buried my face against his chest and gratefully accepted the tightening of his arm around me. “I hate fighting with you.”

“We’ll get past this. It will still be a sore spot for me, for a while, but we will get past it. Just promise me that you won’t let Gabriella suck you in again. You deserve better than the way she treated you.” He paused. “Make sure you get anything she offers in writing. Benefits, salary, bonuses - “

“Neil?” I said gently, looking up. “I’m sorry. It’s very difficult for me not to - “

“Meddle?” I laughed through my tears. He sighed. “I was going to say help you avoid major mistakes.” “I don’t want to avoid major mistakes. This is my life. I only have one chance to live it, and I’d like to be the one in the driver’s seat. I love you. But I don’t want you to live my life for me.”

At least he had the sense to look remorseful.

I knew what I was going to say next before I fully committed to saying it. I had never bared my feelings so honestly to anyone before. But I had to. It was crucial that Neil know how important he was to me, especially now that I had totally fucked him over. And especially now that I knew I’d done it on purpose to push him away.

“I want you to live my life with me,” I finished, and I felt like my heart was going to leap from my throat, I was so scared. This completely contradicted the “safe relationship path” chart I had drawn up in my head, but I didn’t care.
He took a breath. I couldn’t read the emotions that crossed his face. Finally, he simply smiled and said, “I want the same thing, Sophie.”

“Good.” That helped ease some of the sick feeling. “I’m really sorry for not telling you.”

“I know you didn’t do it to deliberately hurt me.” He released me and stepped back. “You did it because you were protecting yourself. It might not seem so to you, but there is a world of difference between the two. I’m angry and hurt, and I’m not entirely forgiving you at this moment, but knowing why you did it helps.”

“And I can appreciate why you fired me.” Ow, it stung a bit to say it now. The shock was wearing off.

We sat together on the couch in silence for a while, both of us clearly unhappy with how the day had gone, both of us desperately wanting to make it all different, without really knowing how.

“I have to call Rudy,” Neil said suddenly, forcing some cheerfulness into his voice. “This may take a while. But why don’t we go out tonight? Emma is going to be busy with horrible Michael. You and I could go see a movie or have dinner out. Anything from sitting around and stewing about this.”

In a strange way, it was a relief that he wasn’t my boss anymore. Now he could just be my boyfriend, and I could just be his girlfriend.

Even if things were strained between us at the moment.

Of course, this meant my lunch with Gabriella tomorrow would be life-or-death. Okay, life-or-unemployment. Same difference.
"Look at you," Neil said with a low whistle as I leaned close to the mirror, applying eyeliner. "You never get this dressed up on the weekend for me."

"Because I don't have to." I blinked a few times. The cold sensation of the liquid at the edge of my eyelid faded as it dried. "You like me with or without."

"That I do." He'd been leaning against the sink, watching me, seemingly fascinated by the whole process as I put on my makeup. I suspected he just liked watching me. "If Gabriella Winters had any intelligence at all, she would appreciate you the same way."

"Well, hopefully she'll appreciate me sans earrings, because I didn't bring any." I frowned, and hoped I could keep my hair from moving for the entire lunch, so she wouldn't notice.

"I might be able to help with that." Neil straightened and went out of the bathroom. By the time he returned, I'd applied my mascara. I noticed the distinctive light-blue box in his hand. He turned it around in his palm and cautiously met my gaze in the mirror. "This was supposed to be a Christmas gift, but... I think it might make a better good luck charm."

Nothing on this planet would ever riddle me with such anxiety as the sight of Neil holding a small jewelry box with an earnest expression on his face. He lifted the lid and took out a blue velvet drawstring bag, which he up-ended into his palm. When two gleaming stud earrings shook out, I had to forcibly stop my sigh of relief.

"Oh my god." I stared down at the truly beautiful gems in their gleaming round settings. "Is that white gold?"

"Platinum, and pink sapphires." He held them out to me. "Do you like them?"

"They're absolutely beautiful." I took them, feeling oddly choked up. "Neil, this is too much."

"You don't want me to tell you how to live your life, don't tell me how to spend my money," he scolded gently, leaning forward to kiss my cheek. "I know that you will do beautifully today. Gabriella is a fool if she doesn't hire you."

I admired the earrings a moment before putting them on, and Neil continued, "Of course, I think you might be a bit of a fool to consider working for her when I've offered to help you find another job..."

"That's enough," I warned sweetly. After our near nuclear fight the day before, we'd come to a truce. He wouldn't give me unsolicited career advice, and if I got into dire financial straits, I would remember to ask him for help before doing anything drastic like a high interest credit card.

"I'm sorry we fought." He said quietly. "Those... might be a bit of an apology as well."

I smiled as I fastened the back of one stud. "I'm not sorry, actually. It was nice to have a fight with my boyfriend, not my boss. I didn't have to hold back."

He gave me that half-smile and watched as I put on the other earring.

Then, softer, I said, "These are beautiful. Thank you so much."

He came to stand behind me, his arms encircling my waist. "I love you, Sophie. No matter how we might fight, I love you. We're having some growing pains, but I'd much rather argue than not talk about our problems. That didn't work out so well for me the last time."

My heart did a ridiculous little flutter. He wanted us to work out. To what end, I didn't know, and I didn't want to speculate. Things were moving pretty fast already.

"Is this the part where I mention the super awesome make-up sex?" I giggled. "I want to make sure I've got my clichés right."

"I think this is the part where you're going to be late for your lunch, and I'm going to be late for my
meeting, if we don't behave ourselves." He gave me one last peck on the cheek and went to his closet to dress.

The meeting he was having at *Porteras* this afternoon was an emergency one he'd arranged last night. He was going to meet with the rest of management and discuss the information I'd given him - and my firing. They were also planning to uncover just who was stealing the subscriber list. A lot of the staff had worked up from the mailroom, or assistant positions that'd had access to the list. Ferreting out the culprit was going to be difficult.

I put the meeting out of my mind, to focus on my own. Neil would be out most of the afternoon, but we'd made dinner plans. I hoped everything would be sewn up by then, so we could get back to normal.

My phone buzzed, and I picked it up. It was a text from Holli: *Some raccoons have moved into your room, is it cool if they stay there?*

I snorted and shot back: *I'll be home today. BTW I got fired.*

Almost immediately, she responded: *Whaaaaaaaaaaaatat?*

It would be easier to explain in person.

* * * *

Gabriella wanted to meet at a brunch place in the Meat Packing district. It was part French bistro, part daylight-hours nightclub. There was a line outside the door, but when I gave my name to the runway model-looking hostess, I was ushered right inside.

Gabriella, Jake, and Penelope sat at a corner table in the busy dining room. Gabriella and Penelope had taken the tall-backed booth seat against the wall, while Jake was installed in one of the chairs on the other side. They were all well-dressed, impeccably groomed, luxuriating in an air of their own self-importance that was bolstered by the timid glances and whispers at the tables around them.

They looked like fucking vampires.

"Sophie, it's so nice to see you again." Gabriella rose from her chair and leaned over the table when I approached, kissing the air on either side of my face. She'd never greeted me quite so effusively. I wasn't sure she'd ever actually greeted me, come to think of it. Her chin-length, ruby red bob swayed like the pendulum in Poe's story as she sat back down.

"Sophie, you look good," Jake said, standing to pull me into a hug. I went along with it, because to him, we were still old friends. He didn't know I thought he'd become an insufferable dick. "You look great, have you lost weight?"

"Um. No?" I smoothed the front of my jacket. "Did you think I needed to lose weight?"

*Wow, moody much?* I couldn't figure out why, but for some reason, everything anybody said lately poked the badger. Probably because I was so tired and stressed out.


As I took my seat at the table, I realized what my problem was. I'd been working with real people, spending time with real people. Gabriella and Jake were just broadly drawn caricatures of their own making. It was so sad that they couldn't see how ridiculous it all was. It made me even sadder to think that I'd bought into their "we're so important" clique mentality for my entire career so far. Had I really wanted to be just like them? Did I still?

The thought made me queasy. But then, I was always queasy lately. I was pretty sure I was getting a stress ulcer.

Caricatures or not, they were willing to give me a job. So I needed to nod, smile and play along. I had spent two years swallowing my opinion of Gabriella Winters; I could go another ten if I had to.

"How have you been finding *Porteras*, Sophie? Be honest." Gabriella's huge blue eyes narrowed as she waited to scrutinize my answer. There wasn't a single line on her face, but I got the impression she was frowning.
I could be honest. I didn't work there anymore. "Well... I was promoted to assistant beauty editor - "
"I know all this." Gabriella waved her hand. "What I want to hear is how the magazine is doing internally."

"Oh. Well, there are some growing pains." I knew that wasn't what she wanted to hear. She wanted me to openly condemn the new company and give her secrets she could weaponize. Whether I still worked for Porteras or not, I wasn't about to sabotage Neil for their sakes. "I think they're going to lose some subscribers as they continue to tinker with the format, but they'll attract new ones, as well. There is a market for cruelty-free fashion, and I'm proud that Porteras is going to be on the cutting edge of that movement."

"How... diplomatic of you." Gabriella looked amused at my answer.

"And is Elwood giving you any more problems?" Jake asked. To his credit he sounded actually concerned. I had to give him a bit of a break there; he didn't know Neil and I were dating. From his point of view, he'd seen me come out of the boss's locked office all shaken up and flushed and freaked out. Then I'd gotten a promotion the next week.

Better to clear that up right away. "I never had a problem with Mr. Elwood. I barely worked for him at all before I was promoted, and that was on Gabriella's recommendation. And thank you so much for that, Gabriella. It really meant a lot to me that you thought me capable of the job."

She gave me a benevolent smile. "I knew you'd do well there, Sophie. It wasn't a favor to promote you."

A waiter came over with menus, and I tucked my hair behind my ear as I scanned it. Almost immediately, I noticed Penelope's eyes light up.

Penelope and I had gotten along okay when she'd been second assistant in Gabriella's office. Tall and willowy with ginger hair and cat-like green eyes, she had often been mistaken for a model in her early days at Porteras. But she had a photographer's eye for detail, and she zeroed in now on the pink sapphire winking in my ear. "What lovely earrings. Tiffany, right?"

"Oh my, Neil Elwood must pay his assistant editors much better than I did," Gabriella murmured, raising one eyebrow and pursing her lips as her gaze flickered over the menu. I honestly don't know why she ever bothered to look at the damn things; any restaurant in New York would make her whatever she asked for, and she knew it.

I ordered a cheddar and kale salad with baked eggs. Gabriella had her customary salmon. Jake, having the totally unfair metabolism of a dude, got eggs benedict with the muffins swapped out for portobello caps, and Penelope stuck to water, since she was doing a detoxifying cleanse. As we ate, we chatted amiably about what Gabriella had been up to since leaving Porteras.

As much as working for her had stressed me out, I did like Gabriella. I respected the hell out of her for getting what she wanted out of life, and not allowing the usual roadblocks of gender and stereotype to hold her back. And I had to admire how quickly she'd gotten a new magazine organized and staffed, even if their first issue wasn't due until February.

"It will be completely digital," she said with languid pride. "I must admit, I've never liked the idea of a totally paperless publication. I thought it cheapened the brand when Porteras began offering a digital edition, but we just weren't thinking outside of the box then. Jake has shown me that a magazine can be beautifully presented, with quality content, and transcend the limitations of print."

"Wow, Jake. I had no idea you were so talented with the computer stuff," I said, truly impressed.

He smirked and lifted his water glass to his lips, pausing before he drank to say, "Well, in my new role at Mode, I'm able to take some pretty big risks."

"You're welcome," Gabriella said easily. She dropped her napkin on her plate. "Sophie, you could be taking those risks, as well. How would you feel about... assistant creative director?"
I was so grateful I didn't have a mouthful of anything, because I would have sprayed it all over the table.
"Excuse me?" I looked from Gabriella to Jake. Across the table, Penelope was smiling the benign smile of someone content to wait for her day to come. "You're not serious."
"Totally serious, Sophie," Jake assured me, looping one arm over my shoulders in a buddy-buddy gesture. "I told Gabriella about the work you've been doing in the beauty department, and how hard it's been for you guys to find worthwhile products to feature. She picked up the January issue - "
"Ghastly," Gabriella said under her breath. "Not your section, of course."
"And we agreed that with the parameters you've been given, you exceeded beyond expectation," Jake continued.
"Right, but there are two other people working with me in the beauty department. It's not just my work you're looking at. India does a great job - "
"India does a great job drinking during the work day," Gabriella said, her gaze sliding slyly to Penelope, who smirked and shook her head. "And we already have Jessica Nguyen working for us in another capacity. Sophie, I'm not going to beg you. You either trust me when I say that I know you can do the job and accept the position, or you toddle out of here and go back to Porteras."
"She can't go back to Porteras," Penelope said, sipping her coffee. "You're getting fired, aren't you?"
My stomach dropped. "How the hell could you possibly know that? It just happened."
"Twenty minutes ago." She held up her phone, displaying a text message. It said, Scaife's out.
"Who - " I shook my head. Who wasn't important. Well, it was. But that would be important later.
"I had an idea I was getting canned."
"Because of your involvement with Neil Elwood?" Gabriella asked quietly.
"What? No. I'm not involved with him." I looked to Jake, because I couldn't handle the pointed stares from the other side of the table.
He shifted uncomfortably and couldn't meet my eyes.
"Jake tells me you had a locked-door interlude with Elwood," Gabriella said, fixing me with her x-ray vision that I swore would see right into my soul. "Your work attendance changed drastically once he was installed. You took a long lunch with him on the second day he was there, and you took two half-days and a sick day..."
"I was a little shaken by the fact that the boss I liked working for suddenly wasn't my boss anymore, and I didn’t know how secure my job was," I said, as politely as possible. "How do you know all of this?"
"Half the remaining staff at Porteras is still loyal to Gabriella, Soph," Jake said, looking utterly baffled that I didn't realize this myself. "It's not like they're unwilling to share this information."
How the fuck had this gone from a job interview, no, a job offer, to a goddamned interrogation by the Mean Girls clique?
"And those are very expensive earrings," Penelope observed.
"No one is condemning you, Sophie. We're simply concerned that your loyalties might not lie in the right place." Gabriella studied me as though she were going to paint me from memory later. "You understand, of course, that future involvement with Mr. Elwood, or any employee of an Elwood and Stern company, will be... discouraged, should you accept my offer?"
"There's nothing to discourage," I insisted. Shit. Would she hire a private investigator to follow me? Or would she just have one of her simpering sycophants do it?
That made me feel bad. Not too long ago, I'd been one of those sycophants. How often had I done things for her that had hurt my co-workers? Probably plenty, and without question, because I’d wanted
to be good at my job. My mind raced over all the times she'd asked me to keep an eye on the elevators, to see what time this editor or that assistant arrived to work. The times she'd sent me on errands to fashion houses and asked me who'd been waiting in the lobby with me. Probably all those times had been about espionage more than errands.

Holy fuck, I'd been living in a freaking soap opera and I'd never noticed. Because I had wanted the glamor and the drama, or maybe I had thought I was supposed to want it.

I felt super dizzy. I gulped down some water and hoped my face didn't look as red as it felt. "It isn't that I don't want the job," I began cautiously. "Obviously I need a job, since I'm unemployed. But I really have to think about this. It's such a huge responsibility, and I don't want to take it lightly. Can I let you know tomorrow?"

"That's reasonable, right, Gabriella?" Jake asked nervously. She sighed. "I really had hoped for more enthusiasm. But then, your cautious nature was one of the reasons I hired you as my assistant."

We chatted a bit more, but it was clear that as the point had been reached, the "interview" was over. Jake offered to walk me out, and while I didn't want to be anywhere near him, I couldn't refuse.

"Listen... is there anything going on with you and Neil Elwood?" Jake asked. "You seem... off. And you didn't exactly laugh at those accusations."

"Because they're not funny," I said firmly as he hailed a cab for me. "I don't have to sleep around to be successful."

"Fine, fine. I won't ask again." He held his hands up. A taxi coasted up to the curb, and I reached for the door as Jake continued, "Don't blow this, Sophie, that could be the biggest mistake of your life."

"No pressure." I tried not to snap, but I bet I sounded snappish. "I really am going to have to think about this. It's a major decision."

"And you have to check with Neil Elwood?" The corner of Jake's mouth lifted in a wry smile, like he had caught me doing something I shouldn't have.

Okay, sleeping with my boss was something I shouldn't have done. Getting into a relationship with him, that was worse. But I didn't regret it for an instant, and no job was worth losing what I had with Neil or hurting him further. My mind was already made up, now I just wanted to get the hell away from these people. "Goodbye, Jake."

I didn't look back at him as I got into the cab.

* * *

Meeting Neil for dinner should have been refreshingly stress free. For the first time, I wasn't worried about running into someone from work. In a city of eight million people, it was strangely easy to get caught by someone you least wanted to see when you were doing the thing you least wanted to get caught doing. Tonight, we could honestly say that we didn't work together.

I was at the restaurant, a cozy, intimate place with soft lighting and a quiet dining room, for about twenty minutes without any sign of Neil. Which was totally bizarre; barring that one time I beat him to his apartment after work, he was never late. I checked my phone. He hadn't called me.

That struck me as odd. Surely he couldn't still be tied up at Porteras. Wouldn't he have let me know?

I tried not to keep my eyes on the door, but I spotted him the moment he came into view. He looked apologetic and ashamed as he approached, but he looked tired, too. Definitely not himself.

"I am so sorry." He slid into the seat across from me. "We had a hell of a day, and I completely forgot we were meeting for dinner."

"Ouch," I said under my breath. "How quickly we go from 'I fucking love you,' to 'I forgot about you.'"
His face scrunched up as he realized how what he'd said had sounded. "No. No, I'm sorry, that didn't..." He took a deep breath through his nose, as though mentally wiping the slate clean. "I'm sorry I didn't call. I'm not feeling right."

"Another headache?" I realized I was leaning forward slightly, examining him, as though I could diagnose his illness.

"I have to remember to schedule an appointment to see someone." He reached across the table and took my hand in his. His thumb brushed across my knuckles, and I drew a shaky breath.

I was making the right choice, turning down Gabriella's offer, wasn't I? A part of me was disappointed that when the chips were down, when I had to make a really important decision about us, charming, panty-melting Neil hadn't shown up to dinner to make the choice easier. In his place, weird, stand-offish Neil-with-a-headache had turned up. Another part of me was glad it was playing out this way. Because the shine of a new relationship wasn't going to last forever, and I needed to be able to make my choice about this job - and Gabriella's ridiculous requirement - with that in mind. Would I turn down the offer if I knew Neil and I wouldn't be together in three months? Right now, where I was sitting, after waiting twenty minutes for a no-call, no-show boyfriend... the answer was still yes. I loved him, insane as it probably was to love someone I'd only been in a relationship with for a two months. But something about us just worked. I couldn't imagine not being with him in three months. I couldn't imagine not being with him in three years. It just seemed right that we were together, and I suspected he felt the same way.

"Don't worry about it. You had a stressful day." I shrugged. "It's not like we're going to always be perfect."

He squeezed my hand before releasing it to pick up his menu. "I had a stressful day? I wasn't the one interviewing for a job. How did it go?"

"It went... not great." I wasn't sure how much I should tell him about the reason it hadn't gone great. Though Neil had agreed to let me make my own mistakes and not meddle, it would be a lot easier for him to say he was going to stop meddling than to actually do it. "She offered me a job, but I'm not going to take it."

"Why not?"

"I wouldn't want to work with them again. It was uncomfortable for me, sitting there with them, being aware of how important they found themselves. They're the center of their own little world, still, and I was expected to fawn over them and try to earn their approval. I guess when I worked for Gabriella before, I got so used to that expectation that I didn't see anything weird about it."

"And they are convinced I'm sleeping with you."

"You are sleeping with me," he observed.

"But they have no reason to believe that. They had all this supposed evidence, like the fact that I took a sick day... it was just stupid, inconsequential stuff. But their little spies had come to this conclusion for them, so Gabriella offered me this job on the condition that I break things off with you. Even after I lied and said we weren't dating."

The look I had been dreading crossed Neil's face, a darkening expression like a thunderhead of over-thinking rolling right in to spoil our dinner. "What job did she offer you, exactly?"

I took a sip of water from the stemmed glass in front of me. "Assistant creative director of her new magazine."

"Good lord." He shook his head. "Well, I suppose this calls for a congratulations?"

"I'm not taking it," I stated firmly. "She's trying to control what I do in my private life. And Jake is just as bad. I thought we were friends, but I guess I didn't notice how obnoxious he was until I started"
"I don't think there are any normal people at Porteras," Neil opined. "Myself, included. I cannot wait until Valerie is able to take it off my hands."

I wasn't sure what would happen when he quit working at Porteras. I didn't suppose he'd starve or anything, but what would he do? Would he go back to England? I didn't want to think about that now, even though I knew I should before I finalized my decision. But I trusted him to tell me if he didn't plan to stay in the country, especially now that he knew I was turning down a job for him. "How did the meeting go?"

"Not well," he confessed. "There is a lot of concern that perhaps the subscribers were supporting Gabriella and the culture around her, not the magazine. And Rudy and I spoke, he should be calling you this evening to officially let you go."

"Rudy is going to do it?" I made a face at that. "I thought you already fired me. Why do we have to drag him into it? Now it's going to be all awkward the next time I see him."

"But it's not awkward to fuck the man who fired you?" He chuckled, but his laugh quickly turned in a grimace of pain.

"Oh my god. Neil, are you okay?" I pushed my chair back, intending to get up, but he motioned for me to sit.

"No, it's just these horrible contacts." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm not feeling well, Sophie. I hate to suggest we cancel our plans - "

He looked pale, and slightly sweaty. This wasn't him faking sick to get out of talking about our situation. I was sure Neil would never do anything like that, anyway. He looked really, really ill. "If you need to go home, go home. Do you need me to come with you?" I asked.

"No, no. I've kept you far too long this weekend." He managed a tired smile. "Let me drive you home?"

I shook my head. "You look like you need to go eat about an entire bottle of ibuprofen. I can get home fine on my own. If you go to work tomorrow, I'll call you during your lunch. And if you're sick, I'll come over and bring you chicken soup. Which I will feed to you through a plastic bubble while wearing one of those Ebola suit things, because I can't afford to get sick again right now."

He tried to smile. He still looked miserable. "I love you. We'll talk tomorrow."

"I love you, too."

I walked with him to the door. He tossed a bill on the hostess's station and apologized for holding the table. Outside, I wondered if I should offer my shoulder to lean on, he looked so bad. For a second, I considered overruling him and getting into the car with him to go straight to the emergency room, but Neil was a big boy. He could be sick on his own, if he wanted to. I saw him safely into his car, and watched the Maybach pull away from the curb before heading toward the subway station on the next block.

So, our date was a bust. And I was going to get officially fired. But at least I knew I was turning down the job with Gabriella's new magazine for the right reasons. I loved Neil even when he was sick and nearly standing me up. That had to count for something.

When I got to the apartment, I found Holli and Deja snuggled on the couch, watching A Christmas Story.

"Tell me it's not Christmas Eve," I said, with a note of panic, gesturing to the television. "Because if it is, I missed my flight home."

"DVD," Deja said. "It's the fifteenth."

"I thought you were hanging out with Neil tonight," Holli said, moving her feet so I could sit on the couch.
"He wasn't feeling well. I hope he's not coming down with that thing I had." I waved her off. I wasn't planning to stay up, I just needed some time on my own, and I didn't need to horn in on their evening. I patted my stomach. "I'm still not entirely over it."

Deja frowned, and traded a look with Holli. "Um."

"Soph..." Holli began uncertainly. "We've actually been meaning to talk to you about that. You've had that twenty-four hour stomach thing for like a week now."

"No, it's only been..." I counted backward in my head. How long had it been? With my job going down the tubes, I had lost time, like one of those alien abduction stories. "Oh my gosh, it has been a week. Do you think I should go to a doctor?"

Would my health insurance still cover that, now that I was canned?

"I think you should," Deja said. Why were they talking to me like I was stupid? She went on. "This thing has been coming and going, right? And you've been really tired."

"It's the stress, it has to be." I shook my head. "Stress is what causes ulcers, right? I've had this awful heartburn -"

"Sophie... oh my god. How are you not getting this?" Holli's mouth dropped open.

"I know. Oh my god, I know." I shook my head, one hand lifting my long bangs off my forehead. "I should have gone last week, before my benefits were up in the air. If they want to do tests or anything it’s going to cost a fortune, and I can’t afford private insurance -"

And then I looked at Holli and Deja, and I saw genuine pity in their faces. Well, pity and, "are you fucking kidding me?"

And then I got it.

Oh god. I totally got it.

I'm pregnant.
Chapter Twenty-Two

I'm pregnant.
"No." I shook my head. "No, no, no, no."
It wasn't an ulcer, it wasn't a stomach bug. I was pregnant.
I couldn't be.

My mind flicked back through every time we'd had sex. It was impossible that I was pregnant. I was on birth control. We used protection. If my pills had a 98% effective rate, and condoms had a 98% effective rate, we should have been nearly 200% certain of this not happening, right?

Deja sat up, scooting Holli forward so she could swing her legs off the couch. "Okay, okay, I've done this before, there is no reason to panic. I'm going to Duane Reade to get you a test. Holli, you keep her calm, and get a calendar. Try to figure out where things got fucked up."

It was too late. Like hitting a run of pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, everything fit together really fast. I hadn't had a stomach bug. I'd had awful morning sickness that had just come and gone at all crazy hours. And I wasn't tired all the time from too much sex. Well, I was tired all the time from too much sex, but mostly from being overloaded with baby hormones.

I felt like I was going to throw up, and not as a pregnancy symptom. I raced to my room and grabbed my laptop. I pulled up my schedule as Holli stood next to my bed, her arms crossed over her chest.

"You guys weren't using protection?" she asked, chewing on her bottom lip.

"I was on the pill, and we used condoms. We only went without one time. But it seemed fine, you know, we'd both had recent check-ups..." How could that sound so unbelievably stupid now, when it had seemed totally sensible back then? "I'm not crazy, right? I should have been safe."

"It only takes one unlucky time, Soph. And remember how you're always saying that the green pills are a waste, you don't even take them, because you can always remember what day you need to start the pink ones?" Holli lowered her voice. "And you just thought it might seriously be Christmas Eve."

Oh god. Had I started a pack late? Way late? I thought I might hyperventilate and pass out at the slow realization that I’d probably done exactly that. I’d been so busy with work, and the takeover… and the stupid, reckless fun of a new relationship. I’d probably been missing pills left and right. Sophie.
You're an idiot.

“You know, this happens,” Holli tried in an attempt at moral support. “Not to careful people. You’re just… I hate to bust out the tough love, but I thought you were smarter than this, homie.”

I looked up at her, and burst into tears. "I just lost my job!"

She sat beside me and wrapped her arms around me. "Hey, it's going to be fine. If you are pregnant, you have some options. Neil isn't going to just abandon you, right? He's a good guy."

He was a good guy. But how on earth was this conversation going to go? Hey, Neil, I'm really embarrassed, and please don't flip out, but we've replicated and now I need to borrow some money even though I've rejected every offer of help you've ever given me and also I kind of helped sabotage your company. Oh, and you divorced your ex over something similar. But we're cool, right?

Holli rubbed my back supportively as I looked at my online calendar. But I couldn't remember when my last period was. I had no fucking clue, because I didn't chart it, I used my pills to keep track.

Jesus, I’d really thought it wouldn’t happen to me. And now it had and it was terrifying.

"What am I going to do?" I looked up at Holli, fully aware that my mascara was probably running in rivers down my face from the tears I couldn't hold back. I held up my hands helplessly. "What am I
"You're going to do whatever's best for you," Holli stated firmly, resting her cheek on my shoulder as she put her arms around me. "You don't want kids though, right?"

"No, oh god, never." I sat back and shook my head, feeling awful. Was I a bad mother?
No, that was crazy talk. I wasn't a mother. I was an... accidental incubator. A horrible fear gripped me. "What if he's changed his mind? He said he didn't want anymore kids, but what if I tell him I'm pregnant and he wants to keep the..."

I couldn't even say the word.
"It's not up to him, Soph."

That didn't make it any easier. That just meant I had to make this decision all on my own.

No, you don't, I reminded myself. You're just freaking out. Neil is in love with you. He's going to be just as mortified by all this as you are. I had to tell him. Shit, before I even took the test, I had to tell him, if for no other reason than to demand he buy a condom company, because this was not happening again.

Oh, who was I kidding? Holli probably had an entire drawer of condoms, in varying textures and shades. I could have looked in her room that night. Instead, I'd made the stupidest possible choice.

"I'm going to call him," I told Holli. "I know he's not feeling well, but... fuck, does that make me a bad person?"

"If you need to call him..." Holli shrugged. "I suppose the worst that could happen is that he wouldn't answer."

I wiped the tears from my cheeks and climbed off my bed. "Okay. I'm going to go get my phone."

It took me two tries to make the damn call my hands were shaking so badly. When I finally managed to dial him, he didn't answer. Voicemail picked up after six rings, and I found myself in a very strange predicament. What, exactly, was the etiquette for telling someone you were eighty percent sure that you were pregnant? You couldn't do that via voicemail. Texting was out. Instead, I left a lame, "It's Sophie. Call me," and waited with Holli for Deja to return.

Holli had made me some tea - "You'll need something to pee, when she gets back," - and tried to stay chipper. When she set the cup and saucer in front of me, she said, "So... I bet Neil drinks a lot of tea. Being British and all."

"No, he drinks coffee, mostly." I shook my head. "He's probably going to drop dead of a heart attack from all the caffeine."

"Well, this is caffeinated, but I don't think a little bit will hurt the... thing." Holli turned away from me quickly and dumped way too much sugar into her own cup. "What do you think Deja meant?"

I sipped my tea. "Meant by what?"

"She said 'I've done this before.' And then she ran out to get a pregnancy test." Holli tried for a casual shrug. She's never going to be a model-slash-actress, is all I'm going to say about her attempt to be nonchalant.

"Maybe she had a pregnancy scare before." It was totally selfish and unfair of me to wish something so awful on another woman, but I was really glad to know someone personally who had gone through the same thing I was going through.

"I know, it's just..." Holli shook her head. "No, I'm being a jerk. You're like, legitimately worried about the contents of your uterus and I'm acting weird about my girlfriend's past."

"Girlfriend?" If anything could momentarily take my mind off the idea of a chubby-cheeked horror slowly siphoning away my life force, it would have to be good news about my friend's life. "So you guys are like, official now?"

"Yeah, we're exclusive. I don't know, I thought she was going to drive me crazy, she's so bossy and
kind of," Holli moved her hands all around her head, crossing and rolling her eyes. "You know. I thought we might be too similar."

"You're clones of each other," I pointed out.

"Yeah, well." She grinned at me. "Turns out I must be one narcissistic bitch, because I fucking love my clone."

"A narcissistic model? You'd be the very first." I made a finger gun at her. "I'm happy for you. Really happy for you."

"Don't worry about this." She waved a hand at my midsection. "If you decide to get rid of it, we can hang out and have a post abortion slumber party with ice cream and cake."

"You and cake." I laughed to myself, even though the thought was horribly depressing, in my frame of mind. What would my mom say? What would my super Catholic family think of me?

"And if you decide to keep it, I'll help you pick out the color for the nursery. Provided, of course, that you find an apartment with a room you can make into a nursery." She took a sip of her tea, making a face at what I assumed was the six pounds of sugar she'd nervously dumped into it. "I mean, you can't keep it here. No pets allowed, it's in the lease."

The door opened, and Deja stepped in, Holli's keychain dangling from one hand, a plastic bag in the other. "Okay. I have the test. Are you going to do it now, or in the morning?"

"What's the difference?" How I managed to stop myself from lunging across the room and snatching the bag from her hands, I would never know.

"Well, they say you're supposed to take them in the morning, because that's when the highest concentration of hormones is sitting around in your pee." Deja held the bag out to me. "But I figured you'd want to know right now, so I got a two pack."

"How much do I owe you?" I went for my purse, and she shook her head.

"Just go take the test, okay? We'll figure that out later."

That's code for, "I'm not going to ask you to pay me, because you just lost your job," but I wasn't in the mood to be particularly prideful at the moment.

I took the bag into the bathroom with me and ripped the box practically in half to open it. My hands were shaking, which didn't make it easy to get the foil packet undone. When I held the damn thing, it seemed utterly wrong that I should be so terrified of a tiny chunk of cheap plastic. This stupid little thing held so much power over my life. My entire future, possibly.

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I sat on the toilet and tried to figure out what angle would work best. Unlike most men I'd ever met, women don't generally have a bizarre childhood history of peeing on things, so I'd never had any practice. Then, I had to overcome my nerves to actually get things flowing. I managed to force a few drops, and peed on my hand.

"You have to be fucking kidding me," I muttered under my breath. It was hard enough taking a pee test at the doctor's office, and that little plastic cup was a much bigger target.

I looked at the sink. The gleaming porcelain cup we used as a toothbrush holder tried not to make eye contact with me.

"Sorry, Holli, I'll buy you another." I emptied our toothbrushes into the sink then sat back down, positioned the cup between my legs, and urged myself to relax.

I didn't get much, but I hoped it would be enough. My heart in my throat, I dipped the cotton-ish tip thing on the end of the test into the bottom of the cup.

Watching the test saturate and the wet mark creeping through the little plastic window was not unlike watching a car accident from the sidewalk. I knew what was going to happen, but I was powerless to stop it from happening as the horror unfolded before my very eyes. As my urine washed across the test strip, there it was, clear as day. Two bright, unmistakable pink lines. It didn't even need a few
minutes to develop.

"No." I shook my head and set the cup on the floor. At least I had the presence of mind to put the cap back on the test, so it wouldn't dribble as I shuffled, my pants still around my ankles, to the torn instruction sheet on the floor. I compared my test with the diagram, certain I'd made a mistake reading it. But there it was. One line for negative. Two for positive.

I really was pregnant.

My ears were ringing. I looked up at my reflection in the mirror, my eyes wide, my face pale. I looked back at the test in my hand, and flung it to the floor in disgust. "You're a liar!"

Holli knocked on the door. "Soph! Are you okay?"

I slid down the wall and covered my face with my hands. The door opened just a little bit. "Soph?" "I'm not okay." I wiped my tears from my cheeks on the back of my hand. "I'm pregnant."

"Oh, honey." Holli sounded just as upset as I felt. That added guilt to my reaction. Could I be any more dramatic?

Okay, so I knew that having unprotected sex wasn't a great idea. I'd done it anyway. But this wasn't the worst-case scenario. I could fix this.

I stood up, dumped the cup into the toilet, flushed, and said, "I'm pregnant, and we need a new toothbrush holder."

"Yuck. I'll give you a minute." Holli closed the door, and I welcomed the space. I just needed to think.

There was a fucking baby in me.

Jesus Christ.

A real baby? Like a rip out of my vagina Aliens-style baby? What was I going to do about that?

I thought about the pictures in Neil's kitchen. Emma with her puppy. The first day of school. Neil had obviously been a part of her life. He didn't want to have any more kids, though. I had no doubt he would financially support me if I chose to keep it, less doubt that he would walk away from me and a baby without providing emotional support, as well. But when I tried to imagine what life would be like living on Fifth avenue with a baby and a nanny while my older, more successful husband made billions of dollars... the picture didn't look appealing.

I liked my apartment. I liked my room. I liked my bathtub. And I really, really liked not having a human being I didn’t even know using me for life support.

But it was a baby, right? It was our baby, half me, half Neil. Shouldn't that magically undo all my worries? Shouldn't I be happy that I made a baby with the guy I loved? Didn't everyone want this?

Was I supposed to want this?

I put our toothbrushes in the medicine cabinet, washed my hands then stepped out of the bathroom. Holli and Deja were waiting in the living room, and I held up one finger to stave off their questions. "Wait. I just want to try Neil one last time."

"Neil... I really need you to call me." I took a breath, and I knew he would hear my teary snuffling. "It's super important. I... I don't know what to do. I just really need to hear your voice."

Okay. So not my best moment.

Hopefully, pathetically, I took the phone with me into the living room. *He said he was sick. He's probably in bed right now.* That didn't make me feel better.

"Are you okay?" Deja asked as I entered the room.

I nodded. "I'm in shock."
"I understand that, believe me."

Holli's head whipped up to look at her with a bad attempt at disguising her curiosity.

Deja sighed. "Yes, I got accidentally pregnant once. It's not something I put on my résumé."

"What did you do?" I asked, because I knew Holli wouldn't, and I really needed to hear someone say they had all the answers.

"I had an abortion." Deja shrugged, her wide eyes bouncing between me and Holli. "What? It's no big deal. I was at a party, I'm pretty sure someone put shit in my drink, and then next morning I'd woken up and I'd had sex with this guy."

"That’s not sex," Holli said gently. "That sounds more like you got roofied and raped."

"I know," she said, looking slightly embarrassed. "And I'll talk to you about it later. This isn't the rape conversation, it's the Sophie is pregnant conversation. I'm trying not to steal her thunder."

I laughed at that. I don't know why. "Sorry. It just strikes me as totally insane that we're having this discussion."

Deja gave me a closed-lip smile of sympathy. "You're going to be okay. You have somebody to go through this with you. Mr. Elwood isn't going to leave you stranded."

"And while we both think it's creepy and weird that you have a boyfriend we have to call 'Mr. Elwood,' I agree with Deja," Holli said with a decisive nod. "He's going to support you with this, no matter what."

As if on cue, my phone buzzed. "It's him." I didn't leave the room to take the call. I didn't figure I would be breaking the news to him over the phone. I would wait and do it in person, tonight, if he let me. "Neil?"

"This is Emma."

I frowned. "Emma... what are you - "

"Dad is in the hospital." There was a faintly hysterical quality to her voice. "They just gave me his things, and I saw you'd tried to call him."

"In the..." Wait, this was all wrong. I was the one having a crisis. We could only have one crisis at a time. "What happened?"

She made an impatient noise. "I don't know. He was unconscious in the back of the car when Tony found him. Look, are you going to come down here? You've been calling all night, you must have been worried."

"I had been, but for reasons I didn't care to discuss with her at the moment. "Which hospital? I'll be there as fast as I can."

"Presbyterian, east sixty-eighth."

"Is he okay?" Of course he was okay. It was impossible for Neil to not be okay. It just couldn’t happen.

"I don't know, I haven't seen him. He wasn’t awake when the ambulance arrived. Now I'm waiting for the bloody doctor to come out and bloody talk to me," she snapped impatiently. "I'll know more by the time you get here. Come through the emergency entrance, I'll wait for you there if I can."

She hung up without saying goodbye, and I numbly hit the disconnect button. I stared back at Holli and Deja, a paralysis of fear and disbelief leeching the blood from my veins. "Neil had some kind of collapse. He's in the hospital."

"What?" Holli squeaked. "What the hell is going on, Soph?"

"I don't know." I reached for my purse, dropped my phone into it, grabbed my keys and headed for the door. I wanted to say something else, but I just couldn't. "I don't know," I repeated, and then I dashed out the door.

Every step I took down the stairs jarred all the way to my skull. He’s okay, this is nothing, he’s fine,
tumbled through my mind. This wasn't happening. This wasn't my life. I wasn't pregnant. My boyfriend wasn't in the fucking hospital. None of this was real.

But it was. Disturbingly, awfully real.
Chapter Twenty-Three

True to her word, when I got to the hospital Emma was waiting by the emergency room doors, bundled up in her winter coat. Her eyes were red, like she had been crying.

"Is he okay? Is Neil okay?" I asked, as if she wouldn't know whom I was there to see.

"They've moved him to a room, I can take you up." She gestured to the automatic doors behind her, and we went inside.

With every step I took, my nerves gripped my stomach tighter, twisting it into knots.

"Visiting hours are over, but since he was just admitted they said they'd make an exception," Emma said quietly in the eerie silence of the elevator.

"Thank you for calling me." I wanted to hug her. The thought that Neil could be in here for days without me knowing made me panicky, even though it hadn't happened. "Do they know what's wrong with him?"

"Um..." Emma’s gaze darted away, her brow wrinkling in concentration. "They’re running some tests."

I had the feeling she knew more than she was saying. Then again, I was pretty paranoid at the moment.

We stepped out of the elevator, and I wrinkled my nose at the hospital environment. The quiet, interrupted only by soft, far away beeps. The suspiciously clean smell even though you knew the place was crawling with germs. Someone had made a bag of popcorn in the break room; as we passed by the open door, the scent wafted out to mix with the sharp, unnatural odor of disinfectant, and I gagged.

A nurse was standing outside one of the rooms, writing in a patient chart. She looked up, slightly annoyed, and said, "Visiting hours are -"

"We have permission," Emma said authoritatively, and she led me past the nurse. I envied people who could do that. Just walk around a hospital like they owned the place. Emma was far more comfortable here than I was.

Neil was in a huge corner room. The lights were low, and the curtain around his bed was pulled when I peeked inside.

"Come on," Emma said gently. "He was awake and talking to me not long ago."

I knew I probably wasn't her favorite person. I couldn't blame her. But she'd taken the time to call me, and she was being so kind, despite her discomfort around me. At that moment, I had to really fight my urge to hug her.

"Dad?" Emma pushed back the curtain a bit. Neil was lying flat in the big, weird hospital bed. There was a heart monitor on, beeping steadily, and two big bags of clear fluid hanging from an IV pole next to him. He opened his eyes just a little, then a bit more, then squinted at us, and I realized he probably wasn't wearing his contacts.

"It's me, baby," I went to his side and leaned down, brushing my lips across his forehead. "What the hell happened?"

"Oh, Sophie." He half-laughed, half-wept, his arms coming up to hold me. I stepped quickly back, so he didn't tangle me in his IV tubing. He dropped his arms and rubbed one hand over his face.

"They've given me enough sedatives to kill a whole pack of elephants."

"He's had a spinal tap," Emma explained. "And painkillers for the headache."

"Oh my god, why didn't you tell me you were so bad? I never would have let you leave by yourself, if I had known." I sat down in the armchair beside his bed and took his right hand, the one that didn't
I didn't know I was.” He blinked a few times as he remembered. "I didn't feel all that bad until I woke up in the emergency room. My god, I'm so relieved you're here."

"Emma called me." I looked up at her with a grateful smile.

"You should put her on your emergency contacts," Emma told him. "If I had been in London-"

"Thank god you were still here." My relief was so acute, I could cry. Neil was... alive. I had honestly thought, from the way Emma had looked when I arrived, that he might have been dying. "What do they think is wrong with you?"

Neil squeezed my hand. He was coming around a bit, but his speech was halting. "They… don't know. I am most definitely anemic. The headache had them worried, until they found out I wasn't having a stroke."

"Okay. Okay, those all sound fixable. I'm just thankful that you're all right." And that I wasn't carrying a recently deceased billionaire's heir. But I wasn't going to tell him that now, or he really would have a stroke.

"I'm going to go get some coffee," Emma said quietly, excusing herself from the room.

Once she was gone, Neil lifted our entwined hands to his lips and kissed the backs of my fingers.

"I'm so glad she called you. I've been medicated out of my head since I got here."

"I just feel bad I didn't get here until now. You had all these painful things done to you - "

"And you weren't here to get queasy and throw up while they were happening?" he asked with a wry chuckle. I remembered the morning he'd cut his hand, and now I couldn't remember if I'd been sick over the blood, or because I was pregnant.

I rubbed my hand up and down his arm. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do to comfort him.

"Was it awful?"

"Truthfully, it wasn't that bad. They do hand out painkillers like candy here. But I was thinking, on the ride home..." He paused, his gaze flicking briefly to my face, then down again. "I want you to consider Gabriella's offer."

"I couldn't work with them. They're a bunch of assholes." I tried to laugh, but my stomach was still in knots. Every time I finished a sentence, I had a moment of panic, thinking, Did I just tell him I'm pregnant?

If he knew right now, he would want to give me money or some other job in his company. I didn't want either. Besides, the man was already hospitalized, he didn't need more stress.

"Those assholes are going to build an empire. You can't miss out on this chance." His quiet intensity set me on alert. He might have been drugged, but he'd obviously put some clearheaded thought into this.

"Well..." I began cautiously. "Gabriella told me I don't get the job if I'm involved with you, so..."

He still couldn't meet my eyes. "Then it might be for the best if we're not involved with each other."

The pain and disappointment hit me first, starting as a squeezing ache in my chest and ringing in my ears. I seriously wondered if it were possible I was having some pregnancy-related heart condition. And even though I'd heard him, I still uttered a hoarse, shocked, "What?"

"I don't want to be the man who ruins your life." His voice was thick with held back emotion. "I love you too much to let something so important pass you by."

"You're on drugs. Maybe we shouldn't have this conversation right now," I said, pulling my hand back.

"I'm not that drugged." He made a noise of disgust. "Well, I am that drugged, but truth be told, I made this decision before I ever came to the restaurant, before I knew about Gabriella's stupid proclamation. Being with me while working for her is only going to complicate things for you."

"Neil, I'm not going to work for Gabriella. I don't even want to - “
He cut me off. “Listen to yourself. This is Tokyo all over again. You have a life changing opportunity in front of you, but you’re making the easy choice.”

“This is nothing like Tokyo,” I whispered, the vise grip feeling in my chest tightening down hard. “I was a stupid kid then, making a dumb choice for emotional reasons.”

He didn’t say anything.

Oh god. That was how Neil saw me: a stupid twenty-something who was making a bad, emotionally driven choice without thinking of the consequences.

He didn’t trust me enough to make up my own mind.

“You told me that working for Gabriella was unhealthy,” I reminded him through my painfully tight jaw. “You were furious at the thought I would throw you over to work for her.”

“That was when I thought you were going to be offered a job as an assistant. Assistant creative director is… you might have worked at Porteras for fifteen years without reaching that position.” His voice broke a little as he continued, “Your career matters too much to you. I can’t stand by while you miss this chance.”

I stared at him, willing him to look up, to see the tears already spilling down my cheeks. "I can't believe this."

"Sophie, please-"

"I can't believe you're doing this to me again!" I knew I probably shouldn't raise my voice because of the other patients, but I couldn't help it. What the fuck was going to happen now? Did I tell him about the pregnancy? Did I just go on my merry way and deal with it all on my own? Here he was, basically telling me to break up with him over a job, and I was incubating a fetus he helped make. So much for not being in this alone. "What is wrong with you?"

"Everything is exactly the same as it was six years ago." He was so calm, so maddeningly calm. "I'm watching you, about to make a huge mistake, and what can I do besides leave to prevent you from making it?"

"You've never prevented me from doing a damn thing. You just don't want to feel responsible for my choices." I shook my head in disgust. "And you talk about me having a problem admitting things. You're willing to run away because you don't want to feel guilty."

"That's not fair!" he snapped. "Look at me, Sophie. I'm a middle-aged man in a fucking hospital bed. What if I'd had a heart attack and died? What if I'd had a stroke and been paralyzed? Would you really want to be tied to me for the rest of my life? Caring for me while I was sick or dying?"

"Oh for fucks sake, you're not ninety. You're in your forties!" Had they given him a handful of overreaction pills along with the painkillers? "What 'rest of your life?' We're not married, we're dating."

"And maybe I'm at the point in my life where that isn't enough anymore. I love you more than I reasonably should. I've tried, Sophie, I have really tried not to push for too much, too fast, but that seems to be the path we're on. If it isn't what you want, then we need to let each other go now, before we wind up bitter and unhappy!"

I don't know that I'd ever seen Neil so... angry. And hurt. My god, he was hurt. Because he thought I didn't want him.

What a fucking idiot.

Even though I was furious with him, even though I knew I shouldn't want him if he was willing to do this to me, I did. I knew I should be happy to be rid of him.

And even though I knew it was hopeless, even though I knew now that we wanted polar opposites from this relationship, I had to try. "I love you."

Finally, he held my gaze for longer than a few seconds. His eyes - god, his eyes... I’d never really stood a chance - were glazed with unshed tears. Maybe it should have made me feel vindictively better
to see that he was miserable, but it was hard to hate someone lying in a hospital bed. "And I love you. Don't ever doubt that."

"I don't." I wiped at my cheek with my fingertips. I didn't doubt that he loved me. Not for a moment. He loved me enough to let me go, to not ruin my life when we knew we wanted different things. And that almost made me love him more. "But you're really an asshole."

I stood up and walked away. I didn't look back at him.

"Take a few days to think it over," he said, sounding far more tired than before. I felt so guilty, that we had argued in the hospital. I was a terrible girlfriend.

"I won't be angry if you decide to take the job," he continued. "But you said you weren't looking for a commitment from me. Letting this opportunity pass you by, choosing me over this job... that's a commitment. You should be honest with yourself, and with me. Don't pass up this job expecting that it won't change anything between us. It will."

I turned, wiping my eyes quickly. "Fine. Give me a few days."

"I'll call you. When all of... this is over." He gestured to the bed. "I just want you to be happy, Sophie."

"You have no idea what would make me happy," I sniffed miserably.

"Neither do you," he pointed out gently. "You told me that you just got your life, and you weren't ready to share it with anyone. I don't want to lose you. But I will let you go, if it's what you need."

When I left the room, Emma was standing outside the door. She'd heard every word, goddammit. She tried to say something, then stopped, and shook her head. "I suppose I might see you... again? I'm not entirely sure what to say, after all that."

I didn't have the time or the energy to engage her. "Just make sure he doesn't do anything stupid while he's in here."

Everything I needed to know was all laid out in her expression. She thought he'd already done something stupid. Maybe she could talk some sense into him.

I got a cab home, despite my unemployed status and dwindling bank account. I just couldn't bring myself to cry on the subway in front of strangers.

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Places look different when you're sad. I stepped into the apartment and hung my coat up on the same peg I hang it on every night, but it looked wrong there.

I heard laughter from Holli's room. I tip-toed to my bedroom. They were having a good time, there was no reason for them to come running out to console me. I would still be emotionally shattered in the morning.

I didn't bother to turn on my bedroom light. I didn't want to see myself in the mirror. As silly as it sounded, I was afraid I would look pregnant. I knew my tummy was still mostly flat, and the little curve at the bottom would be there, fetus or not, so there was no reason to scrutinize my body quite yet.

Because the metaphorical human heart is a cruel son of a bitch, when I lay in bed, all I could think about was that day six years ago.

"First time going to Tokyo?"

"No, but I'll bet it's yours."

A tear slid from my eye and dripped into my hair.

"So what, are you like, from England or something?"

"No, this is the accent I use when I try to pick up women in airports."

Not only had he broken my heart, but he'd ruined one of my favorite memories. Great.

For a bitter moment, I wished that Neil had never come to Porteras. That he had remained Leif, the mysterious stranger from my one unbelievable night. I could have held onto him then, at a safe distance.
I could have just kept on being myself - or whoever I’d thought I was before he’d come back into my life.

If our flight had never been delayed, if I’d just gone to NYU right off the bat, I would never have met him. I wouldn't be in the predicament I was in right now. That filled me with so much panic, I could barely breathe. One rash decision, and I had really fucked things up for myself this far down the road? How could I ever make a serious choice again, knowing that?

And now I had to make a really big decision.

There was no way I was having this baby. I knew Neil well enough to know that he would want to be a part of its life, whether he'd planned to have another child or not. And while that was admirable, I didn't want to be tied to him like that. I couldn't imagine trying to get over loving him while parenting a child together, apart.

And I didn't want a kid. I didn't care that people said, "it's different when they're yours." The thought of spending hours on a park bench, watching some grubby toddler play in a sandbox... my skin crawled at the notion. It would be different when it was mine? Yeah, it would be real, and I would be miserable and trapped in a life I’d never wanted. That wasn't fair for a child, and I wasn't about to go through what my mother had gone through when she'd chosen to keep me.

Adoption was... not an option. I didn't want to be pregnant. I really didn't want to give birth, no thank you very much. I'd have to explain to everyone I knew that I was having a baby and giving it up, and they'd all want to weigh in with their opinions or try to get me to change my mind. Would I have second thoughts every time a well-meaning stranger touched my belly? Maybe a stronger person could withstand all of that, but not me.

Then there was the other really big decision. Did I let Neil go?

He was right. If I turned down this job to be with him, I was making a commitment. It would be stupid of me to see it any other way. No one passed up the opportunity of a lifetime to casually date someone. If I didn’t take the job, I could end up resenting Neil and destroying everything we had together, anyway.

But I couldn't work for Gabriella. Not when she thought she could freely make ridiculous demands over my personal life.

And yes, fine, I did feel more for Neil than just your usual casual relationship stuff. Holli was right, I was never planning to do the happy-family thing... but if I ever were to do it, it would be with Neil. I didn't want to break up with him. I couldn't imagine my life without him. He'd become my closest friend and the only lover I'd ever actually, well... loved.

I picked up the phone then remembered the time. Then I decided I didn't care. It didn't matter if Gabriella had some amazing place for me in her amazing company where I would be amazingly successful. She would micromanage my life more than Neil would. And at least I could reason with him and get him to back off.

Maybe that was what a relationship actually was. Just learning to be able to stand the other person and make them happy. What a concept.

When Gabriella answered the phone, she sounded confused. "Sophie Scaife is calling me. At this hour. Which seems odd, because I thought she wanted a job - "

"I don't want the job." I blurted. "Not if you think you can tell me what I can and can't do in my personal life. You, or Jake. It's never going to happen."

"You can't date the owner of a competing publication if you want to work for me. That's not negotiable." She said each word carefully, rolling them around her mouth like a fine wine. I could perfectly visualize her facial expression, her big, blue eyes wide in her deceptively kind face.

"I understand. Thank you for the opportunity." I'd said "Thank you," and not "fuck you," right?
"Goodbye, Sophie."

She hung up, and I sat staring at my phone for a long time. I felt like I hadn't really lost anything. I was just as unemployed as I had been before the phone call. I was just as pregnant. My boyfriend was just as hospitalized. And possibly not my boyfriend. I had no clue where we would go from here.

I could walk away from all of it, I realized. I could go, have the abortion, break up with Neil, tell him I'd taken the job, and start completely over. Everything would go back to the way it had been before Neil had walked into Porteras.

But I could never go back to the way things had been the day before that flight to Tokyo had been delayed. I could never un-know Neil, or stop feeling the way I felt about him. I would probably never stop loving him.

I could stay with him. I could have his baby. Or not. The clock was ticking, and I didn't know what I was going to do.

What the hell was I going to do?
Abigail Barnette is the alter-ego of author, blogger, and funny person, Jenny Trout. Writing as Jennifer Armintrout, she made the USA Today bestseller list with her debut novel, Blood Ties Book One: The Turning. Her novel American Vampire was named one of the top ten horror novels of 2011 by Booklist Magazine Online. As Abigail Barnette, she writes award winning erotic romance. When she’s not writing, she’s sleeping or otherwise incapacitated.

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